

## Movies

# Lord of the Dance

Australian director Bruce Beresford chats to Sarah Lang about his unusual childhood, and his latest film, *Mao's Last Dancer*.



WORLD STAGE: Chi Cao, with Camilla Vergotis, plays Mao's last dancer.

**“R**AGS-TO-RICHES stories are a dime a dozen, but the rags in this one were so ragged,” ponders veteran director Bruce Beresford of his latest film *Mao's Last Dancer*.

A young 69 in jeans and a T-shirt, the salt-of-the-earth Aussie forgoes an austere Auckland hotel suite for a pew among the tea-taking plebs. Waving away his team of minders, he sips a cuppa and, in between quips, obligingly rehashes a true story that's stranger than fiction.

*Mao's Last Dancer* is based on the eponymous autobiography by world-famous Chinese ballet dancer Li Cunxin. Cunxin was born in 1961, the sixth son to good peasant stock in a Chinese village. He grew up worshipping Communist chief Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution which plunged the country into chaos and the people into poverty. At 11, Cunxin was plucked from school on the whim of a cultural advisor, and taken away from his family to Madame Mao's punishing Beijing Dance Academy. There, the students' daily grind was to glorify the revolution through ballet — but not as you know it. Ballet with guns. Revolutionary ballet.

Never a natural, the skinny, awkward Cunxin stood out only thanks to gruelling evenings practising the splits (he once fell asleep in that position) and early mornings hopping up stairs with sandbags tied to his ankles. Eventually, the star student earned a study trip to America.

“You couldn't make this stuff up,” says straight-talking Beresford, the antithesis of a prima-donna director despite a CV that sports 27 feature films including 1989 Academy Award-winner *Driving Miss Daisy*. “One of the world's best ballet dancers coming out of one of the most repressive regimes in world history, where people were starving to death in a country run by a madman. What Li achieved was against the most unbelievable odds.”

Indeed, if it wasn't for a shoulder-tap and a succession of utterly unlikely circumstances, Cunxin, now 49, would probably still be a cabbage-eating peasant, not a world-leading “ballerino”-turned-Aussie stockbroker. But this isn't just a modern Cinderella tale. It's also a big-screen lesson in history, politics and international relations, and a touchingly human story about one earnest young man pulled between freedom and family, desire and duty, communism and capitalism, East and West.

Beresford, who's dabbled as a writer, producer, actor and cinematographer, read the best-selling autobiography soon after its 2003 release but never sniffed a script. Even after a film was proposed, he doubted it'd get made. And not because compressing 30 years and 700,000 words into 117 minutes was a hard ask.

“I thought, ‘Who's going to find a Chinese man who's a top ballet dancer, can act, is fluent in Mandarin and English, very good-looking and not gay?’” Then, unexpectedly, the real Li phoned about a Chinese ballet dancer in Birmingham, Chi Cao, who fitted the bill.

But Beresford, a Sydneysider who also works in England and the US, was concerned about more than just casting. “This was a pro-American film. Who makes pro-American films nowadays? Nobody! Not even the Americans. I was aware that Australians would probably rather live in China under Chairman Mao than American under Bush.”

Still, the film had the West's fascination with all things

China going for it, and you can look at it as pro-freedom rather than pro-American.

Although he'd directed operas, Beresford had to swot up on ballet. “I got hold of all the ballet films ever made: four.” To get around another snag — scenes spoken in Mandarin — he pored over translations and peered through binoculars to spot hesitation or indecision in the actors' eyes. “I'd say stop. And I could sit down with Li and ask how he did this, and that.”

Beresford, who already knew a lot about Chinese history and culture, points out that an Eastern director would still have to deal with unfamiliar (Western) material. Still, there was the logistics of film-making across two continents. “I don't know that we ever really got permission to film in China... China was tricky,” he admits, though a Chinese co-producer helped. “They [government officials] said you can't mention Chairman Mao, and you certainly can't show Madame Mao. She's absolutely a non-person. She's out.” But as Madame Mao ran the ballet academy in question, Beresford quietly cast a lookalike.

Unlike most celebs, this laidback bloke doesn't give a toss what people think; rather, he refreshingly and amusingly speaks his mind. No more so than in his 2008

book *Josh Hartnett definitely wants to do this:*

*True Stories from a Life in the Screen Trade*. The “diary” dishes dirt on a year spent setting up films, full of false trails, deluded execs, self-absorbed actors, and destitute producers who pretend otherwise. “I keep a diary because the tax guys ring up and say ‘where were you on a certain day three years ago?’. One day I reread a bit, started laughing and sent 30 pages to a publisher. They called and said ‘Is there more?’”

As for why Hartnett's in the title, Beresford laughs and launches into the tale

of their conversation about a potential Chet Baker film. “Josh was astonishingly self-absorbed, even by actors' standards. And also humourless. He didn't like that I was sarcastic when he was pretending to be very knowledgeable about Chet Baker. Which he wasn't.” After Beresford spent months more on the project, he was told that “Josh Hartnett definitely wants to do this. But only if you don't direct.” There's no trace of sour grapes as he recounts the story, just astonishment and amusement.

It's the same tone he takes when talking about his childhood with a bipolar father and a mother who lived in a fantasy world. There were unusual house rules. No one could get out of bed before his father did, even if that was 3pm. “I thought all families were like that. The worst thing was we weren't allowed to talk at meals. If you wanted the pepper you'd point. Once my sister didn't understand what I wanted and I said ‘No, that’ and my father whacked me one and I went flying off the chair.”

Retreating into books, music and movies, he started making short films at 12 but his parents threw away his film equipment. “Then I realised I had to get out as soon as I could.” At 17, he left for university and to pursue directing. “I made sure I had nothing to fall back on, because if you have something to fall back on you'll fall back.”

Half a century and multiple Oscar nominations later, he has, astonishingly, never seen any of his films more than once. “I'd feel a bit silly.” That sole screening of *Mao* was “good”, he says matter-of-factly.

He doesn't reveal that it was Australia's biggest box-office success last year and runner-up for People's Choice at the Toronto International Film Festival. Odds are it'll do well here too, given we Kiwis like a battler.

But surely there's a little fiction spliced between the facts? “Well, there's nothing in it I could say is actual fiction.” Beresford laughs. “You wouldn't dare make this stuff up.”



BERESFORD

*Mao's Last Dancer* is in cinemas from March 4.