

## Un Nuevo Práctico

*Bryan Strange*

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2004 it so happened that there was a British couple sitting in fila 23 of tendido 2 at Las Ventas. It was of course during San Isidro of that year but that meant little to this couple because they'd never seen a bullfight before. One of the pair had an historical interest in the activities of the Royal Court in Madrid in the early XVII century and was aware that bull spectacles were a regular feature at that time. This interest led to the reading of *Death in the Afternoon* and ultimately to the acquisition of tickets on this day. As it turns out, the bullfight was largely unremarkable but it is important to the rest of this account. More significantly, and very fortunately, both visitors were enthralled by what they saw. So much so in fact that on discovering their common reaction to the bullfight their first action was to go directly to find some more expensive tickets for the next day. They knew immediately that they had to see this thing again. Sadly, the new tickets were liberated by one of Madrid's less desirable residents along with credit cards and money before they could be used. However, that anecdote is not important to the rest of the tale that is to follow.

A second significant factor was that the senior matador on that day was Eduardo Dávila Miura. The name meant nothing to these future aficionados at the time but in the years that followed they would see him appear many more times. How amazing then that on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, almost exactly seven years later, the non-historian out of the pair, that is me, should find himself standing in a ring with that same Eduardo Dávila Miura. This time, however, it was I that was holding the muleta and walking towards an animal and Maestro Dávila who was watching. Of course both the animal in question and the number of spectators were significantly smaller than those on that day in 2004, but these are mere details when one is participating in something so extremely exciting.

Diane and I joined the CTL quite soon after seeing our first bullfight in Madrid. The club was something of a revelation because, I suspect like many other Brits who discover the bulls, we spent several months thinking we might be completely alone in this interest. I've since come across people who have existed in this state of perceived isolation for many years so we should perhaps consider ourselves lucky. One of the things I remember very strongly from that first bullfight was the very stylised and controlled way in which the toreros moved themselves and their lures. Almost like dancing, in fact, which was a surprise to me at the time. One of my first thoughts was that I wished that there were a way that I could experience something of what it feels like to do that. Then, as luck would have it, in one of the first copies of *La Divisa* we received there appeared a short article by Jim Verner. I can't remember much about the article itself but this was the moment that I realised that it is possible for a layman to participate and not just to watch. This was tremendously exciting but I had no idea how to go about it. Cumbria is not bristling with bullfight schools.

In 2005 Diane and I attended part of the Feria de Abril. At that time we didn't know many Club members and certainly didn't know the regular CTL haunts in Seville, but in our wanderings we did notice Pedro Algaba's shop near La Maestranza. As a result, when we returned to Seville the following year I had determined to pay him a visit to buy a capote. Pedro was a little bewildered but he couldn't have been nicer. After a quick appraisal of my height as well as an introduction to Uceda Leal's picador, who happened to be in the shop at the time, a capote was selected. Pedro said that he'd only sell it to me if I promised to use it. Not a problem I assured him and he offered to print my name on the capote while I went to fetch the cash. We returned to find him somewhat distraught because he'd just realised that he'd printed **BRYAN STANGE** and dropped the **R**. For those who've not purchased a capote you should know both that they are expensive and that the printing ink does not come off. The mistake was irreversible. To be honest I don't mind; in fact I rather like it, and Diane has more than once called me "*El Stange*" when I've been swinging the cape about. When we returned later in the year for the Feria de San Miguel I went back to the shop to purchase our muleta.

The purchase of equipment immediately threw up the problem of learning how use it. I watched some of Ron's DVDs and studied pictures in *6 Toros 6* but this is really not adequate. For the novice at

least, it is very difficult to know whether you are copying a good or a bad example and in any case it's impossible to ascertain how effectively you are copying. Despite this there is great value in at least making an attempt at using a capote and muleta. On one's first encounter it is immediately apparent that they are very heavy. One quickly gains respect for any torero that can move them gracefully and without the appearance of effort. This is especially true when using the muleta in the right hand when that wrist takes all the weight of the muleta and the espada. Achieving a long, steady and graceful passing movement, correct or otherwise, requires a good deal of strength in the right wrist.

