



MAO'S STAR DANCER

BY JOSEPHINE BROUARD

As a principal dancer on ballet's world stage Li Cunxin has experienced stage nerves countless times, but nothing prepared him for the gut-wrenching anxiety he felt sitting down to view the film of his best-selling autobiography, *Mao's Last Dancer*. For Li, it was the latest chapter in a journey that started in rural China 48 years ago. Born to peasants during the early days of Mao's Cultural Revolution, Li's destiny was unexpectedly transformed one freezing winter's day when he was chosen to train at the Beijing Dance Academy. Today, a glittering career and blockbuster book behind him, Li lives in Melbourne with his former ballerina wife and their three children. Collaborating on the film was emotionally wrenching, Li concedes, but being courageous is something the dancer turned businessman has perfected.

He spoke to Reader's Digest...

He doesn't dance professionally anymore, but Li, left, mentors rising stars like Chengwu Guo

PHOTOS:

RD: Why were you so nervous when viewing the film?

Li: I got a call in February from the producers after I'd just returned from China having buried my father. He was 84. I was still emotional and the thought of seeing my family portrayed on screen... I thought I better brace myself. I'd entrusted my life story to Bruce (Beresford, director), Jan (Sardi, screenwriter), Jane (Scott, producer) and always hoped it would be treated with sensitivity and integrity. So when I arrived I was very nervous. I had terrible stomach cramps. But once the lights went down, the music started and I saw these beautiful Chinese brush strokes on screen I released a few breaths and said to myself, OK, now let go, sit back and just enjoy it.

RD: One of the film's earliest scenes shows a school teacher recommending you for Madame Mao's Beijing Dance Academy. Why did the teacher pick you?

Li: I never thought much about how my career started until I started writing my book. Then, when I began describing that moment when the teacher picked me, I began thinking: What if that teacher hadn't pointed me out to the Communist officials? I would have had a

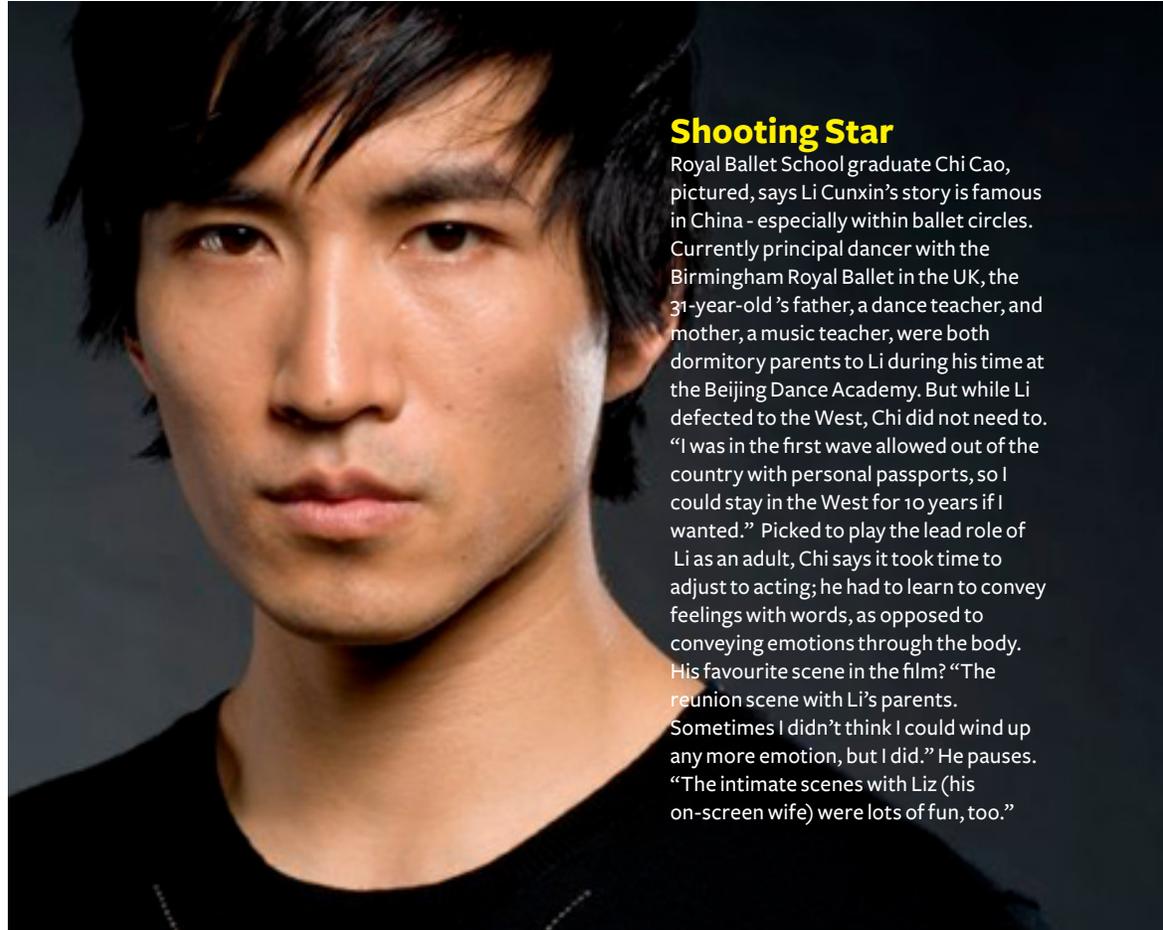
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different journey altogether. I probably would be a peasant living in China. I got such a shock when I realised the degree to which my destiny turned [when] I tracked the teacher down through an old schoolmate. 'Teacher Song,' I said, 'Why did you single me out?' She told me she wasn't sure - I wasn't her favourite pupil. 'Maybe,' she said, 'it was because you ran so fast and was always determined to win.' But she really couldn't say. We both knew, though, that Teacher Song changed my life.

