Transcript

Arts, Literature and Music
A Good Read

Cinema Review – Mao's Last Dancer

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Just once in a while a movie comes along that is as close to perfection as it can be.

Such is the case with *Mao's Last Dancer*. This is a rapturous movie: refined, elegant, often beautiful, and quivering with dramatic tension. The movie is layered with emotion and plays on your heartstrings delicately and without apology, and I would challenge anyone not to be engaged by it and, at times, quite moved. The heart and soul of the movie is its story: a *true* story based on the autobiography of a Chinese ballet dancer who, during the 1980's, became the subject of an incident which threatened to boil over into a major diplomatic confrontation between China and the United States.

I find that movies which are based on true stories often seem to generate a level of involvement for the viewer which purely fictional movies are hard put to match. The knowledge that the story you are seeing unfold on the screen actually happened to real people can give a movie so much more grip and power. But, of course, no matter how intrinsically interesting the story is, the challenge remains to present it on the screen as compelling drama. In other words, to turn it into a good movie.

The autobiography of the Chinese dancer, Li Cunxin, published under the same title as the movie, was an international best-seller in 2003. However, to translate this book into such a fine movie has been an outstanding triumph for the entire production team. In addition, it comes as a pleasant surprise, to realise that the movie is an Australian production. Given the black hole into which Australian film production has fallen for many years now, it is heartening to find that an Australian movie really can cut the mustard.

Of course the provenance of this movie is very different from what we have come to expect from so many, sadly undercooked, local productions. The major difference is that *Mao's Last Dancer* is a work of consummate maturity. All of the major personnel in the core production team have brought long lifetimes of appropriate experience to this project – and it shows.

Producer Jane Scott began working on movies some 35 years ago and her credits include *Storm Boy*, *Crocodile Dundee* and *Shine*. Writer Jan Sardi, who adapted *Mao's Last Dancer* for the screen, has been writing for movies and television for over 26 years. His credits include the screenplay for *Shine* and, more recently, the adaptation of the popular weepie, *The Notebook*.

Choreographer Graeme Murphy, who designed the stunning, pivotal dance sequences for the movie was, for 30 years, the Artistic Director and the creative genius who guided the splendid Sydney Dance Company. And Director Bruce Beresford brought a wealth of talent to the project –

chiefly as a movie director whose credits include *Breaker Morant*, *Tender Mercies*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Black Robe*, but also, and appropriately, as an experienced theatrical director of Grand Opera.

In addition, this team was fortunate in having ready access to the subject of the story himself, Li Cunxin. With that kind of background how could they go wrong?

Well, there was always a chance that they might have gone wrong when it came to casting. For instance, they faced a daunting challenge when they set out to find the most crucial members of the entire cast – the three actors who would play Li as a child, a youth and as a young man. Remarkably, after an international search, somehow they found the right people and the resulting performances by all three are simply perfect.

I don't want to say too much about the plot of *Mao's Last Dancer*. I don't want to spoil it for those few people who, like me, may not have read the book. However, whether or not you *have* read the book I believe that you will find *Mao's Last Dancer* to be an absorbing, dramatic and surprising movie which, at its core, celebrates the triumph of the human spirit.

I could not find any reason to give it less than five stars. Do yourself a favour – go and see it. Good bye for now – I'll see you in the back stalls.