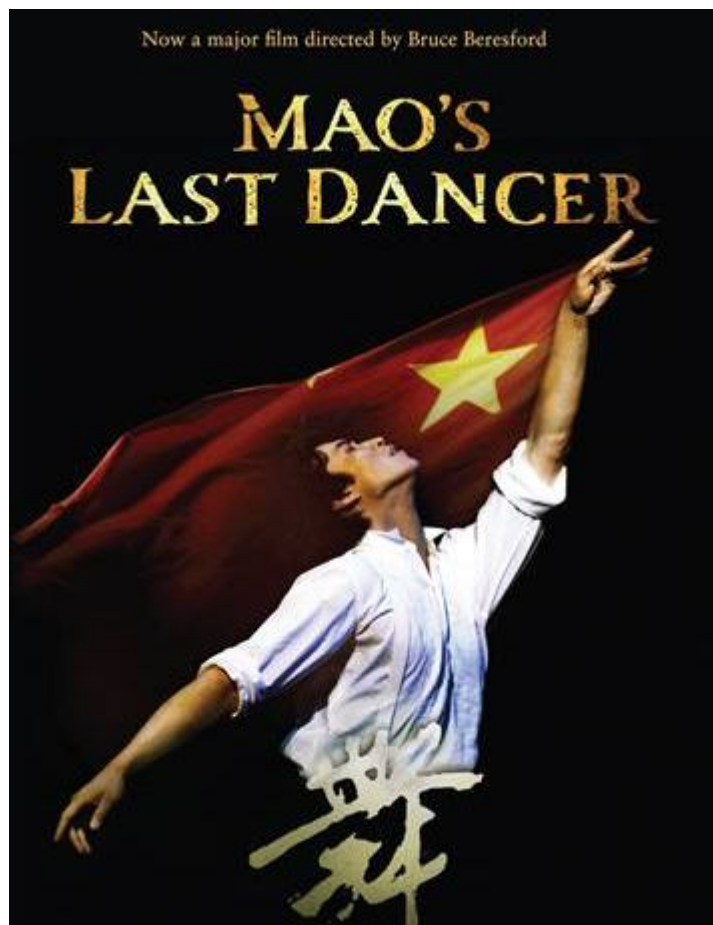


# MAO'S LAST DANCER

EEN FILM VAN

BRUCE BERESFORD



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# MAO'S LAST DANCER – Bruce Beresford

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## **PROJECT SUMMARY**

<b>Een productie van</b>	Great Scott
<b>Taal</b>	Engels/Mandarijn
<b>Naar de gelijknamige autobiografie van</b>	Li Cunxin
<b>Lengte</b>	117 minuten
<b>Genre</b>	Drama
<b>Land van herkomst</b>	Australië
<b>Filmmaker</b>	Bruce Beresford
<b>Hoofdrollen</b>	Chi Cao, Bruce Greenwood
<b>Releasedatum</b>	17 juni 2010
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.maoslastdancermovie.com">www.maoslastdancermovie.com</a>
<b>Kijkwijzer</b>	

## **SYNOPSIS**

Li, geboren in 1961, groeit tijdens de Culturele Revolutie met zijn ouders en zes broers in armoede op in de Chinese provincie Shandong. Op zijn elfde wordt hij geselecteerd voor de strenge, zware en ideologische balletacademie van Mao's vrouw Jiang Qing in Beijing. Li blijkt een waar talent te zijn en wordt ontdekt door Ben Stevenson, de artistiek leider van het Houston Ballet. Als een van de eerste uitwisselingsstudenten krijgt Li toestemming van Mao's communistische regime om naar Amerika te reizen. Na een eerste cultuurschock omarmt Li de vrijheid en weigert daarom naar China terug te keren. Het gevolg is een dramatische confrontatie op het Chinese consulaat, die alle nieuwsmedia in de Verenigde Staten weet te halen.

MAO'S LAST DANCER van Bruce Beresford ('Driving Miss Daisy') is een verfilming van de gelijknamige autobiografie van Li Cunxin. In de hoofdrollen spelen Chi Cao, Amanda Schull ('Center Stage'), Bruce Greenwood ('Star Trek'), Joan Chen ('The Last Emperor') en Kyle MacLachlan ('Blue Velvet').

