

Mao's Last Dancer

Cert 12a Australia 2009 117 mins

Crew

Directed by	Bruce Beresford
Screenplay	Jan Sardi
Original story (autobiography)	Li Cunxin
Cinematographer	Peter James
Film Editor	Mark Warner
Music	Christopher Gordon

Cast

Chi Cao	Li Cunxin (as adult)
Chengwu Guo	Li Cunxin (as teenager)
Huang Wen Bin	Li Cunxin (as child)
Joan Chen	Niang, his mother
Wang Shuang Bao	Dia, his father
Bruce Greenwood	Ben Stevenson

Synopsis

Li Cunxin is born into a peasant family in a Chinese village during Mao's Cultural Revolution, and as a young boy he is selected by Communist Party officials for special training at the dance academy in Beijing.

He grows into a talented and powerful young dancer, and makes a cultural exchange visit to the Houston ballet, where the artistic director, Ben Stevenson, recognizes his potential. The student soon becomes a star, and finds that the United States is not the dark, downtrodden place that was described in the propaganda dealt out by the party in his village school.

Despite concerns for the safety of his family, Li decides to stay in the US - but the Chinese Government isn't happy



Reviews

Based as it is on a true story of a real life, *Mao's Last Dancer* is far more complex and layered than a fictional narrative might be, and satisfyingly so, with a great payload of emotional release. Bruce Beresford engineers Jan Sardi's excellent adaptation of the memoir with finesse, delivering that emotional climax with power and great timing. And the emotional peak of this story is not that Li Cunxin (Chi Cao) makes his fabulous entry into the world of western ballet; it is his private story and the realisation of a different, even more important dream....

.....Chinese born dancer Chi Cao is excellent as the adult Li Cunxin, his own background not too dissimilar to Li's; but while we expect this talented young dancer (resident with the Birmingham Ballet) to shine in the dancing scenes, it's a marvellous surprise to accept him totally as Li and click into his emotional space, especially for a moving finale....

..... *Mao's Last Dancer* is a mature work from a master filmmaker relishing his work.

Andrew Urban, Urban Cinefile

.....The production enjoyed a surprising amount of access to Chinese locations and these scenes - photographed by Peter James in a grainy, nostalgic style - are exquisite to look at. Sydney, meanwhile, stands in for Houston, with a roll-call of Aussie actors playing the Americans (local viewers will have fun name-checking them). Chi Cao is a likeable leading man whose dancing is spectacular, and Joan Chen is moving in brief scenes as Li's mother.

The film's galvanising performance, however, comes from Canadian actor Bruce Greenwood (*Star Trek*) as Li's mentor Ben Stevenson. A scene in which Stevenson, a driven but gentle and nurturing man, has to explain to Li the meaning of a racist term, is quite affecting.

Aussie moviemakers have shown themselves adept at a range of genres this year and we should not be surprised to see a great 'coming-to-America' film among them. *Mao's Last Dancer's* two hours go by in a flash, and the ballet sequences choreographed by Graeme Murphy are an added visual treat in a film with an embarrassment of riches. Late in his career, Bruce Beresford has delivered one of his best movies.

Nick Dent, Time Out Sydney, September 2009

Film website:

www.maoslastdancermovie.com