RD: In the film, your father gives you a pen before you head off for Beijing. Relive that moment for us.

Li: My father, like his brothers and his father and uncles before him, wanted to be educated. It's ingrained: a

better education gives you a better life. My grandfather hoped my father would have a better life, but my father remained a peasant. Then, when I was chosen to go to Beijing, my father gave me a pen. It was his way of signalling his hope that I would be the one to break the cycle.



Shooting Star

Royal Ballet School graduate Chi Cao, pictured, says Li Cunxin's story is famous in China - especially within ballet circles. Currently principal dancer with the Birmingham Royal Ballet in the UK, the 31-year-old's father, a dance teacher, and mother, a music teacher, were both dormitory parents to Li during his time at the Beijing Dance Academy. But while Li defected to the West, Chi did not need to. "I was in the first wave allowed out of the country with personal passports, so I could stay in the West for 10 years if I wanted." Picked to play the lead role of Li as an adult, Chi says it took time to adjust to acting; he had to learn to convey feelings with words, as opposed to conveying emotions through the body. His favourite scene in the film? "The reunion scene with Li's parents. Sometimes I didn't think I could wind up any more emotion, but I did." He pauses. "The intimate scenes with Liz (his on-screen wife) were lots of fun, too."

RD: The early scenes of your training at the Beijing Dance Academy are depicted very bleakly. Is this accurate?

Li: I was 11 when I was taken away from my family and I suffered terrible homesickness. Our family was poverty stricken - my mother struggled to feed us, but despite the constant hunger, there was always enormous love. So I missed my family terribly, and cried privately a lot. On top of the

homesickness, I hated ballet in the early years. I couldn't think of anything worse! It didn't make sense; it was all agony, no fun. I longed to run outside, but I was forced to do stupid steps. I was virtually written off by my teachers. I was quite introverted ... but in the end, the boys at the Academy became my 'family' and I cheered up.

RD: Visiting America at the age of 18

PHOTOS:

Still centre stage

Li Cunxin migrated to Australia in 1995 with his wife, Australian-born ballerina Mary McKendry and two of their three children, Sophie, then 6, and Tom, then an infant. Their youngest daughter, Bridie, was born in Melbourne in November 1997. Li was principal dancer with the Australian Ballet for three and a half years after the family's move; his wife gave up her dance career to focus on helping their first-born, born deaf, to realise her full potential. Ten years ago, Li forged a career in finance and today is a senior manager at one of Australia's largest stockbroking firms. Li also serves on the boards of the Australian Ballet and the Bionic Ear Institute - both are causes close to his heart. He is a popular motivational speaker and likes to share his thoughts on human achievement and realising one's dreams.



was a huge culture shock for you and actor Chi Cao (who plays Li as an adult, see Breakout box) depicts brilliantly your bewilderment as you land at Houston Airport in 1979.