## **CAST**

CHI CAO	<i>Li Cunxin (adult)</i>
CHENGWU GUO	<i>Li Cunxin (teenage)</i>
JOAN CHEN	<i>Niang</i>
WANG SHUANG BAO	<i>Dia</i>
BRUCE GREENWOOD	<i>Ben Stevenson</i>
AMANDA SCHULL	<i>Elizabeth</i>
KYLE MACLACHLAN	<i>Charles Foster</i>
JACK THOMPSON	<i>Judge Woodrow Seals</i>
CAMILLA VERGOTIS	<i>Mary McKendry</i>
MADELEINE EASTOE	<i>Lori</i>

## **CREW**

DIRECTOR	<i>Bruce Beresford</i>
PRODUCER	<i>Jane Scott</i>
SCREENWRITER	<i>Jan Sardi</i>
CHOREOGRAPHERS	<i>Graeme Murphy &amp; Janet Vernon</i>
CINEMATOGRAPHY	<i>Peter Jamer</i>
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	<i>Herbert Pinter</i>
SOUND RECORDIST	<i>David Lee</i>
EDITOR	<i>Mark Warner</i>
COMPOSER	<i>Christopher Gordon</i>
MAKE-UP	<i>Viv Mephram</i>

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## **FILMMAKERS**

### **BRUCE BERESFORD – REGISSEUR**

**Bruce Beresford** is one of Australia's most celebrated film directors. He was nominated for an Oscar® in 1980 for the script of *Breaker Morant* and in 1982 for directing *Tender Mercies*. His film *Driving Miss Daisy* was awarded four Oscars®, including the Award for Best Picture, in 1989.

Bruce Beresford's early Australian films include *Don's Party*, *The Getting of Wisdom*, *The Club* and *Puberty Blues* as well as the internationally acclaimed *Breaker Morant*.

Bruce's many other film credits include *Crimes of the Heart*, *Black Robe*, *Mister Johnson*, *Double Jeopardy* and *Paradise Road* and he has been awarded three Australian Film Institute Awards and been nominated for several others.

Bruce has also directed several operas and recently published a memoir, *Josh Hartnett Definitely Wants to do This... True Stories from a Life in the Screen Trade*.

### **JANE SCOTT – PRODUCER**

Jane Scott is one of Australia's most respected producers. She produced the Academy Award-winning *Shine*, starring Geoffrey Rush and Noah Taylor and was nominated for the Darryl F Zanuck Theatrical Motion Picture Producer of the Year Award (1996) by the Producers Guild of America. Jane produced *Love's Brother*, a collaboration with the screenwriter of both *Shine* and *Mao's Last Dancer*, Jan Sardi. Jane also produced the acclaimed feature *Head On*, directed by Anna Kokkinos, and *Crocodile Dundee II*. Earlier in her career, Jane worked on some of Australia's highest profile films including *Strictly Ballroom*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *My Brilliant Career* and *Storm Boy*.

### **JAN SARDI – SCREENWRITER**

Jan Sardi is one of Australia's most distinguished screenwriters. He received an Oscar® Nomination for his screenplay for *Shine*, as well as a BAFTA nomination, a Writers' Guild of America nomination and a Golden Globe nomination. Jan has won numerous awards for his extensive work in Australian film and television, including Best Screenplay for *Shine* \*(Australian Film Institute Awards and Australian Writers Guild Awards). He also wrote and directed \**Love's Brother*, an Australian/UK co-production starring Giovanni Ribisi and Adam Garcia. *Love's Brother* won the Best Film Award at the 2004 Houston International Film Festival; it also won the award for Best Director and Best Cinematography. It won the Grand Prize - Best Film - at the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis. It was nominated for six Australian Film Institute Awards (2004) including Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay. Jan also adapted the hit film *The Notebook* for the screen.

