

Gladdening the Soul and Lightening the Body

A Visit to the

LOS ÁNGELES

BALLROOM

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The home to different rhythms, these spaces soothe the soul. We humans have always had the imperious need to express our feelings not only through verbal communication but also by moving our bodies.

The working-class Los Ángeles area of the Guerrero Neighborhood in Mexico City's Historic Downtown is the cradle of the country's ballrooms. The importance of the middle and working class as actors—not solely as the broad public, admirers, and consumers—was the reason urban spaces dedicated to dancing emerged spontaneously and imaginatively in the 1930s and 1940s. The opening of ballrooms marked a kind of “cultural victory.” Taxi dancers,¹ musical groups, and many more were to be found there, and they made spectators move to the music, there not only to look, but also to participate in the ambiance. It was here that more than 75 years ago, one of the oldest, most traditional “dancings,” as they were called in Spanish, opened, the Los Ángeles Ballroom.

Located at 206 Lerdo Street, a few steps from the Los Ángeles Church, from which it got its name and where Mario Moreno “Cantinflas” had been an acolyte, what was once a warehouse for trucks and sacks of coal was turned into one of Mexico City's ballrooms *par excellence*.

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And we Mexicans are no exception: we dance during the week and even on Sundays. For some, dancing is a way of staying healthy; others do it because it's a chance to enjoy being with their partners. Then, there are those who think dancing is an effective, fun therapy for stress. For most, it's a way of

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forgetting their problems for a while. And only the few do it because they were born knowing how to rhumba.

Traditional ballrooms have several advantages: usually they are quite economical and conveniently located, a place where regular customers meet and get to know and respect each other. Every ballroom expresses the spirit of its neighborhood: "Tell me which ballroom you go to and I'll tell you who you are." These spaces for the body to express itself are an idiosyncrasy in themselves, a culture and way of speaking; actually, an entire way of being.

Little by little, the other social classes began to appropriate these spaces, socialize them, and adapt them to their tastes and needs. Today, a wide variety of people from different walks of life converge in the ballrooms and get along comfortably, since, at the end of the day, the main goal is still to dance. That's what Miguel Nieto Applebaum says; for more than 30 years, as owner and manager, he has seen a huge number of lovers of dancing, the curious and the confused, walk through his doors where afternoon after afternoon, they find not only a cure for body and soul, but also a brother- and sisterhood of dancers.

The owner greets me at the door and when I walk through, the ballroom acts as a time machine, taking me back to the atmosphere of 1950s movies. "Anyone who hasn't been to the Los Angeles Ballroom hasn't seen Mexico" is its well-known slogan. Its walls are covered with sketches and photographs of *pachucos* and *rumberas*,² plus a pair of illustrations demonstrating the different steps to the mambo, the *danzón*, and the cha-cha-cha, among others.





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Miguel Nieto (owner)**

I was overwhelmed, perplexed and joyous at the same time. Here, you breathe in history, not only of the ballroom, but of the city, of the country. A place full of tradition and culture, where the decoration has changed very little over the years, as can be seen in several of the movies that have been filmed there. Among them is *Una gallega baila mambo* (A Woman from Galicia Dances the Mambo), with Silvia Pinal and Joaquín Pardavé, just to mention one. Films, radio broadcasts, and television programs from every era have documented the existence of this dancing palace.

Continuing along the left side, we encounter the altar to mambo king Dámaso Pérez Prado. The whole place is spacious, in the form of a horseshoe, and in the middle is a large dance floor surrounded by black and white tiles in a square that seems to never have been trod upon; it's completely pristine. At the end of the hall is the stage where the guest orchestras make the music that gets the customers twirling.

I noticed a pink neon sign announcing “The Candy Stand.” And that's where I sat down to talk to Miguel, his family's third generation to own the venue. “My grandfather, Miguel Nieto, and a partner decided to establish the ballroom in 1937. The Ángeles is a mirror of the city. It's a working-class spot, but also inclusive; it reflects what's happening in Mexican society: when the economy is rough, attendance drops and obviously it gets better when it improves. The spirit of the people who come here varies according to what's happening in Mexico.” With pride and a touch of nostalgia, Miguel Nieto remembers the celebrities: “This stage has seen artists and groups of the stature of Celia Cruz, Dámaso Pérez Prado, Willie Colón, Rubén Blades, the incomparable Sonora Santanera, and Benny Moré. It's even said that this was where Moré composed the song ‘But How Well These Mexicans Dance the Mambo.’”

An interminable and diverse line of figures have shined his floor with their feet, from railroad workers and local residents to artists and intellectuals: Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, José Saramago, Carlos Monsiváis, and even legendary revolutionaries like Fidel Castro or, more recently, actor Matt Dillon. The great Mexican comedian Cantinflas and actor Adalberto Martínez, better known as “Resortes,” were all assiduous customers, great dancers, the former of the tango and the latter of the mambo.

