

Chan Hon Goh: Pointe of departure

After 20 years with the National Ballet of Canada, she's ready to leave the stage

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

If it hadn't been for Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, we might never have been able to claim Chan Hon Goh for Canada.

Choo Chiat Goh and Lin Yee Goh were dancers in the National Ballet of China, restricted during the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976) to dancing the revolutionary ballets and performing in appalling conditions for the workers in the countryside. Under the harsh dictates of the Communist renewal program, the costumes and sets of the European ballets in the company's repertory were burned. The Gohs decided it was time to immigrate to Vancouver with their 8-year-old daughter.

There, in 1978, after several years struggling with multiple jobs, the dancing couple established the Goh Ballet Academy, where a professional program prepares dancers for a career in dance.

Chan took lessons and practised hard, but her father had not marked her for stardom. "When I was 14, Anton Dolin (the English dancer-choreographer who was launched in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes) was staging something in Vancouver. He visited the academy because he knew my father." Observing a class, Dolin pointed at Chan and said, "That girl there, she's going to make it." Chan laughs, recalling how her disbelieving father asked her to come forward, "just to make sure."

Dolin was right. Chan Hon Goh took a prize at the Prix de Lausanne (the Royal Ballet's Darcey Bussell and American Ballet Theatre's Julie Kent were among the student competitors) and earned a silver medal at the Genée International Ballet competition in London. As soon as she had graduated from high school, she was hired by the National Ballet of Canada. That was 1988; by 1994 she had been promoted to principal dancer. In the intervening years she has been a popular guest artist with companies in North America, Asia and Europe.

A dancer with strength and elevation that belies her slender frame, a performer who moves audiences with her indelible interpretations of tragic heroines, from Juliet and Giselle to Tatiana in Onegin, Goh is gracefully retiring after 20 years on the stage. She'll open the National Ballet's Giselle on Wednesday, dancing with Zdenek Konvalina, and she'll give her final performance on May 30 at the close of the run.

In ballet, the biggest decision a dancer has to make is when to call it quits. Many of the finest professionals don't plan for the inevitable end of their stage life, which usually comes around 40, as it has for Goh. Even for this dancer, who has managed her career and a family life in admirable fashion, it took a year of consulting with artistic director Karen Kain to choose the time for retirement. And there were tears in Kain's eyes when she announced Goh's final performance at a news conference in February.

"You have to stay so focused and driven," says Goh about the life she is about to leave. She kept quiet about a car accident in Vancouver in recent years that left her with injuries that kept her off the stage. "I didn't want it to be a crutch," she says, and kept working behind the scenes until ready to return to pointe shoes. Now she can leave at the height of her acting and dancing ability, which, sadly, comes to ballet dancers when their bodies tell them there are only so many spectacular jumps left in them.

Goh has been married since 1997 to Chun Che, a dancer she met at her parents' school when she was a teenager. Their adorable 3-year-old son Aveary speaks Mandarin and is learning English rapidly. Over dinner at a Chinese restaurant, he turns to talk to the guests at a neighbouring table. "He's offering them some of our food," his mother translates.

Until now, Chun Che has been handling most of the couple's pointe shoe business, called Principal by Chan Hon Goh. The shoes are engineered according to the needs of dancers to reduce the hair fractures and other injuries. The line includes footwear for young dancers as well as professionals and is manufactured in China.

Goh plans to be more active with this company and also to spend more time working with her parents at the Goh Ballet Academy, where she says she'll be more involved in performance aspects of the school. A bicoastal existence seems likely.

Her fans will miss her and so will her partners, including Konvalina. Goh was just returning from maternity leave to dance one of her favourite – and toughest – roles, Aurora in The Sleeping Beauty for the ballet's first season in the Four Seasons Centre.

Kain gave her the tall order with a sweetener, "I have a new partner for you." The Czech-born Konvalina had just joined the company after dancing with the Houston Ballet.

He says the older dancer made his Toronto debut easier for him. "I love Chan. She's a partner I really like working with. She is so accommodating, and yet she likes to work. She has a very amazing jump." Experience, says Konvalina, is the most valuable asset a dancer can have. "She has learned so much and she has eliminated what is not important. That's what every great artist does."

Learning to dance the Balanchine ballets, finding a kindred spirit in Suzanne Farrell, who cast Goh in dances with her Washington-based company, have been among the most satisfying experiences of a long career. Also, touring China with her colleagues and hosting an annual Chinese New Year's show in Toronto have helped keep her connections to her first culture.

In Giselle, she'll show her great strengths. "You have to make her make sense," says the ballerina. "She's not just a peasant girl. She is sensitive and very deep." The task in a story ballet partly set in a fairy land is to effect a believable transformation, "to draw the audience into my world."

There's no greater rush for a performer than making such a connection with an audience.

"Nothing will ever replace dance," she says, but not with any sadness.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Chan Hon Goh is set to retire from the National Ballet of Canada after her final performance of Giselle on May 30. (May 19, 2009)