

Shall We Dance?

A fortyish businessman seems to have it made: a secure job, a loving wife and daughter, and now a new house in a nice district. But, but...*something* is missing. Mooning about that “something” on the subway home, the fellow spots a pensive--and delectable--young woman staring out the window of the Kishikana School of Dance. Is this--she--what he has been missing? After a struggle with himself, the man gets up courage to go to the dance school and sign up for lessons. To be near her.

If the above opening sounds like some paraphrase of a 1940's Hollywood romantic comedy, the comparison is apt. But we are in a different time and a different country. The film described is *Shall We Dance ?* (even the title is a throwback to an Astaire-Rogers vehicle), a new Japanese import that is as sweet and warm-hearted as the old U.S. comedies but which has layers of subtlety and social commentary they never attempted.

Shall We Dance ? was written and directed by Masayuki Suo, maker of four feature films since 1984. It follows Japanese “salaryman” Shohei Sugiyama (Koji Yakusho) as he acts on a dare--or whim--which becomes his passion. When requesting lessons, he cannot afford the advanced class from his love-object, the radiant Mai Kishikawa (Tamiyo Kusakari), so he signs up for a group class taught by the patient Tamako (Reiko Kusamura) and the fiery Toyoko (Eriko Watanabe), all the while watching Mai from afar. With time, Mai is less the focus of his attention, and the dancing itself begins to capture him. His interest is heightened when he discovers that a timorous colleague at work, Aoki (Naoto Takenaka), is able to transform himself into a flashy Latin dancer at the same school.

Sugiyama conducts his dance life in secret, never saying a word to his family. His wife, Masako (Hideko Hara)--fearing his constant absences means a mistress--even hires a private investigator to trail him. One night, Sugiyama finally attempts a move on Mai by asking her out to dinner, but she turns him down sternly, saying she takes her dancing seriously--and would be offended if he didn't feel the same. The rebuff focuses Sugiyama, and he practices all the harder to enter a local dance competition and prove his prowess to Mai. His clear improvement catches Mai's eye, and she agrees to train him herself for the contest. Mai, long in a depression about an accident she suffered in the famous Blackpool, England, ballroom dancing competition, opens up with the prospect of training Sugiyama. While he comes to suffer a debacle similar to Mai's, he is able to overcome it. The salaryman, thus, in renouncing what he thought he wanted (Mai) to concentrate on his skill, ultimately gains privileged access to her.

The sketch of the plot barely begins to suggest the richness of relationships and the suppleness of the scenes in *Shall We Dance ?* (the title comes from the Rogers and Hammerstein song from *The King and I*). What makes it so distinctive from its American film counterpart is its attitude towards desire and zeal and its cultural presumptions about social dancing itself.

In a Yankee flick tracing the same theme, there would be some obvious payoff in the desire of Sugiyama for Mai--either a final clinch or a poignant parting. Here,

surprisingly for Westerners, the man's inchoate passion for the woman is transmogrified into passion for the enterprise, for the discipline it takes to fashion a skill. His discipline and achievement is thus honored by the woman who shares it. Very Japanese this, but no less satisfying to the U.S. filmgoer who gives it a chance.

The film also starts with a cultural fact not obvious to an American audience: ballroom dancing in Japan is deemed a vulgar in mainstream tastes, something only for lecherous men and loose women in lurid "dance halls." As one of his class colleagues says to Sugiyama, dancing in Japan "is for losers, for guys after girls." Most surprisingly, social dancing is taboo among couples, too obvious a contact in a relationship which is supposed to thrive on the unexpressed. This cultural baggage that ballroom dancing carries is discreetly displayed in *Shall We Dance?*, adding an extra dimension. It's shown in the chagrin with which Sugiyama approaches his first class, in the students' sweat-glistened foreheads as they struggle with their steps, and in their constant embarrassed apologies. It's what makes Masako's concern so poignant, and her shock so real when she learns of her husband's obsession.

Note, however, that *Shall We Dance?* is also filled with wry humor and fine grace notes. The private detective, for example, becomes so intrigued with Sugiyama's dance efforts that he himself becomes a ballroom dancing fan. Unable to talk in front of their office colleagues about their dancing, Sugiyama and Aoki regularly discuss their progress--and even assay a few steps--in the men's toilet. There are touching moments, too, as when we watch Sugiyama doggedly practice his waltz outside, well away from his house, in an evening drizzle.

The movie is uniformly well acted, although Americans are likely to think Takenaka, as Aoki, goes way over the top when he does his rumba in a fright wig. Veteran actor Koji Yakusho (*Tampopo*) is on target as Sugiyama, full of qualms and uncertainties at first, then slowly gaining a confidence which even overrides a crashing humiliation. In her first film role, professional ballerina Tamiyo Kusakari seems made for the role of the mysterious Mai. We see why Sugiyama is so drawn to her.

This film has the potential to be one of those all-too-rare foreign language sleepers--like *Il Postino* or *Like Water for Chocolate*--which starts small then gains legions of fans by wonderful word of mouth. May the word start here: *Shall we Dance?* is certainly worth it.

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An Interview with Masayuki Suo

Sitting down to chat with Masayuki Suo, the writer/director of *Shall We Dance?* is unsettling at first because a video camera is trained on you and a tape recorder is at the ready. Seems the filmmaker himself is documenting his first U.S. tour by shooting all his interviews, perhaps to wrap them all up into a television documentary. Permission is politely asked and granted, and one feels, perhaps, the same sense of slightly humbling irony that adorns Mr. Suo's film.

The trip was undertaken not only because the American distributor Miramax

thinks it may have a hit, but because Suo-san feels the cultural context of *Shall We Dance?* merits some explaining to non-Japanese audiences. While Japan has a lively tradition of dancing, he explains, “individual performance is emphasized. The Japanese are not accustomed to showing public affection; they feel very hesitant about holding each other in public. This always has a sexual connotation.”

The cultural prejudice against ballroom dancing is strong,” says Suo. “Those who enjoy it are just looking for women and vice versa. Women are seen as very pretentious--showing off their swirling skirts; when they dance they seem to be trying to look like Westerners.” The film makes this prejudice clear in many ways, he notes, such as when the men taking lessons can only talk about it in the bathroom--which, Suo adds, “is the only private place in corporate Japan.”

A big hit in Japan, the film has changed attitudes towards ballroom dancing, Suo remarks. “Those who couldn’t say they were practicing are now ‘out of the closet’ and can declare their passion.” He said that sales of ballroom dancing magazines have increased and many more dance groups have been organized, several of them named after the movie.

First exposed to *The King and I* on TV in the 1970’s, Mr. Suo identifies strongly with his lead character (he’s the same age at just 40), saying he took dance lessons himself for some six months, “during which time I devised scenarios for the film.” “My intention was to learn the ten basic kinds of ballroom dance,” he comments, and while the level of his waltz was not up to the level of lead actor Koji Yakusho’s, “I was better in the rumba and cha-cha!”

He sees Japanese life as having changed tremendously over the last ten years, with the “lifetime employment system” breaking down somewhat, with more people having to change jobs, and more workers “starting to appreciate their families more, and the company not coming first for them.”

The film clearly touched a personal chord in the director, who finally says “if I have a point to make with *Shall We Dance?*, it is that, in Japan, we have always been told how we should live, not how we should enjoy our lives.” He made the picture “to explore how Japanese middle-class people who are somewhat lost--like me--could live their life.”