### **CHOREOGRAPHERS- GRAEME MURPHY & JANET VERNON**

Until recently Artistic Director and Associate Artistic Director respectively of the Sydney Dance Company, Graeme Murphy and Janet Vernon have been a major force in contemporary dancing in Australia for the past three decades.

Previously with the Australian Ballet, Graeme took on the directorship of the Dance Company (NSW) at the end of 1976, changed the company's name to Sydney Dance Company in 1979 and went on to develop it as a major choreographer-led contemporary dance company. With his Associate Director Janet Vernon, Graeme also nurtured the work of other Australian choreographers, including dancers

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from within his own company. Choreographers whose early works have been mentored by Graeme included Paul Mercurio, Gideon Obarzanek and Stephen Page.

As well as having to his credit a substantial body of work created on his own company, Graeme has choreographed for a range of other dance and opera companies including the Australian Ballet, the Australian Ballet School, the Canadian Opera Company, Nederlands Dans Theater, Opera Australia, the Queensland Ballet and White Oak Dance Project.

Graeme received Australian Dance Awards for outstanding achievement in choreography for Tivoli in 2001 and Swan Lake in 2003 and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1997. In 2006, the year in which both he and Janet Vernon resigned from Sydney Dance Company, they were joint recipients of the award for lifetime achievement.

### **CAST**

#### **CHI CAO - *Li Cunxin (adult)***

Chi Cao is Principal Dancer with the Birmingham Royal Ballet. Born in China, Chi trained at the Beijing Dance Academy and the Royal Ballet School, London. He joined Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1995 and progressed quickly throughout the ranks of the Company to be promoted to Principal in 2002. Chi is a virtuoso classical dancer, and often leads the Company in the classical repertory. His superb technique won him the gold medal in 1998 at Varna, the 'Granddaddy' of all ballet competitions.

With his frequent partner, Nao Sakuma, Chi has also represented the Company at a number of prestigious occasions, dancing at the NATO Gala in Birmingham (2000) and Birmingham's Gala to celebrate HRH Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee (2002).

#### **BRUCE GREENWOOD - Ben Stevenson**

Bruce Greenwood's illustrious career has seen him work with some of the finest directors working in contemporary cinema including Bruce Beresford (*Double Jeopardy*), Todd Haynes (*I'm Not There*), Bennett Miller (*Capote*), Atom Egoyan (*The Sweet Hereafter*) and Deepa Mehta (*The Republic of Love*). Bruce has featured in many other high profile films including *The World's Fastest Indian*, *Being Julia*, *I, Robot*, *Thirteen Days* and *Star Trek* and in the television series *St. Elsewhere* and *Nowhere Man*.

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## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

Mao's Last Dancer was filmed on location in China, the United States and Australia.

The story began for Producer Jane Scott five years ago when she read the book of Mao's Last Dancer, Li Cunxin's best-selling autobiography.

The book stayed on the Australian top 10 Bestseller List for over one and a half years and it is in its 32nd printing. It has been published and sold in over 20 countries. It won the Book of the Year Award in Australia, the Christopher Award in America and was short-listed for the National Biography Award.

The book had been recommended to Jan Sardi by a friend and he was intrigued enough by the story that he mentioned it to Jane Scott. Jan and Jane had successfully collaborated on two films, the Academy Award-winning *Shine* and, more recently, *Love's Brother*. "We each bought a copy and raced each other to finish it. Even before we were half way through we knew that it was a film that we wanted to make," Jan says.

Jane Scott continues: "It immediately came across as an ideal book to be made into a film, although I must say I believe books don't necessarily make good films due to the difficulty in translating their literary quality. But in the case of *Mao's Last Dancer*, Li had written a wonderful book - beautifully - and of course his story is riveting.

"Jan Sardi was the ideal writer of this screenplay because he has a great way of simplifying the writing into a visual style or a style that a director can use as the background for his own vision and he doesn't let the literary quality get in the way of it. Bruce Beresford is an ideal director of this film for much the same reason in that he is a great interpreter of storytelling."

