

Chan Hon Goh's masterclass brings emotion back to ballet training

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BY NATALYA ANDERSON JAN 30, 2016 IN ARTS

The third annual masterclass series with Chan Hon Goh teaches dancers that layering emotion and musicality into physical training is integral to career longevity.

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A dancer's emotional energy can dramatically change what they communicate to their audience. It's a pretty straightforward idea, but add layers of technical, physical, musical, and lyrical precision to what's required in a single performance, and it seems miraculous that a dancer could communicate anything beyond "Help me." It's a message Chan Hon Goh is bringing to young artists across Canada with her third annual masterclass series, which gives dancers the opportunity to learn from one of the country's most respected prima ballerinas.

"When you're able to not be so tense or gripped, and you're able to think differently and command your body to work in a different way, you discover so many other things," says Goh, former principal dancer with **The National Ballet of Canada** and now director of Goh Ballet. "They see 'Oh, yeah, all of a sudden I have so much more energy into that movement, and also I'm able to highlight that section of the music.' You have to personify the music."

The tour, which kicks off on February 6th at Calgary's School of Alberta Ballet and concludes February 23rd at Northern Lights School of Dance in Whitehorse, offers small groups of dancers between the ages of 10 and 18 a

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chance to be coached by Goh. A handful of students will also be offered up to \$5,000 in scholarship funds to take their training further at Goh Ballet, the prestigious school Goh's parents — ballet stars in their own right before emigrating from Beijing to Canada — founded in 1977. Goh says her goal is to bring physical and musical fluidity to the story young artists are telling on stage, which in turn will enrich and lengthen their careers.

“Even though the technical development is absolutely crucial – you can't go on stage without the proper technique – it just is an added voice to say, ‘You know, when you're doing this port de bras, have you ever thought that it comes from a romantic era, and to add in some of the nuances, say, from *Les Sylphides*?’ Or, to then say, ‘This tendu, it really extends and will push you when you go on stage to do a polonaise.’ [I want to] add another thought process to the work that they're already doing and hopefully inspire something in them while they're still training so that they're that much ahead and can be a much more well-rounded dancer when they graduate.”

Goh's interest in emotion and the impact it has on a dancer's energy levels increased throughout her career, particularly as focus shifted steadily toward technical prowess with the emergence of artists like Sylvie Guillem, who quite literally pushed technique to new heights.

“It's something that made a huge difference in my own career,” says Goh. “In the very beginning I was very much focused on perfecting technique – being able to count all of my achievements based on the number of turns and how high I could jump. The technical aspect was what, at first, we thought was a measurement of how good you are as a dancer. It wasn't until later on when I started to do the full length story ballets, and the ballets with characters that offered such substance – the Juliets, the Tatianas – [that I wanted] to be able to circle back and put a real characterization into the role. It's something that I valued so much in my career, and that in recent years, working with younger dancers, [I've seen] that they were probably of the same mind-set as I was during my training – just working on the technical aspects and not minding what the story was behind *Don Quixote*. Just wanting to do hops on pointe.”

The ability to thread physical power, emotion, character analysis, and music together is something, Goh adds, that comes with repeated study and application. While the process can feel complex and sometimes frustrating, a learned result can dramatically shift a dancer's energy reserve when they have a breakthrough.

“The thing that always feeds me is when I'm able to offer something and they're hearing it for the first time and you see it in their eyes and they're able to try it and you know that it's just made their love of dance surge that much higher.”

Goh's approach is having an impact on students across the country.

“It's a gift to take part in Chan Hon Goh's masterclass,” says last year's masterclass participant and scholarship winner Madison Dewart. “Through her guidance, she helped me explore the artistic and emotional elements to elevate my dance performances. Ms. Goh is a very encouraging and inspirational mentor; the class was truly an unforgettable and enriching experience.”

“Ms. Goh encouraged me to use music in new ways,” adds Caitlin Campbell.

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“Focusing on the possibilities of physicality in the music, my body started to react differently with each new piece. I feel I am now a more musical dancer.”

The transition from dancing (Goh’s stage career spanned two decades) to teaching was overwhelming at times.

“It is very different,” says Goh. “Teaching also has various levels. It’s different when you teach company dancers versus when you teach students. And then there’s a difference as well when you teach younger kids versus when you teach kids that are in their mid to late teens and are on the road to wanting a professional career. I assumed the position of director here about a year after my stage career and it was a new and big learning process for me to be able to understand and really to investigate into what dancers need at certain points of their development.”

The key to her success may be Goh’s ability to foresee and shift with changes in the industry.

“I believe [my perspective] comes from [knowing] what companies and choreographers are needing to see in dancers - the way the training has progressed, and [understanding that] the needs have to feed and meet the end goal, which is for dancers to get into a professional company and then thrive and excel and get promoted. How professional companies are shaping their repertoire has changed. There are new voices in the choreographers that are being recognized on our scene now. Athleticism and innovation is very much out there, and new full length ballets are being developed. They’re just pushing the boundaries – not only are they asking for that technique, but they’re asking you to emote and dramatize within. I’d like to [teach] that as a point of reference for [new artists] to be able to incorporate into their daily training. Also, just respecting the art form and putting the art back into the dance is important.”


Goh adds that even those who do not go on to train at Goh Ballet can benefit tremendously from the workshop series.

“The time is very intense and short. That’s why now that we’re in our third year – and already in the second year I started to recognize faces that had attended the year before – it’s [about offering] bits of information that [won’t] be too overwhelming that they can take with them. I encourage them to jot some of the major thoughts and things down. Those things you can take into your regular training on a weekly basis and be able to grow from that.”

And her desire to shape the future of classical ballet has the seal of approval from another beloved ballerina.

“I have always admired Chan Hon Goh’s never-ending passion, drive and courage as both a dancer and now as a teacher,” says Karen Kain, The National Ballet of Canada’s artistic director and one of the country’s most acclaimed dancers. “She continues to create and contribute to dance in Canada.”

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