

## **Brave Steps (A Film Essay on Dancing)**

**(By Toshio U.-P.)**

*"The movement of the dancer creates a geography that never was. With a turn of the foot, he makes neighbors of distant places."*

~Maya Deren

Dancing in cinema is tied into a need for escape, an act of rebellion or even suitable parity and romance. In four films from different cultures, we will explore the role of dancing in the film narrative and its connection to the characters who find themselves secretly or publicly seeking out opportunities to improve and showcase their dance steps and (sometimes defiantly) insist on finding a spotlight for themselves, their dance partner and their peers.

In Shall We Dance? (1), we meet Shohei Sugiyama, an overworked employee at an accounting firm who rarely has time to enjoy life in his rather mundane and repetitive weekly schedule. One evening, while on his usual long commute back home, he randomly notices a young and attractive dance instructor from the Kishikawa School of Dance in the nightly distance. After having second thoughts about giving ballroom dancing a try, he is lured away from the usual weekly lull and decides to give night-time group lessons for beginners a try. Upon adding dance school lessons to his already busy routine, Mr. Sugiyama feels rejuvenated by his new hobby but makes his wife and daughter ponder his sudden changes of behaviour and his lateness on certain nights of the week. After hiring a private investigator, Sugiyama's wife soon finds out that her husband is not having an affair like she had suspected, but is instead consumed by learning dance steps like waltz, quick step and rumba.

In Swing Kids (2), we are transported to Hamburg in the early stages of World War II where a gang of boys defiantly frequent local Café dance halls to pick up girls, perform jazz numbers and dance popular swing steps like the jitterbug. When Gestapo crackdowns on dance halls become the norm making jazz music and swing dance illegal, the gang is divided through the prevailing pressures by the Nazi regime to either join the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) or risk being disciplined and placed in a deadly work camp for enemies of the state.

In popular 1980s film Footloose (3), we meet high schooler Ren, who is settling in as a newcomer in the rural town of Beaumont where strict rules on 'spiritual corruption' are in place, banning drinking, loud 'rebellious' music and especially dancing. Determined to make the most of their youthful years, Ren, his new love interest Ariel and his new high school friend Willard decide to defy the puritanical rules in place through the town's influential reverend by attempting to sway the devout citizens of Beaumont in a town hall meeting with a motion to reinstate a high school dance and prom at the end of their school year.

In Strictly Ballroom (4), we enter the confines of the Kendall School of Dance in the vicinity of Waratah, Australia where high profile ballroom dancer Scott Hastings is training for the upcoming Pan Pacific. After a falling out with his dance partner Liz, Scott's competitive parents are determined to find him a suitable partner that will bring the coveted championship back into the hands of the Hastings family. With time running out, Scott is approached by a dance school beginner called Fran, who asks him to be her dance partner at the elite event. While hesitant at first due to the imminent competition deadline approaching and due to her questionable level of ballroom dance experience, Scott meets Fran's family and soon decides to get involved in training sessions with her, focusing on Latin styles of dance like the Paso Doble and especially the Rumba, where they both feel they have some sort of compatible rhythmic chemistry.

While dancing often involves a risk through its deviation from the norm, its defiance from the rules or its tie into competition and rank, the main characters seek it out as a remedy for boredom, oppression, austerity and loneliness. The dancer often finds himself learning lessons about self-confidence, friendship, integrity and love when tested with the task to keep dancing amid challenge, conflict, restriction and the excesses of pride.

Films:

1. Shall We Dance? (1996). Dir. Masayuki Suo. Toho Co. Ltd. Japan. 136 min.
2. Swing Kids (1993). Dir. Thomas Carter. Buena Vista Pictures. USA. 112 min.
3. Footloose (1984). Dir. Herbert Ross. Paramount Pictures. USA. 107 min.
4. Strictly Ballroom (1992). Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Ronin Films. Australia. 94 min.