

Fated to Dance : Yokota Kenji & Kojidani Miki

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

ALLROOM dancing had been simmering quietly in dance halls throughout Japan when the movie *Shall We Dance* hit the screen some nine years ago. The movie, which was recently remade in Hollywood, depicts a plodding, humdrum businessman whose life is transformed when he sees a woman in a dance school window during his commute home one evening. Smitten by her beauty, he enrolls in the school and the quirky, flashy dance scene unfolds. Since then the number of dance devotees in Japan has risen to close to 10 million, according to an estimate of the Japan Ballroom Dance Federation in 2004. Ballroom dancing has become a mania.

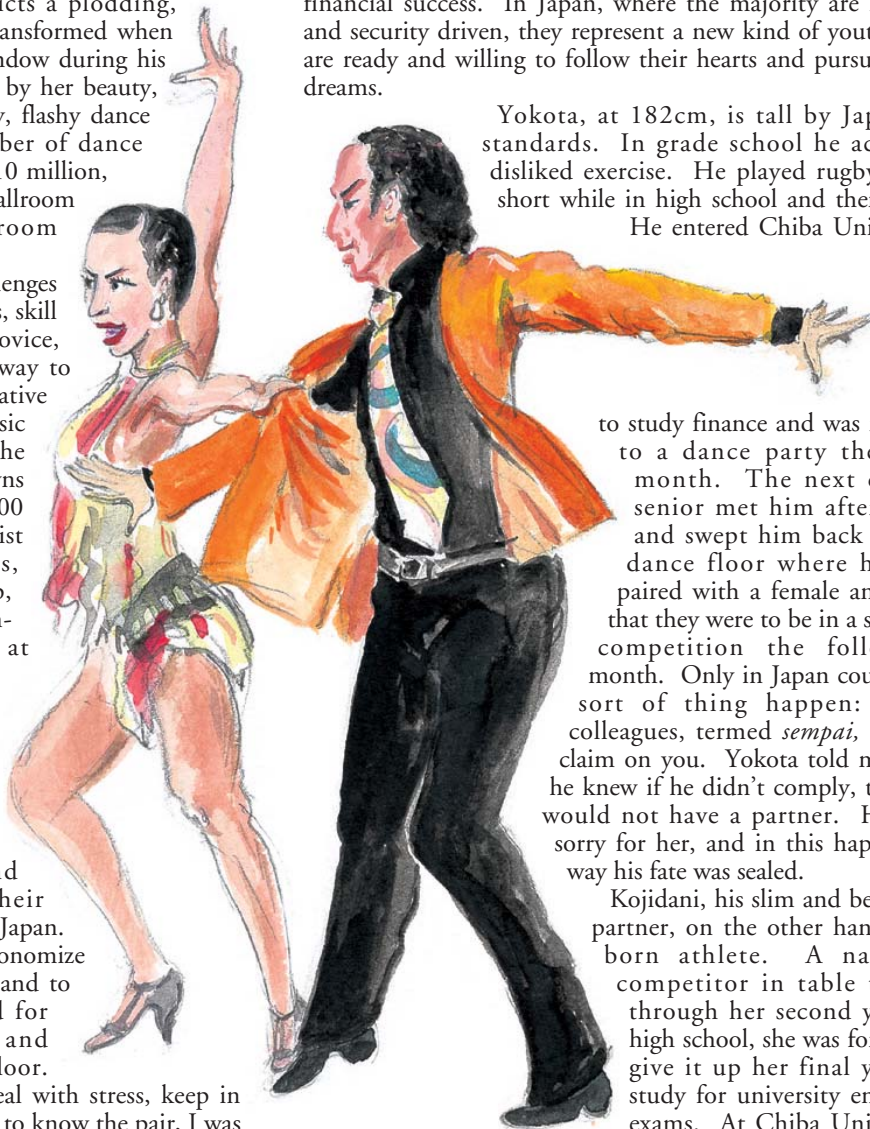
Once started, there is no end of challenges and no end to the costly demonstrations, skill tests and competitions available for novice, amateur, senior, grand-senior all the way to professional contenders. A huge, lucrative business has developed ranging from basic dance shoes and practice clothes to the glittery stuff of dreams – ballroom gowns that rent out for sometimes over \$1,000 for just three days. There are specialist dance hairdressers, dance magazines, dance teaching videos, stage make-up, sprays to keep the soles of shoes non-slippery and glitter jewelry selling at fabulous prices.

AT the top of the dance world, the young professionals compete relentlessly. Yokota Kenji and Kojidani Miki, two such stars in their early 30s, spend about three months a year in England practicing and competing, preparing for their breakthrough into the top Latin slot in Japan. Their lives are full of sacrifice. They economize to make their pilgrimages to England and to buy the expensive costumes needed for competition. They are focused and fabulously appealing on the dance floor. Dance for me is a hobby, a way to deal with stress, keep in shape and meet new people. After I got to know the pair, I was perplexed at why such intelligent and well-educated people would be dancing rather than pursuing the lucrative careers for which they were educated.