For Bruce Beresford, the script was irresistible: "You could describe it as another rags to riches story and there's been lots of them in the history of movies. But, in this case, the rags were somewhat more extreme because Li Cunxin came from a background of incredible deprivation in a totalitarian country and to try and get out of that background and achieve world fame as a dancer is monstrously difficult, but he achieved it against the most staggering odds."

The first challenge for Jan Sardi in adapting the book of *Mao's Last Dancer* was to take a story that spans so many years and so much diversity - from Li Cunxin's rural Chinese peasant childhood to performing before the US Vice President in America - and creating an emotionally satisfying cinematic journey. "One of the first instincts I had for telling the story was to begin on the day that Li is plucked out of his village classroom to go to Madame Mao's Beijing Dance Academy" says Jan Sardi. "The idea of him being taken away from home, from his family and those he loves and being sent on an epic journey. And then of course I wanted to bring him home. There's so much wonderful material in the book and what I set out to do was to follow the emotional line of Li's story in a way that would make it feel to the audience that they've been on that journey with him. It's not easy to do in two hours, to distil a life in that way, but that's what you have to do. It's always all about emotion."

Jan, who memorably wrote the screenplay of *Shine* based on the life story of pianist David Helfgott, says he feels, in telling a real story about someone's life "this great burden of responsibility to get it right. You have to take certain liberties in terms of combining characters and compressing time because there is no way you can condense someone's life into two hours without doing that, or even

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twenty hours. So the aim is to try to find a cinematic and poetic style of telling the story which takes an audience emotionally on that journey to a place and brings them back feeling transformed."

The second great challenge in bringing Mao's Last Dancer to the screen was in casting the character of Li Cunxin.

"When I first read the script I thought we'd never find anyone to play Li," says Director Bruce Beresford. "Because obviously we had to have a first class ballet dancer - indeed, not just first class, but superlatively good - he had to be young and handsome and he had to be able to act a very complicated role in two languages, Mandarin and English. And I thought, does such a person exist? But, we hunted around and we found Chi Cao with the Birmingham Royal Ballet."

In the end, three actors were cast as Li - Chi Cao plays Li as an adult; Chengwu Guo plays Li as a teenager, and Huang Wen Bin plays Li as a boy.

Jane Scott says: "Bruce said to me early on, 'Of course if we don't have those actors/dancers, we won't have a film'. So it was pretty important to be able to find just the right people in the world and I suppose, strangely, those people have come to us one way or another. It was obvious that Chi Cao was a fabulous opportunity for us and indeed for him I think to play this extraordinary character in the film. We found the little boy, Huang Wen Bin, in China and we also had the great opportunity of meeting Chengwu Guo, who was attending the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne. We saw Chengwu dancing at his graduation from the Australian Ballet School and auditioned him and he was fantastic as the middle Li.

"It was always going to be difficult to get the dancers released for the film and I worried about this but actually we've had the most wonderful assistance from each ballet company. First of all the Australian Ballet -was most generous; Artistic Director David McAllister made available any dancers who wanted to be in the film if we had chosen them. So that's been fantastic. And also there's part of the Australian Ballet's production of Swan Lake in the film which was wonderful to be able to show. From the Birmingham Royal Ballet and the Hong Kong Ballet too we've had great help and so really none of it was as difficult as I thought it would be."

The third great challenge for the production was filming in China.

Jane Scott had already met Chinese producer Geng Ling and invited her to join Mao's Last Dancer as Co-producer (China).

"To shoot in China I knew we had to have a Chinese co-producer and I really needed to have a co-producer whom I respected and who understood the project. Geng Ling was absolutely the ideal person to work with me on the film. I gave her the screenplay and she read it and loved it. And I was so fortunate because Geng Ling was able to guide me on the right way to do business in China. She made a lot of things happen that wouldn't have been possible otherwise, such as making the very best choices of key crew and the best locations," Jane says.

A number of significant roles were cast in China as well as hundreds of extras, including young dancers from across the country. A Chinese crew was appointed, to work in tandem with the international crew from Australia, Mexico, Europe and elsewhere.

"We really had some of the most experienced people in China working with us. Our Chinese 1st Assistant Director Zhang Jinzhan - known as The General - has worked with directors such as Ang Lee,

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Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige; and our Chinese casting director Li Hai Bin has worked with directors such as Quentin Tarantino," Jane says.