“As I was saying, the ballroom, just like our country, has had to adjust to these changes; we've found new ways to



survive. The only two ballrooms from that time that still exist in Mexico City are the Ángeles and the California Dancing Club.” To preserve the ballroom’s legacy, the Nieto family has opened it up to other cultural activities: dance performances, exhibitions, book launches, conferences, dance classes, and even fashion shows are all held there.

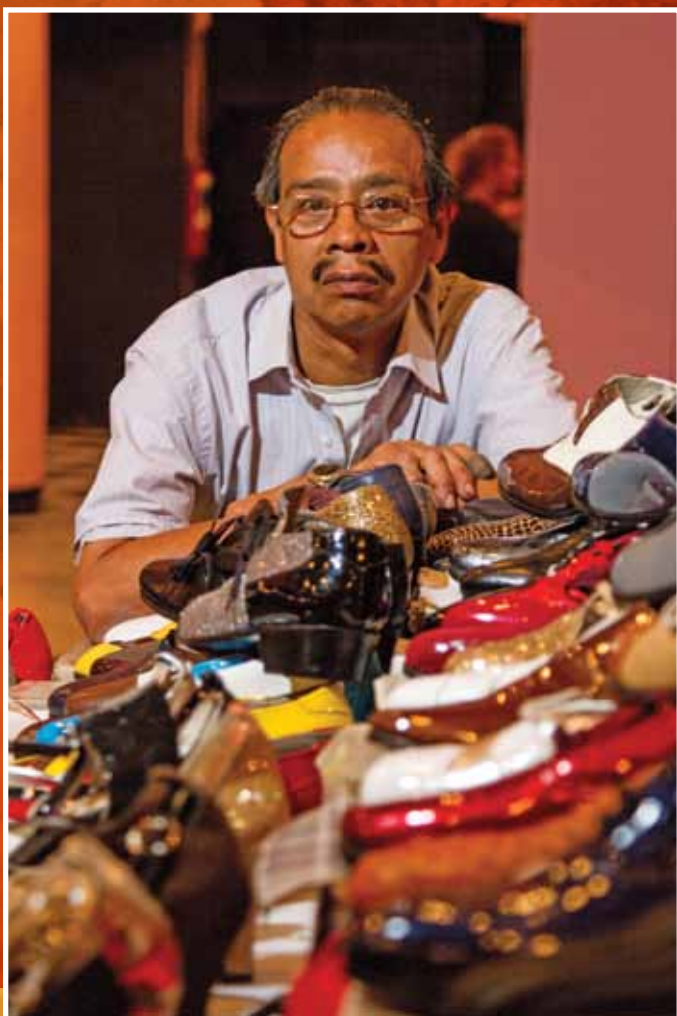
What doesn’t change is the tradition of *danzón* Tuesday and the great bands playing the very distinct rhythms of swing, mambo, and cha-cha-cha, as well as of Sundays with Cuban *son*, salsa, and *cumbia*.

Today, like every Tuesday, the place is packed; it’s a real fiesta, with couples dancing to the rhythm of the *danzón*. Here, people enjoy life, as María Enriqueta and Daniel say, a married couple that has been dancing for more than 25 years and every Tuesday for the last six has been coming to the Los Ángeles. Daniel says, “It’s a way of expressing what we feel inside; we come to dance, and we don’t care what people think.” María Enriqueta says, “It’s a real pleasure; it’s a chance to be with my husband and enjoy the music. We come here for the acoustics, for the hardwood dance floor, but above all for the people. The dancers here are very respectful; one of the big advantages of this ballroom is that on Tuesdays, from six in the evening on, we can start dancing and we don’t have to stay up late to do it.”

The horns start playing and the notes of the *danzón Sea Nymphs* (or *Nereidas* in Spanish) invades the room. Daniel puts his left arm up and takes María Enriqueta's right hand, holding her lightly. He puts his right little finger on his partner's back at the waist. They slide across the dance floor with great cadence to their steps, simple but elegant. During the chorus she fans herself while Daniel takes out a handkerchief and wipes his forehead, and their flirting is clear.

In the ballroom, the ambiance is nostalgic; you breathe harmony. The couples enjoy their passion for the dance, and it's moving to see how, from the very first song, the bodies come together and move, and reality and fantasy combine in each of the dancers.

As I continue my journey through the ballroom, I discover hair slicked down with Vaseline, wide-brimmed hats with one feather, two-toned shoes, wide, baggy pants, sequined dresses, sling-back pumps, and crimson lips. This reminds



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me that the local parishioners don't just come to show off their dance moves, but also their elegant clothing.

