

## Assassination Tango

*Assassination Tango* is really two movies spliced together: a look at a homely hitman, John J. (Robert Duvall) from Brooklyn, who is given an exotic assignment to bump off a retired general in Argentina, and John's gradual discovery, through a young dancer, of the fascinating world of the Argentine tango.

The film represents a long time passion of Duvall, who discovered tango 15 years ago and has since made a personal study of it, with constant trips to Buenos Aires to feed his interest. This is very much his project and, like his film *The Apostle* (1996), he is in on every aspect and appears in almost every frame. While in Brooklyn, his John J. is an engaging, ruffled *paterfamilias*, happily living with a nice hairdresser (Kathy Baker) and adoring her 10-year-old daughter Jenny (Katherine Micheaux Miller). He likes dancing and a drink with his buddies at Frankie's, a bar owned by his employer. He just so happens to be a hit man!

Once on the job in Buenos Aires, John is engaged by a disaffected group (led by Ruben Blades) seeking vengeance on the old regime's killers. They try to guide him, but he insists on doing things his own way and eventually senses that he is being set up by his handlers. With time on his hands before the act, he, almost offhandedly, discovers tango and, intrigued by this sensuous new experience, he enlists a young dancer Manuela (Luciana Pedraza) to instruct him in its methods and moods. Thus, we view a somewhat schizophrenic John J., meticulously setting up his hit while haunting the salons with Manuela in search of pure tango steps.

Whether this bifurcated film works depends on the viewer. As for me, the tango sections work better--because more heartfelt--than the suspense sections, which seem to be lifted from another movie or perhaps added to "sell" a movie about dancing that Duvall really wanted to make. The best scenes with Ms. Pedraza--Duvall's longtime partner in her first movie--seem genuine and unrehearsed, like conversations they have had before: the two fencing in a cafe or John J. trying to get at the essence of tango by quizzing Luciana and her fellow *tanguistas*. These moments appear to be where Robert Duvall's real heart lies.

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