Graduates of Chiba University, a national university, they have top-level educations. They landed good jobs, Yokota in finance and Kojidani at a firm now dealing in computer

accessories and were on their way to the prescribed good life. To the consternation of their parents, they threw it all away for dance, with no guarantee of succeeding and still less for financial success. In Japan, where the majority are money and security driven, they represent a new kind of youth who are ready and willing to follow their hearts and pursue their dreams.

Yokota, at 182cm, is tall by Japanese standards. In grade school he actually disliked exercise. He played rugby for a short while in high school and then quit. He entered Chiba University



to study finance and was invited to a dance party the first month. The next day, a senior met him after class and swept him back to the dance floor where he was paired with a female and told that they were to be in a student competition the following month. Only in Japan could this sort of thing happen: older colleagues, termed *senpai*, have a claim on you. Yokota told me that he knew if he didn't comply, the girl would not have a partner. He felt sorry for her, and in this haphazard way his fate was sealed.

Kojidani, his slim and beautiful partner, on the other hand, is a born athlete. A national competitor in table tennis through her second year of high school, she was forced to give it up her final year to study for university entrance exams. At Chiba University Kojidani majored in law, and lived in a small room without a bath, and therein her future was decided. She made a friend at a public bath who led her to dance. "Initially I had no special interest in dance," She explained, "but I love exercise. It was fate. Once I entered the dance club it was as if I had stepped on an escalator. I paired with Yokota, we took lessons three

times a week at Hojo School of Dancing where we now teach and we competed. Before we even realized it, our road was totally mapped out.”

THE life of a dancer is strenuous. Yokota does gym training every other day. The pair practice from 9:30am until 1pm before their dance school opens. They teach six days a week from 1pm until 10pm, after which they sometimes resume practicing until midnight. On Sundays they practice or appear in competitions. Apart from their wealthy middle-aged and university students, they have almost no contact with anyone outside the dance world.

Competitions are frequent in Japan. “The most important thing in competition is concentration,” according to Yokota. “For each competition we decide on one point to concentrate on while we perform. For instance, we might decide to concentrate on the tension between our extended hands and feet or on squeezing our bodies into position. Once we get out on the dance floor, it is important to concentrate on one simple thing. Sometimes we have spats about what it should be. But it all blows over.”

Even after 15 years of competitive dancing, both say they are very nervous before performing. Kojidani with her perfect figure in tasteful but the usual skimpy Latin dance dresses shows none of her jitters to her audience. Her smile and movement are all elegance and pizzazz. “My worst experience was years ago when we reached the top level ‘A ranking.’ We were asked to perform a demonstration dance for the Tokyo Ballroom Dance Academy held at the Imperial Hotel. For the first time we invited both sets of parents – all had been against us dancing to begin with. Maybe it was because my mother was watching, but I fell down. I had never fallen in competition or demonstration before or since. My mind went white.”

YOKOTA contends, “Part of the weakness of top Japanese dancers on the world stage is the tendency for non-sportsmen to take up dance. Also, the majority start dancing when they get to university, years after their foreign counterparts have begun their training. For instance, at our university – as elsewhere I think – the top athletes choose baseball, soccer or tennis. If they succeed, they can make big money. Were some of these athletes to choose ballroom dancing, Japan would have more serious contenders.”

At the other end of the dance world, the overall level of those dancing as a hobby is rather high in Japan, reflecting the

Japanese penchant for wanting to be perfect at whatever they do. Perhaps it comes from their schooling; high standards for performance carry over into their amusements and hobbies. Few Japanese are satisfied with just having fun, whether it is swimming, golf or bowling. Most aim to become excellent at whatever they take up, with the emphasis on perfect form. So much so, in fact, that at dance parties the expressions of most dancers tend to be rather grim. For them, dance is serious.

At 34 years old, Yokota has about six more years before it will be time for him to retire from professional Latin dance competition. The competition life span for standard dance – waltz, foxtrot, tango and quickstep – is a bit longer, with contestants still competing in their 40s. The rhumba, jive, cha-cha-cha and other types of Latin dance require faster and more acrobatic movements. Like in other sports, a dancer’s peak is reached relatively young and I wonder how top dancers can adjust to being on the sidelines teaching future stars.

Kojidani says she looks forward to teaching children, not just the steps but the consciousness of body movement and expression. Yokota is undecided but is holding open the option of some other dance-related job as well. Whatever happens, both claim they have no regrets about giving up the high-level, mainstream jobs they had landed.



DESPITE the boom in dancing and the ever-growing crowds watching the pro and amateur competitions, dance in Japan is curiously under-commercialized. Prize money for most major competitions merely covers the entry fees. Notwithstanding its current popularity, even TV and newspaper coverage is trivial. It is a business opportunity waiting for promoters.

I see no reason why ballroom dance shouldn’t command the high salaries and prize money that other sports such as baseball and soccer offer. Certainly ballroom dance is more entertaining to watch than, say, golf. Talk abounds about adding dance to the Olympics. It is my hope that the Yokota-Kojidani duo will use their advanced educations and effervescent charisma to help promote the sport in the future.

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