

## Around Town



# Casually ballroom

John Ovens discovers a relic of old Shanghai that isn't quite ready to hang up its dancing shoes

Without a doubt, one of the uniquely surreal highlights of living in Shanghai is the routine afternoon sight of the city's senior citizens tearing up the public parks with quicksteps and foxtrots. Ballroom is a veritable relic of old Shanghai (no jokes about the dancers, please) that arrived at the latter end of the 19th century in a flurry of Western imports. Introduced to his salon by an Englishman called Henry Smith in 1858, partner dances were taken up by the well-to-do Shanghaiese elite, then imitated by the upwardly mobile hoi polloi. Eventually, feather steps and free spins were just part of everybody's physical vocabulary, because that's what everybody did for fun in the evenings. You know, before box sets were invented.

Thanks to modern televised dance shows, many now only know ballroom in its competitive form, but before scores, sequins and

disturbing volumes of fake tan, it was popularised as a social dance that belonged to the people. Today, a group of such people gather regularly on Nanjing Dong Lu outside the Yongan Department Store, where they have been dancing for several years. They didn't know one another before, but now they get together to dance daily – often first thing in the morning and in the evening, and sometimes, according to 75-year-old Mr Tan, 'it's like a whole day affair!'

Madame Zhang, who dances with a small speaker in her hands, is the designated bringer of beats. 'You let everyone know that we old people love dancing because it makes us happy and it keeps us trim and fit,' she declares before waltzing off.

**We old people love dancing because it makes us happy and it keeps us trim**

On occasion the group can swell to around a hundred dancers, which can cause problems. 'The police don't like us dancing here,' says Mr Zhou, 68. 'They say we disturb the peace and are afraid we may

cause trouble or inconvenience to the crowds here. I don't understand – the police are supposed to be here to protect us, not interfere with our dancing!'

While they're an unlikely lot to get on the wrong side of the law, back in the 1930s, ballrooms were filled with the kind of unsavoury characters that helped Shanghai earn its infamous nickname 'Whore of the Orient'. Nowhere is more symbolic of such a bygone era than the Paramount Theatre on Yuyuan Lu in Jingan district, which housed

the most famous of the 200 or more ballrooms that dotted Shanghai at the time. Sporting a front replete with a ritzy pencil of neon lines, the theatre is a jewel of Art Deco.

The Paramount is currently closed for refurbishment, but before it recently shuttered it was still home to occasional dances – though few compared to the pomp on show during its '30s heyday. The crowd was a bombastic, full-flavoured buffet of Shanghaiese society: wealthy peregrines from the West slipping gold ingots into the hands (and drawers) of dancing girls flanked by Russian musicians, gangsters, aristocrats; the best and worst of both worlds shaking their hips to the cha-cha-cha.

So what happened? Come 2014, you would think the only waltz anyone does after leaving their workplace is the one that takes them to the inside of a dark bar, suggesting that sadly,





## Care to dance?

### In a club **Mural**

It's salsa night on Mondays at Mural, which welcomes beginners and professionals to dance for free. A live Latin band provides the soundtrack, while instructors are on hand to get you going. Oh, and it's buy-one-get-one-free on drinks between 7-9pm, so that ought to loosen your hips. 10 Hengshan Lu, near Gaoan Lu, Xuhui district (6433 5023). Open 7pm-2am Sun-Thur, 7pm-3am Fri-Sat. ☎ Hengshan Lu. 徐汇区衡山路10号, 近高安路

### In a garden **Lu Xun Park**

Simply turn up, and the regulars here will be more than happy to welcome newcomers – plus it's a great way of getting to know some of the city's older residents. Dancers usually congregate around 5-6pm. 146 Dong Jiangwan Lu, near Sichuan Bei Lu, Hongkou district. ☎ Hongkou Football Stadium. 虹口区东江湾路146号, 近四川北路

