

The London Ballet Circle

Li Cunxin

Artistic Director of Queensland Ballet

In conversation with Gerald Dowler
at the Civil Service Club
on Monday 3 August 2015

It was standing room only on a hot, summer evening for the visit of Li Cunxin and his supporters from Queensland Ballet. Already known to members through his book 'Mao's Last Dancer' and the subsequent film in which Chi Cao danced the part of Li we knew we would be in for a fascinating evening about life in China, the world of ballet and of stockbroking. Gerald Dowler cleverly divided the conversation into several parts with questions in between and began by asking why Li was in London now and why had he chosen to bring La Sylphide.

Li was very proud of his flagship Company with its foundations in the classics such as Cinderella, Giselle and Macmillan's Romeo and Juliet. Just as Fonteyn and Nureyev needed these ballets to challenge their technique, his dancers trained so hard for ten to twelve years and wanted the same opportunity. His favourite version of La Sylphide was that by Peter Schaufuss commissioned by Beryl Grey for English National Ballet in 1979. Peter, with his Danish background, was still a young star and Li's present Ballet Mistress, Jeanette Mulligan, and his wife, Mary Mckendry, were both in the original production. Bringing it to London now was like "coming home". It was an expensive undertaking and had taken three years of work with new dancers and experienced repetiteurs to bring to fruition.

Gerald pointed out that Li's own training was very different from his young dancers now. Li had not wanted to dance as he didn't quite know what ballet is, and was being selected at the age of eleven to go to the Beijing Academy based on his physic. He struggled at first with the strict training regime, lack of interest in ballet and a lot of Maoist propaganda. He was one of forty four students selected for the Academy, where Mme Mao was Artistic Director, for seven years' training. He hated ballet with a passion and found it boring and no fun whatsoever so he was a poor student. Everything was classroom based and

they took part in political ballets. Several things changed for Li – Chairman Mao died and China began to open up, he saw videos of Mikhail Baryshnikov which were an eye-opener and he had an inspirational teacher, Teacher Xiao. Under President Nixon a cultural delegation came to China and Ben Stevenson, former Principal Dancer of the Royal Ballet, Artistic Director of Houston Ballet. Li and another dancer won scholarships to America and with interventions from Barbara Bush, ballet fan, wife of President Bush, they were allowed out of China.

Li found the western world very scary and not at all how it had been portrayed in China. If he had stayed in China he would have been a successful dancer but his knowledge, experience and success would have been limited to the calibre of what he would have been allowed to dance - “the ballets make the dancer”. At this point Li answered audience questions as follows:

He hated class which was accompanied by military marching music not romantic piano music.

The teachers were incredibly strict on discipline and there was never any question of saying 'no', to the point that when doing handstands they could not come down until allowed no matter how long and painful.

The inspirational teacher made him curious but also encouraged him to be more patient and enjoy the process of becoming a dancer. He told him a story about a mango to help him find pleasure in dancing and unlock his potential. Under Mme Mao everything from the storyline, music, steps, make up, props and costume had to be politically correct with enemies being killed and Li soon perfected his “death stare” because even eye movements were political.

Moving on to life in the western world, Li said that, without having had the benefits of social media and the Internet, he felt it was like going to the moon and he began to realise that he had been brainwashed for eighteen years. In China he had been a member of the Red Guard and a leader in the Communist Youth Party but soon appreciated how important having freedom is for artistes to reach their full potential. He did not want to go back.

Gerald explained that the scholarship for six weeks was then extended to two months. On his return to China he was offered a contract by Ben Stevenson but it was difficult for him to leave the country again. Finally he made it to America and never went back at the end of the year. Although he loved China, coming from a close family where he was one of seven boys, as well as having a strong sense of duty, he had fallen in love with an American dancer and was torn in two deciding what to do. His parents had taught him always to live life with integrity and honesty and he knew he would never be happy living a life without freedom. There was a very frightening twenty one hours in the Chinese Embassy and it took another intervention from Vice President Bush and President Reagan before he was released.

When asked why Li had chosen Houston and not New York he replied that he loved Ben Stevenson and was a loyal person. He wanted to work with talented people, choreographer, director, teachers, to reach his potential and this was more important than the size of the Company. He made his home in Houston where people were kind and respectful so it was the right place for him to be.

There had been many highlights during his sixteen years there, including galas at the Bolshoi and Royal Opera House, but for him personally the best was having his parents watch him dance in The Nutcracker. Again the Bush administration played a major role in this event which happened after Li had been there for ten years.

In a second round of questions from the audience, Li informed us that

His parents thought they had lost their sixth son forever.

He found the food in America difficult at first and did not like salad or rare steak.

He was determined to learn the language, being only able to say 'oh dear me' and 'upon my soul' when he arrived. Principal Dancer Mary McKendry helped him learn and encouraged him to read.

While at Houston Li developed artistically and musically and also enjoyed the varied repertoire of Ashton, MacMillan, Bruce and Tetley as well as having roles created on him by Ben Stevenson and Ronald Hynd. He and Mary were even coached by Fonteyn in Swan Lake while she was visiting the Houston Cancer Hospital.

Finally Gerald moved on to talk about Li going to Australia. This came about because he and Mary married and had two children, one of whom was deaf. Mary came from Queensland and at the time cochlear implants were being pioneered in Australia. Li also wanted to challenge himself out of the comfort zone of working with Ben Stevenson and prove himself that at the age of 35 he was artistically mature. After three years he stopped dancing and moved into the world of stockbroking and finance. This came about as the result of an injury when he spent time taking an online finance course alongside his physio. He ended up doing barre at 5am, going to the stock exchange, back for class, rehearsal and performance. He enjoyed being a stockbroker but his passion for ballet never left him and soon he accepted the role of Artistic Director of Queensland Ballet.

Having been asked to write a peer review for their funding bodies, Li saw huge potential and had a clear idea of how to improve the Company as he could appreciate their strengths and weaknesses. Three years later he is justifiably proud of their progress. Seventeen hundred subscribers have now grown into

seven thousand four hundred; one hundred and fifteen shows were sold out even before they opened; the training programme is seen as an investment and is rooted in a classical approach.

Li's Company is now attracting dancers internationally, from New Zealand and Asia and although sometimes members would leave to go to the Royal Ballet or American Ballet Theatre he was building up a strong talent pool which includes members from Cuba, America, China, Korea, Japan, South America and Europe. He finds this exciting as the richness from difficult culture brings an extra dimension and creates competitive camaraderie. The Company is also investing in the community, working for example with people with Parkinson's Disease, young children, people in rural communities and next year a regional tour is planned using smaller stages and venues with special performances for charities to raise money for themselves.

Gerald Dowler congratulated Li on his eventful and successful career to date. Li said the success was not all his and that he was surrounded by talented and visionary people. The audience warmly thanked him and his supporters for coming to see us and some went home wondering how to fund a trip to Queensland Ballet which sounds such an exciting place to be.

Report by Jean Wilde

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