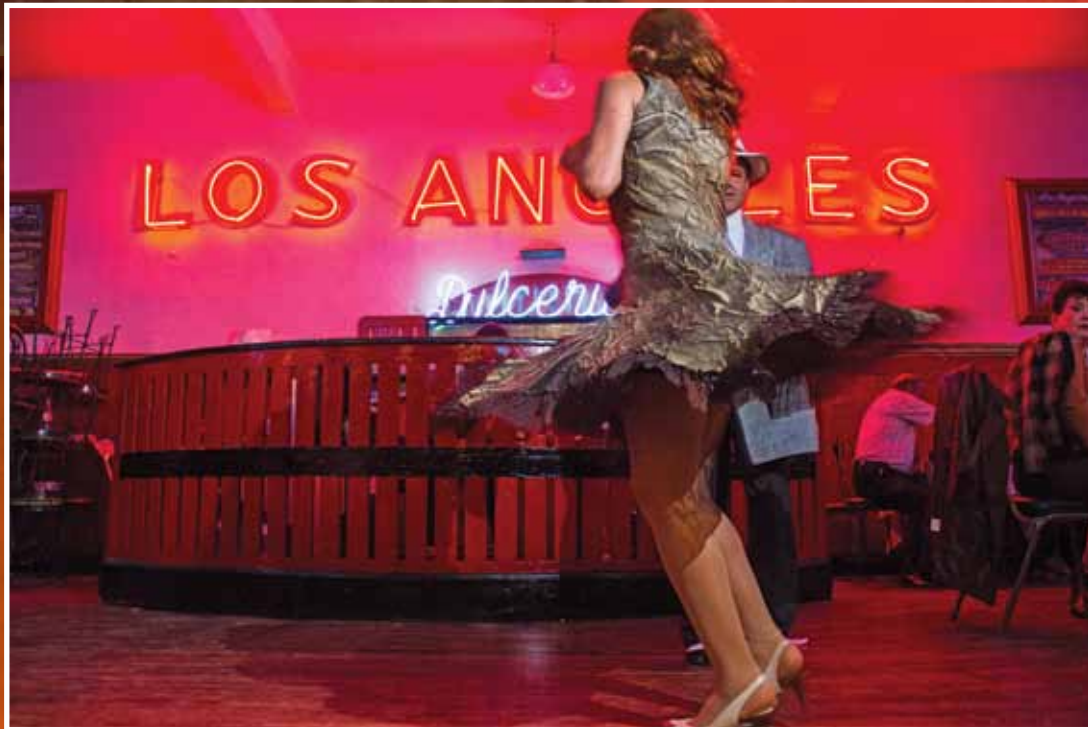
One regular tells us, "To come to this ballroom, you have to follow a certain protocol: you have to dress appropriately; anyone who comes here doesn't just come to dance, but also to project an image." He, like several other people, knows what you experience at a night out at the Ángeles: perfect dance steps accompanied by tremendous elegance.

Most take their own dancing shoes, but if not, you can acquire them there from Mr. Alipio, who on a board to one side of the cloakroom displays one by one the pairs of shoes he has made himself. He has been hand-making about 24 pairs of shoes a week for more than 40 years, 14 for men and 9 for women, in his workshop. When I asked him what kind are the most popular, he answered, "The traditional shoes for men are the two-toned saddle shoes in classic black and white; the women prefer bright colors and high heels for dancing and dressing well."

Not only the stories of those who frequent the Ángeles, but also those who work there permeate the place and live there. This is the case of Mr. Alipio, the shoemaker; Joe, the musician who arrived from Cuba in the 1960s and who, when he's not playing with his orchestra, waits on people in the cloakroom; Leonel, the man in charge of the candy stand, who offers customers cake, soft drinks, and a sweet attitude that invites you to buy the sweets; and Guillermina, the

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photographer, who has been capturing just the right moment with her camera, the perfect smile as Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez would say. Guillermina came to work here because of her mother, who has been selling flowers here for more than 40 years, and she tells me, “The Ángeles has been a haven, a place for pleasure and entertainment not only for the Nieto family, but for us workers, who are part of the family, [and it’s alive] in the memory of many men and women who have come and gone in search of happiness.”

The night of dancing goes by; people who know each other and who don’t, share; angels and archangels will continue to write stories and anecdotes about this ballroom, also dubbed “Heaven,” where time never stops; it’s always in movement to the beat of different rhythms to gladden the soul and the body. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ In the days when dancing was a service in the ballrooms, gentlemen bought tickets at the door and gave one to their partners for every dance. The women then exchanged the tickets for money on their way out.

² The *pachucos* came into being in the 1920s; young U.S. Americans of Mexican origin, dressed in loud colors, hats, chains, and two-toned saddle shoes who spoke a characteristic slang that was the basis for “Spanglish.” The *rumberas* were young women who danced to Afro-Caribbean music in ballrooms and nightclubs.