This difference between the perception of how it must be to perform 'toreo' and the reality of what is required to do it well is one of the core reasons for setting out on this route. I don't feel able to judge or understand fully what I see at a corrida without a much deeper first-hand reference. For me this is not unique to the corrida. For example, now and then I may enjoy sitting down to watch a game of rugby, cricket or tennis. I believe that I get much more out of it having played these games myself. I was never any good at any of them but without the experience I believe it would be impossible, or at least very difficult, to understand fully what was going on or appreciate the skill of those who are good at it. Interestingly, I don't watch football and perhaps one of the reasons for this is that I have no personal experience of playing it. Another example of practice leading to better appreciation for me would be with motor racing. I have had a very small amount of professional instruction on a racing circuit and for a while I participated in go-kart racing at the most basic level. It's not much but it is enough to understand just how hard it is to make a car go fast, even a fast one, and how hard it is to do this in the context of a race. I do not aspire to be a Formula 1 driver, but my experience enables me to watch and appreciate much more vividly a professional motor race; even Formula 1 can be interesting in this context. An armchair observer would certainly miss the detail because in modern motorsport it is impossible to see it directly. You have to have tried it yourself to fully appreciate what the driver is doing and the skill involved.

There is more though. Diane and I are keen ballroom and latin dancers and I think this provides the strongest parallel of all. Even someone with no experience at all of dancing should be able to tell the difference between a terrible dancer and a great one. Nevertheless, there is a 'correct' way to execute any formal dance step and, while there are lazy ways to make an approximation of a step, it is not correct unless it's correct. The nuances of the difference between 'looks about right' and 'is exactly right' are very difficult to see unless you've tried to do it yourself. Not all dancers take lessons. Indeed I remember a chap we met in the Blackpool Ballroom boasting that he had never taken a lesson in his life. All I can say is that it certainly showed. You can't learn to dance correctly solely by watching others. You can't tell what they are striving, usually imperfectly, to achieve. You will inevitably end up copying their mistakes. I realised very quickly that the same was going to be true of salón.

Thus, acutely aware of the need to find someone with knowledge and experience I asked Tim Hardman of the Peña Fiesta Brava de Manchester, of which Diane and I are also members, if he could suggest any names. Tim very kindly supplied a couple of e-mail addresses and within a very short time I had had an enthusiastic reply from Holly Burman. Despite the fact that Holly and I have only once managed to get both ourselves and our capes in the same place at the same time, and then only for a few minutes, Holly has provided some very useful advice and encouragement to get me going.

Diane and I practised, perhaps experimented might be a better word, now and then in the garden. I even fashioned a set of horns from some off cuts purchased at, of all places, a damson fair. However, a couple of house moves and work commitments reduced 'now and then' to 'very occasionally'. The capes were beginning to spend much more time packed away in a bag than they should have done.

Thus it was that the announcement of the event organised by Alexander Fiske-Harrison at this year's Feria de Abril was met with considerable excitement in our household. We both agreed that this was an opportunity much too good to miss.

Initially I'd planned to practice as much as I could beforehand, but in the end decided against it. I knew from my experience in dancing that it can be very hard to correct a learned bad habit once the muscle memory is established. On that basis it seemed wiser not to reinforce the likely many bad habits and misconceptions that I might have. As it happened within minutes of the first day's lesson in La Plaza de Toros de Algaba I realised what a sensible decision this had been.



The precision and complexity of the movements made by Maestro Dávila and his assistants, Jesus and Manuel, were a great deal more detailed than I had imagined. As with one's first attempts to drive a car, there seemed an impossible number of different, but coordinated, movements involving different parts of the body all happening at the same time. In fact, also very much like learning new dance steps. Take, for example, the verónica. One has to think about the position of the feet, the alignment of the hips and upper body, the position of the head, hands and the cape, then your position relative to both the animal and the arena itself, and all of this is before you have even moved. This then reveals another parallel with dancing. The required rotation of the upper and lower body relative to one another is very similar to the body positions required in all the ballroom dances; and perhaps the Foxtrot in particular. Surprising in a way that the greatest similarity should be with a ballroom dance and not a latin one.

