

DANCE LIKE EVERYONE IS WATCHING



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On stage, Chan Hon Goh is the quintessential ballerina. A principal dancer with The National Ballet of Canada, Goh, 35, is one of the company's most exquisite classicists. Her ballon, or the lightness of her landings, is legendary. Her every movement is filled with a lyrical grace that defies gravity, and the dramatic power of her expressive body compels attention. The great American Balanchine ballerina, Suzanne Farrell, describes Goh as someone who "illuminates technique". In short, Goh is everything that makes the ballet beautiful. She transforms the challenges of dance into smoke and mirrors; we see only the elegance, none of the struggles.

Goh however, defies the conventional wisdom that dance is a narrow horizon. Ballerina, yes, but she is also an impresario, entrepreneur, and author. She puts together international ballet galas to great acclaim, choosing the dancers from among the world's best, and her producing credits include a superstar tour of China, and glittering programs for Festival des Arts de St-Sauveur in

Quebec, and London, Ontario's Grand Theatre. She has her own line of pointe shoes with average annual sales of 10,000, and an upward growth curve. Her autobiography for Young Readers, "Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina's Life", written with Cary Fagan, has been short-listed for The Norma Fleck Award for Children's Non-Fiction because of its positive message about the immigrant experience. Not surprisingly, one of Goh's heroes is superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov. "I believe in being multi-faceted," she says, "because it makes you a better dancer. I also am realistic that dancers have short careers, so it's smart to look for other outlets that will guarantee financial security. Baryshnikov has his own dancewear and he's also into acting. The difference is, people go to him with ideas, while I start my own projects."

Goh is proof that dance just might be genetic. Both her mother, Choo Chiat Goh, and father, Lin Yee Goh, were principal dancers with Beijing's prestigious National Ballet of China, before immigrating to Vancouver when Goh was seven. She is the niece of the late, great American choreographer, Choo San Goh. In fact, out of her father's family of ten siblings, five have had careers in dance. Nonetheless, although her parents founded the famed Goh Academy, one of Canada's most lauded ballet schools, they never saw their only daughter as a dancer. With her long, flexible fingers and innate musicality, they envisioned Goh as a concert pianist, and she studied piano from age three to fourteen. "The general consensus was I didn't have the right physicality," says Goh. "I had no natural turn-out, and my coordination and suppleness were poor. I had to work really hard to put all these things into my body."

As she pined away on the sidelines watching rehearsals and classes, Goh dreamed of being onstage. "I always saw myself as a ballerina, alone in the spotlight," she says, "even when no one else did. I was forever trying on my mother's pointe shoes, and dancing to music on the TV or radio." Because her parents were so busy, her aunt, Soo Nee Goh-Lee, helped to look after her. When Goh was nine, Goh-Lee put her niece in a ballet class that she taught at the Vancouver Academy of Music, her aim being for Goh to acquire posture and discipline while keeping occupied after school. Goh's big break, as she calls it, came when her parents began a children's division at their own studio, and Goh began taking classes there. The legendary British dancer/choreographer, Anton Dolin, who knew her parents, dropped by the school when he was passing through Vancouver, and surprised everyone by singling out Goh as having the best potential in the class. "It certainly made my dad more interested in me," she says, "but if I'm headstrong today, it's because all my life, I've had to fight other people's doubts, and prove myself over and over again."

When she was 16, Goh, at her own insistence, entered the Prix de Lausanne, the most important competition in the world for dancers under 18, and won the grand prize, beating out a field that included Darcey Bussell, Julie Kent and Kaori Nakamura, who would go on to greater glory at the Royal Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, and Pacific Northwest Ballet respectively. Companies came calling, but it was James Kudelka who suggested Goh explore the National Ballet. The two met when Kudelka was a judge on a Canada Council audition panel, and Goh had applied for a study and travel grant. "Chan was amazingly evolved as a classicist, which put her in a niche by herself," explains Kudelka. "I was happy when I heard that Reid Anderson had persuaded her father to let her join the company." At 18, the very gifted Goh was in the corps de ballet of the National, and a principal dancer six years later.

Goh is married to Chun Che who is twenty years her senior. Her husband, also a former principal dancer with the National Ballet of China, had been a student of her father's in Beijing. The senior Goh invited Che to come to Canada as a student when he expressed interest in experiencing a wider variety of repertoire. A very talented dancer, Che's career came to an abrupt halt in 1987 when a car making a left hand turn rammed into his at an intersection. He had already been moving into teaching and choreography, but the accident, which left him with disc and spinal injuries, put him permanently into the studio. That was where the teenage ballerina wannabe first had a crush on the stern taskmaster who was always dishing her corrections. Just before the car

accident, Che choreographed a romantic pas de deux for himself and Goh for a ballet gala, and it was during the rehearsals for *The Butterfly Lovers* that she fell in love. Che also choreographed her Prix de Lausanne solo that won her the top prize. They began to go together when Goh was 16, and married when she was 28.

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