Bruce Beresford had worked both with Director of Photography Peter James and Production Designer Herbert Pinter on a dozen previous films.

"This was a film where it was important to be absolutely certain of the personnel. Peter and Herbert are both very, very good and very reliable and I knew that, with them, we would be able to shoot the schedule," Bruce says.

Jane Scott, Bruce Beresford, Geng Ling, Herbert Pinter and Peter James travelled across China in search of locations.

"The village that Li Cunxin came from was a difficult location to find because when we went to where he really grew up, it had now been absorbed by the city of Tsingtao. The little houses had all been demolished and everyone had been rehoused in apartment blocks. Then we found a village about 100 kms or so outside of Beijing in the mountains which was very picturesque. And it too was more or less abandoned but it was exactly what we needed for the film and with a few additions via the art department, it served for the home village," Bruce says.

The art department, headed by Herbert Pinter, recreated Li's childhood home and the village school using traditional Chinese stonework. The village is depicted during the harsh winter, covered with snow, and during spring with cherry blossoms blooming, both effects created by Herbert Pinter's team.

The other major location in China was the Dance Academy in Beijing where Li Cunxin was sent to study and board as a young boy. A disused dance school was found on the outskirts of Beijing and converted into a mini film studio with sets built for the dance classes, dormitory, theatre and communal dining scenes.

Every morning, hundreds of cast and crew were assembled before dawn for the bus convoy to set.

"The film was enormous really in terms of logistics. Shipping people up to a mountain location and finding accommodation for everybody was pretty hard and obviously having something like 85 trucks and carrying equipment and people's possessions and people and so on. And then to run an enormous camp with Chinese food being prepared by Chinese cooks and Western food for the Western crew was huge but these things are strangely conquered by film crews and film productions, almost on an army-style basis, and amazingly it's very possible to do it as long as you have the right people to help you make that organization work," Jane says.

"In Beijing, we had to bring in coach loads of young dancers whom we had to accommodate and they had to have parents with them and guardians and teachers and we had to keep up their dance schedule everyday so that everybody was fit and being properly fed and looked after. The rehearsal period of pre-production was almost as big as the shooting schedule - ferrying everyone in coaches to dance studios that didn't always exist close by the hotel but hours away. So we would have 10 or 11 year olds practicing down one street an hour's drive in one direction and 18 year olds in another direction and then there'd be somebody dancing in a studio we'd find in the basement of the hotel or something mad like that. So it was extraordinary.

"For the actual filming just outside Beijing, we had the international crew plus the hundreds of Chinese crew and hundreds of extras and actors and all of them had to be at the right place at the

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right time and go through maybe wardrobe, or be given breakfast and put into the right place. So I'd arrive where we were filming and outside the studio would be hundreds of ballet shoes drying, or all the little t-shirts that had been dyed overnight, drying, and it brought home how many people were being moved about and brought to the location - and then of course you'd step into the theatre and find, there they all were, dressed and ready to go at 7.30am."

Casting for Mao's Last Dancer traversed continents. Chi Cao, who plays the adult Li Cunxin, auditioned for the film in England, where he is based with the Royal Birmingham Ballet.

Chi is the son of a dance teacher in Beijing. And while his city childhood was quite different to Li's rural beginnings, he says he empathizes deeply with Li's story.

"There are a lot of similarities with my life and Li's life, especially in terms of our career. We trained at the same school, the Beijing Dance Academy, and then I left my family at 15 to go to London to join the Royal Ballet School in London. We both went to the West at such a young age without knowing the language and basically had to find out, by ourselves, how things work," Chi says.

Joan Chen, whose starring roles include The Last Emperor and Twin Peaks, grew up in Shanghai but now lives in the US. Joan was cast as Li's mother. His father is played by acclaimed Chinese actor Wang Shuang Bao (Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, Blind Shaft).

Joan too shares a similar history to Li Cunxin, leaving China as a teenager in order to study in the US. At the time, Joan already had a huge profile in China, as a child star.

"Li and I left for America at the same time. I could understand his feelings, the feelings of arriving at some wonderful opportunities, as well as the aching nostalgia for a home that you might not ever return to. So, I could relate to his story very, very closely. I was denounced by an audience really. I was their little darling - on everybody's calendar on everybody's desk - but the Chinese government was a very prideful government and somehow they view your leaving as an act of treason. So it was very difficult to bear, especially when you don't know if you ever be able to return. It's very painful. What makes the film interesting, I think, is that it shows you pay a great price for your passion."

Other key roles are played by Kyle MacLachlan (Blue Velvet, Desperate Housewives, Twin Peaks and Sex and the City), Bruce Greenwood (Star Trek, The Sweet Hereafter, Double Jeopardy, Thirteen Days), Jack Thompson (Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, Australia, The Assassination of Richard Nixon, Breaker Morant), Amanda Schull (Centre Stage), Aden Young (Black Robe, Cousin Bette), Camilla Vergotis, a soloist with the Hong Kong Ballet, Madeleine Eastoe, a soloist with the Australian Ballet, Chengwu Guo, originally from China but now with the Australian Ballet, and Steven Heathcote, formerly a principal artist with the Australian Ballet.

After several weeks in China, the production moved to Houston, US, and Sydney, Australia.

Some of the most challenging sequences to film were those of Li Cunxin performing with the Houston Ballet. The dancing in the film - from the class rooms of Beijing to a gala performance before the then US Vice President, George Bush Snr, were choreographed by Australian dance legend Graeme Murphy, formerly Artistic Director of the Sydney Dance Company and one of the country's foremost choreographers.

"Although we only show short sequences of the ballets on stage, they still had to be set up as entire ballets with sets and costumes. They had to be convincing professional productions," Jane says.



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"For example, to film Swan Lake, we had to transport the whole production from the Sydney Opera House. That meant a coach load of cygnets as well as all the sets which had to be bumped in beforehand, and everybody had to be rehearsed. It had to be filmed in short sequences rather than shooting the ballet from beginning to end, and it had to be filmed from various angles. Afterwards you almost forget, gratefully, how hard it was at the time.

"As a producer, there are unforgettable moments and I remember one such moment during the filming of Shine where I stood in the middle of an orchestra that was playing the Rachmaninov 3rd Piano Concerto and I thought this was one of the greatest experiences of my life. And I think that standing to one side of a stage with a ballet in full whirl is about the same - it's an extraordinary experience and only, obviously, usually experienced by either the dancers or the musicians in the orchestra."

Director of Photography Peter James describes the look of Mao's Last Dancer: "Every film has its own problems and opportunities and the script is the thing that tells you what the film is going to look like. This is a film in three parts - the early years in China, the ballet sequences in the US, and the drama of the Chinese Embassy and the love story. The story, I think, is outstanding and it gives a great opportunity for variation, which for a cinematographer is a fantastic chance to do good work.

"For the scenes in China, rather than using the whole negative I just went in to 50% of the negative so when blown up it makes it grainy, giving the film a period look.

"For the Houston footage, we went back to a full format and it is much more what we're used to seeing in modern day photography. The ballet is very slick and glossy with beautiful colours and fabulous costumes and so on."

Composer Christopher Gordon began working on the film months ahead of the start of filming. He wrote three original pieces of ballet music as well as scoring for the repertoire ballets such as Giselle and Swan Lake and he conducted the music during filming.

"We needed to record the music to be danced to ahead of filming so I had a number of meetings early on with Graeme Murphy and Bruce Beresford and we discussed just what it was that was needed in a ballet sense and therefore a musical sense. Once we worked out what it was we wanted, I went into the studio with an orchestra and I also recorded some piano solos with (leading Australian pianist) Simon Tedeschi," Christopher says.

"Music absolutely is at the core of this film and because of the long, process of my coming in at pre-production and being on set for so much of the filming, the whole movie was in my blood by the time I actually got to write the score.

"To be working with very, very musical people like Bruce Beresford Jane Scott and Graeme Murphy, is a dream. It just doesn't get much better than this."