Once the lance begins there is a multitude of coordinated movements that must be mastered. One must consider the arms, hands and legs; and all the time this must be performed to give the appearance, at least, of grace and control. The possibility of being able to remember and reproduce all of this while in front of a real animal seemed remote.

The other passes and lances that we covered exhibited similar synergies with the moments of dancing. And I don't mind admitting that I was more than a little delighted when Maestro Dávila and the other professional toreros seemed reasonably impressed with my efforts. They may well have been demonstrating a commendable level of tolerance and politeness, but praise is praise and I left both practice days on a considerable high. I should also admit then that I believe that this was only possible because of the considerable formal instruction in ballroom and latin dancing that I have had. I am convinced therefore that being a passable dancer is indeed a help along the road to becoming a passable práctico. Hopefully this is also true in the reverse.

If the practice days produced a high then this was as nothing compared to the tienta itself. I know that the details of the day, and the spectacular location, will be covered elsewhere so I will not repeat them here. Rather, I shall dwell on my own experience.

I had expected to be nervous, and to some degree I was. Certainly, I didn't have any appetite for breakfast in the morning. In any case, any trace of nervousness evaporated on arrival at the finca to be replaced by excitement and anticipation. It was particularly good to know that the vacas we were

going to be facing were really being tested, that is to say, this was a real tienta and not just an event staged for the humouring of a few curious Brits.

The process of testing was itself fascinating. Having grown up in the centre of dairy-focused North Dorset and living less than ten minutes' walk from what at the time was the largest calf market in England, I am familiar with calves. However, the behaviour of these vacas was quite different from the largely docile creatures that I had known in my youth. Not surprising, but great to observe all the same. They were noticeably aggressive and were much more vocal in expressing their fury than I had expected. I watched Maestro Dávila and the other professional toreros work through the testing and make everything look very controlled. Once the first vaca had calmed down a little, and presumably a verdict had been reached about her suitability, the more experienced prácticos in the group were called out one by one. They were very good and I began to fear that my only memorable contribution to the day would be for the worst attempt. Then suddenly Maestro Dávila's finger was beckoning me out.

Thus it was that I found myself walking towards a young vaca under the gaze of the matador who had provided my first experience of the corrida. Already there seemed to be a whole host of things to think about and, as became apparent later, I had already made my first mistake in not positioning myself correctly in front of her. Specifically, I had not crossed correctly and I must say there is no better way to fully understand what that terms means than by getting it wrong yourself. Leaving that aside for the moment, it was a wonderful feeling when, as I approached the vaca, she turned and focused her complete attention on me. At that point awareness of everyone else and everything else vanished. It felt as though it was just the two of us on the sand. It sounds clichéd I know, but it's true. I moved closer and presented the muleta. I felt a flash of concern that she might simply stare at me in bemused disinterest but I need not have worried. I twitched the muleta and called her and she came. It was marvellous. There was a second pass and then a third. I even managed a ramate of sorts before turning and walking away from her. Did I perform the passes correctly and with grace and temple? Of course not, nowhere near. I've seen the pictures. It was riddled with mistakes and I was clearly anything but in control. But the point is that that doesn't matter. I had done what I'd been so desperate to do for such a long time. The small band of spectators applauded, which felt great, but the icing on the cake was to see Maestro Dávila striding across the sand towards me with a big grin on his face. That made my day and all I could think was "well it can't have been that bad then".



When I think about it I've done quite a few exciting things in my time. I've rock climbed, abseiled forwards down a cliff with the Royal Marines, I've water-skied, I've galloped a horse across the Morecambe Bay sands, I've driven single seat racing cars and driven tanks, I've danced a tango in the Blackpool Tower Ballroom, I've parachuted solo, I've even flow some quite demanding aerobatics manoeuvres. All exciting and, perhaps with the exception of the rock climbing, I'd happily do them

all again. But make no mistake, the only thing I absolutely MUST do again...and again...is the practico. My experience was very short; about six hours' training and a few minutes actually tentando, but I learned so much about this art that we all love so much. Just imagine how much more there is still to learn.

