

# Shall We Dance?

*Shall We Dansu?*, 1996, Japan

## Film Overview



On his evening commute, bored accountant Sugiyama always looks for the beautiful woman who gazes wistfully out the window of the Kishikawa School of Dancing. One night he gets off the train, walks into the studio, and signs up for a class. Soon Sugiyama is so engrossed in his dancing he practices his steps on the train platform and under his desk, and becomes good enough for competition, compelling his wife to hire a private investigator to find out why he stays out late and returns home smelling of perfume. Among the colorful characters Sugiyama meets is his coworker Aoki, who transforms himself from geeky systems analyst to hilariously flamboyant lounge lizard. Aoki explains to Sugiyama, "When I finish work, put on the clothes, the wig and become Donny Burns, Latin world champion, and I start to move to the rhythm, I'm so happy, so completely free." Here lies the chief charm of *Shall We Dance*, the contrast between the ultracompetitive women of the studio—including the one who caught Sugiyama's eye, Mai—and the men who dance simply because they enjoy it. This 1996 film is somewhat comparable

to the flamboyant Aussie favorite *Strictly Ballroom*, but *Shall We Dance* is especially noteworthy for contrasting the boldness of social dance with the buttoned-up societal mores of Japan, where people avoid public displays of emotion. Even in Japan, the joy of dance is irresistible. --David Horiuchi, *Amazon.com*

*Shall We Dance?* was received very well both in Japan and America. It won fourteen awards at the Japanese Academy Awards, every award it was eligible to win, including Best Actor, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Newcomer of the Year. The director, Masayuki Sudo, also won a Best Director award for his 1992 *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't*. – Adapted from *Wikipedia.org*



## Culture Notes

- **Ballroom dancing in Japan:** As the narration added to the beginning of the film suggests, ballroom dancing is regarded with some suspicion in Japan. This stems from the overarching social taboo against public displays of affection, even between husband and wife; the extensive physical contact between male and female that ballroom dancing requires seems licentious as a result. However, the popularity of this film led to something of a ballroom boom in Japan. – Adapted from <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/%60SHALL+WE+DANCE%3F%27+KICKS+OFF+BALLROOM+BOOM+IN+JAPAN.-a064863389>
- **The American remake:** In 2004, Peter Chelsom directed a remake of *Shall We Dance?* starring Richard Gere, Jennifer Lopez, and Susan Sarandon. It makes several changes in order to adapt the storyline to American culture. John, the main character, is a lawyer rather than an accountant and keeps his dancing secret out of a fear of hurting his wife instead of the cultural taboo of dancing. The wife character, Beverly, was carefully changed from typical soft-spoken but devoted Japanese housewife to a hard-working American mom that viewers could relate to and support. Adapted from *Wikipedia.org*