

Dress Code: Cocktail

A broken foot leads to dinner with a dancer

By Jo Wright

The invitation from a friend for an evening out flashed on my hand phone. I was sitting in the National University Hospital waiting for the consultant to cast the foot I'd broken rushing down the stairs to see a lion dance performance at our condominium. How could I possibly wear 'killer heels' with my leg in a cast? My friend gave no details but promised me "a nice dinner, a glass of beer and a talk by some bloke who used to be a ballet dancer."

I didn't have a cocktail dress that looked good with my cast (who does, for goodness sake!) so I cobbled together a vaguely smart outfit of black trousers and a blouse, topped off by my sensible black trainers. It would have to do.

The evening turned out to be a dinner in one of the nicer hotels, courtesy of one of the private banking firms. The after-dinner speaker (the 'bloke who used to be a ballet dancer') turned out to be none other than Li Cunxin, world-class ballet dancer/author/successful stockbroker/screenplay writer/inspirational speaker.

And what an inspirational story he had to tell! Born into the poorest of families, the sixth of seven sons in Mao's China circa 1960, he had absolutely no prospects until he was plucked from obscurity and thrust into the limelight of the Beijing Dance Academy. By dint of sheer hard work, he made it to the top of his profession, both in China and also in the US, becoming principal dancer of first the Beijing Dance Academy, then the Houston Ballet Academy and finally the Australian Ballet. His memoir, *Mao's Last Dancer* published in 1993, became a bestselling book and successful movie.

His tale spoke of endless effort and sacrifice, of a brutal training regime and countless torn tendons and strained muscles. It made my hopping around the Asian Civilisations Museum on crutches a few days before seem very tame indeed! Li told us that to strengthen his legs, he secretly put in

extra training at night. He would creep out of his dormitory in the freezing cold, tie sandbags to his legs and hop up endless flights of stairs. (I wondered whether I should adopt this as a training tip to strengthen my legs once my foot healed....)

During his talk, the nimble master dancer swung a leg high onto the lectern and casually leaned against it for several minutes while he continued with his story, to prove the point of just how much flexibility had been drummed into his body as a boy. It certainly impressed the audience and made me think of ways to inject interest into my own docent tours.

At one point in his story, the entire audience seemed to be holding its breath and I was aware of tears trickling down my face. As I surreptitiously tried to blow my nose on the fine linen napkin kindly provided by the hotel, I noticed that most of the audience was also

struggling to contain emotions. Even the photographers, hired for the night to take photos of the great and the good, paused in their work to listen to Li's words – surely the mark of a riveting story.

After the excellent dinner, we all received a signed copy of Li's memoir and were offered the chance to meet the great man himself. One of the photographers very kindly offered to 'queue jump' me to the front of the line, handicapped as I was, but to my eternal regret I declined the offer.

I left resolved to make the most of what I have and maybe even to inspire others to make the most of themselves.

Jo Wright is an ACM docent who loves guiding students. She has been able to return to rock climbing now that her foot is healed.



Dancer and author Li Cunxin