### On the internet **Dancepartner.com**

Going on the web to look for a 'dance partner' sounds pretty euphemistic, this actually is good, clean fun. Both amateurs and professionals can log on to find their perfect partner in Shanghai or anywhere else, following which you can practise wherever you like. [www.dancepartner.com](http://www.dancepartner.com)

### In a competition **Healing Hearts ball**

Part amateur ballroom dancing competition, part black tie, four-course gala dinner, the Healing Hearts ball (Thur 6, 6-10pm) at the Jingan Shangri-La is for charity, hence hefty price tags for its guests, starting at 1,799RMB. Competing couples – which are sure to include students from top dance schools – will have to dance in four categories. To register, email [healingheartsbball@gmail.com](mailto:healingheartsbball@gmail.com) or call 6111 4839.

Jingan Shangri-La, 1218 Yanan Zhong Lu, near Tongren Lu, Jingan district (2203 8888). ☎ Jingan Temple 静安区延安中路1218号 静安香格里拉酒店4楼, 近南京西路

### No, I don't care to dance **Parinama Shanghai Open**

If you're just happy to leave it to the professionals, check out the Parinama Shanghai Open, the world championship in competitive ballroom dancing. It sounds a bit like Eurovision, in which participating countries are allowed one vote each, although you probably won't find any bearded ladies here. Tickets to the event on Sat 1 start at 300RMB. Mercedes-Benz Arena, 1200 Expo Avenue, near Gaokao Xi Lu, Pudong (400 181 6688). ☎ China Art Museum. 浦东世博大道1200号, 近高科西路



**Dance havens** From historic places like Paramount to clubs like Mural (bottom) and Lu Xun Park (left), dancing is very much ubiquitous in Shanghai



ballroom dancing is dying out with a generation. We arrange to meet with Jorge Geronimo, founder of dance company Latin Grooves – the only school in town that focuses exclusively on ballroom dancing – to find out if that's really the case. Yet, when we arrive at the studio in Changning Cultural Palace, ballroom appears to be alive and kicking. The sultrily lit floor is filled with young couples shimmying their stuff, including one lady throwing shapes in a skintight leopard print catsuit.

There are, Geronimo informs us, 10 international style ballroom dances in all: five standard (waltz, tango, foxtrot, quickstep and Viennese waltz) and five Latin (cha-cha-cha, rumba, samba, jive, and paso doble), and Latin Grooves offers lessons in all. He claims the benefits are multitudinous. 'It's entertaining, you get in shape, and you can meet other people,' he says, adding that one hour of Latin dancing in a club burns 500 calories, 'without you even noticing.' He also describes it as a kind of therapy. 'Through the years I've had the opportunity to work with people who've come out of divorces, had surgeries, bankruptcies, or had other issues or problems,' Geronimo

says. 'And through dancing, their lives changed. With music, you forget about everything.'

In the spirit of investigative journalism, we take part in a taster session, learning the basic moves of the cha-cha-cha. 'Shake your hips in a figure of eight,' the disconcertingly lithe Geronimo commands, as we erratically thrust our hips in a figure that's altogether more horizontal-looking. We're paired up with another beginner to practice some steps. It's strangely intimate, but concentration on getting the steps right eventually displaces our initial self-consciousness. It's only a start though, and Geronimo recommends a minimum of 10-lesson programme to learn the basics properly. Everyone is welcome to join and if you're a single, you'll get paired with another. Following that, it's time to take a turn on the dance floor.

**Latin Grooves** Third Floor, Changning Cultural Palace, 1250 Yuyuan Lu, near Anxi Lu, Changning district (2465 8373). Open 10am-9pm daily. ☎ Jiangsu Lu. 长宁区愚园路1250号3楼, 近安西路 Single classes cost 460RMB an hour. A package of 10 private classes is 4400 RMB.



**Old but gold** These dancers strutting their stuff along Nanjing Dong Lu show that age is just a number