Li: I was in shock about EVERYTHING. It wasn't just the tall buildings, the wide clean streets, or the fact that I'd never experienced air conditioning. I couldn't believe the size of the houses. I'd never seen a bath before - I only had my first shower in Beijing when I was 11. I was really shocked to

see how much food was wasted. I remember driving past dumpsters and seeing clothes strewn all over them - I couldn't believe my eyes! Back home, we would patch our clothes endlessly. I could barely speak a word of English either. It was strange to see Chi playing these scenes - surreal, actually. Someone on the screen would call my name and I'd jump and realise that was ME. I looked around and saw my wife, my children and my mother-in-law watching the film - and realised

I wasn't dreaming.

RD: Your defection is a pivotal scene in the film.

Li: That was another day when my whole life changed. If immigration lawyer Charles Foster hadn't been at the Chinese Consulate that day, I would have been frog-marched back to China. Thanks to my friend at the Houston Ballet, Lori, and her husband, Dilworth, I was put in contact with Foster. I had told Lori about my secret

relationship with (fellow dancer) Liz. As the day approached for me to return to China, I couldn't imagine leaving Liz. She was my first love - we were both so innocent and passionate about each other. [So] I told Ben Stevenson (Houston Ballet's then artistic director) that we had married and I wanted to stay in the US. He was horrified. Ben didn't want the Chinese to think he had put me up to this; he tended to see its officialdom through rose-tinted glasses. Then Charles Foster arrived at the Consulate - and he was incredible. We've become close friends. I'm godfather to his second son; he is godfather to my son, Tom, now 17.

RD: The scene where you are reunited with your parents is very moving. Tell us about that.

Li: I was due to dance the role of the prince in *Swan Lake* in Washington D.C. in the mid-80s, when Barbara Bush (the wife of President George Bush, Snr), who was on the board of the Houston Ballet, invited Ben Stevenson and I to the White House. I told her my story and she was surprised to hear that I had not been allowed to return to China, nor seen my parents since leaving China. Mrs Bush invited the Chinese ambassador and the Cultural Attachè to Swan Lake's opening night and I got rave reviews - the following morning the Chinese consul called to invite me for a chat. Thanks to Barbara Bush, my family [were able] to visit me in America. They came to watch me perform and came back-stage later - my father was

PHOTOS:

Leaping in Li's footsteps

Much like Li Cunxin, who he portrays as a teenager in the film, 20-year-old Chengwu Guo (“Chen”) has enjoyed a meteoric dancing career. Born an only child to middle-class parents in southern China, Chen’s mother encouraged him to dance to curb his restless energy. At 11, he won one of 30 places (in a field of 3000 hopefuls) to train at the Beijing Dance Academy and competed for ballet’s prestigious Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland at the age of 17. His team came second and Chen won a scholarship to the Australian Ballet School. Since joining the corps in 2008, Chen has become renowned for his giant leaps, his compatriots have become ‘family’ and Li Chen’s mentor and father figure. When Chen was picked to play Li he was thrilled. “But,” he admits, “[acting is] much harder than dancing.”



sobbing, my mother was sobbing, I was sobbing. It was one of the most emotional moments of my life.

RD: Today you do a lot of motivational speaking. What is your key message?

Li: One of my greatest fears is coming to my last day on earth and asking myself the question: Have I done enough with my life? By ‘doing enough’ I mean, Have I made a difference? If the answer is ‘yes’, I will die

a contented man. If my answer is ‘no’, I will die of shame. I believe a contented life is measured by what you do for others. I would not have written

my autobiography if my friend, Graeme Base (the children’s book illustrator), hadn’t encouraged me. [He] said, “Your story will give people hope and courage,” I began to think it was a good idea. At the end of my life, I hope that through my work as a dancer, my book, the movie, and my daily behaviour, I will have helped others.

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PHOTOS: