

‘Mao’s Last Dancer’ Performs Strictly on Autopilot

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – World-renowned dancer Li Cunxin’s autobiography, “Mao’s Last Dancer,” has been transformed into the type of unimaginative, sentimental tear-jerker that will only move viewers who’ve never seen (or heard of) a movie before. It doesn’t adapt Li’s autobiography so much as stage the SparkNotes version.

Though director Bruce Beresford once proved to have a gift for exploring intimate character studies on the order of “Tender Mercies” and “Driving Miss Daisy,” he’s clearly made this picture entirely on autopilot. It hurries through all the key moments in Li’s life until the audience is faced with title cards explaining what happened to people that we hardly knew. Remember the scene in “Inception” where Ellen Page wonders how she got to the cafe? That’s how every scene feels in “Mao’s Last Dancer,” since Jan Sardi’s script fails to sufficiently develop every character and plot arc, resulting in a feel-good drama that reeks of feel-nauseous contrivance.



Amanda Schull as Liz and Chi Cao as Li in MAO'S LAST DANCER.

Photo credit: Simon Cardwell / Samuel Goldwyn Films / ATO Pictures

Aside from some conventionally gorgeous dance footage, nicely utilizing slow motion, the film is not at all about dance. There are barely any scenes focusing on the arduous years of practice and rehearsal that led Li on his road to professional victory, save for one shot where he jumps up a staircase with weights strapped to his feet. Instead, the film settles into a reliable rags-to-riches formula, beginning with Li arriving in the U.S. as a young man (played by Chi Cao), before promptly flashing back to his childhood in the Shandong province of China (this parallel structure adds nothing to the overall film).

As a bony 11-year-old, Li was plucked from obscurity to attend the Beijing Dance Academy, where professors train the students like soldiers, and force them to perform in militaristic pageants celebrating the communist revolution. We hear fleeting dialogue from Li in which he expresses his disinterest in ballet, but the film doesn't have time to elaborate. It's not long until Li is sneaking glimpses at forbidden recordings of his new hero, Mikhail Baryshnikov, while his belief in communism gradually begins to wane. An inspirational teacher materializes in Li's life just long enough for him to spout trite wisdom before being swiftly sacked for being a "counter-revolutionary." This subplot would've meant much more if the film weren't so hellbent on fast forwarding through its every nuance.

Soon the flashbacks catch up with Li's life in the magical world of America, where he joins the Houston Ballet as an exchange student. The company's artistic director, Ben Stevenson (Bruce Greenwood), realizes that his new student is more artist than athlete, and assists in moving him toward the spotlight, while keeping his eyes blinded by innocence. When Li is called a "chink," he asks Stevenson for the word's meaning and gets this response: "It means they can see the light inside of you." That's the only sign of racism Li encounters throughout the picture, which comes dangerously close to becoming a cartoonish brawl between communist villains and capitalist heroes.



Bruce Greenwood as Ben Stevenson, Steven Heathcote as Bobby Cordner and Camilla Vergotis as Mary in MAO'S LAST DANCER.

Photo credit: Simon Cardwell / Samuel Goldwyn Films / ATO Pictures

The most potentially interesting material emerges in the third act, after Li marries his American girlfriend, struggling dancer Elizabeth Mackey (Amanda Schull, baring an uncanny resemblance to Amy Adams), so he can remain in the U.S. while avoiding deportation. He becomes the subject of an international debate after getting detained at China's Houston consulate. Unfortunately, the melodramatic romance spoils this section of the film. There's no chemistry between the two leads, and the film fails to develop their relationship enough to make us believe Li when he insists that he married purely on the basis of "love." Sadly, the film quickly disposes of Elizabeth after exactly one instance of domestic dispute, and pairs Li with a more fitting love interest. Who is she? Film doesn't elaborate. There's no explanation for why they're a more compatible couple, save for the fact that she's a better dance partner.

"Mao's Last Dancer" is so well-behaved and cloyingly artificial that it plays more like a sub-standard TV-movie than a serious work of cinema. It evokes memories of Anne Bass's documentary, "Dancing Across Borders," which played at the Siskel Center earlier this year. It told the tale of Sokvannara "Sy" Sar, a Cambodian boy sponsored by an American socialite to attend New York's School of American Ballet. Though the film was far from perfect, it painted a much more complex and unsentimental portrait of the physical and cultural challenges of a life lived under the constant strain of self-improvement in an unfamiliar land. Beresford's picture doesn't have time for such complexity. It merely wants to wring a torrential stream of tears from its audience, without making the effort to earn one drop.

'Mao's Last Dancer' stars Chi Cao, Chengwu Guo, Wen Bin Huang, Amanda Schull, Bruce Greenwood, Ferdinand Hoang and Kyle MacLachlan. It was written by Jan Sardi and directed by Bruce Beresford. It opened on Aug. 20th at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema and the Landmark Renaissance Place. It is rated PG.



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