

Ballerina's last role as enchanting Giselle

By: Paula Citron

*The National Ballet of Canada at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto on Wednesday.*

*Giselle* was programmed specifically for Chan Hon Goh as her last performance of the season before retiring, and the ballerina and her colleagues at the National Ballet of Canada did not disappoint. It was a magical evening.



Choreographed by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot in 1841, *Giselle* is the quintessential French classical ballet. English choreographer Sir Peter Wright, who first staged it for the National in 1970 and is considered the master of the ballet's lore, was there to take a well-deserved bow.

Goh and her swain, Zdenek Konvalina as Albrecht, were absolute perfection in terms of grace, harmony and style. Both have the soft landings so essential to French classicism, not to mention great height in their jumps. In the French style, nothing should jar. Everything is to be fluid and supple.

The character of Giselle is considered one of the most difficult in any repertoire. The ballerina begins as a shy, unsophisticated peasant girl. When she finds out that her lover Albrecht is really a nobleman and not a village boy, she goes mad and dies.

Right from the start, Goh showed her vulnerability. When Albrecht and her jealous suitor, the forester Hilarion (Piotr Stanczyk), have a contretemps, Goh covered her ears in absolute despair, tightening her body as if her nerves were on fire. When she loses her reason upon finding out that her lover is engaged to the noblewoman Bathilde (the stately Alejandra Perez-Gomez), it was perfectly in keeping with the fragile girl Goh had established.

In the second act, Giselle is called from her grave by Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis (Heather Ogden). The vengeful Wilis are the ghosts of young women, betrayed by faithless lovers, who force men unlucky enough to wander in their woods to dance to their death.

Goh was simply enchanting as the spirit. Her face, which had been so full of expression in the first act, was completely calm, an island of tranquillity. She seemed to defy gravity in her jumps, and on her many balances *en pointe*, she hung weightless in the air.

Goh is 40, but her every movement on stage belied her age. She is blessed with a perfect ballet body: a short torso, extra-long legs and arms, beautiful slender hands and feet, and exquisite shoulders, which give her the upright carriage so necessary for ballet's all-important *port de bras*.

As for Konvalina, he is the perfect prince in terms of masterful technique, but he is also a wonderful interpreter of roles and is never out of character. His horror at knowing that Giselle will find out about Bathilde, his bewilderment and grief at her loss, his acceptance of his death at the hands of the Willis before Giselle saves him – all this and more Konvalina conveyed from the stage.

As the brooding Hilarion, Stanczyk is a commanding presence, but his warm relationship with Giselle's mother Berthe (the always expressive Victoria Bertram) gave a richness to his character. Ogden used her powerful technique and crisp, strong attack to establish Myrtha's strength. With her piercing eyes and hardened look, Ogden was the epitome of unforgiving nastiness.

The delightful first-act peasant *pas de quatre* was performed with great flair by Jillian Vanstone, Keiichi Hirano, Stacey Shiori Minagawa and Etienne Lavigne. In their solos, Vanstone and Hirano romped through the intricate footwork (her) and the straight-up-in-the-air jumps (him) that are so much a part of French classicism, while Minagawa and Lavigne tossed off the delicate, balanced partnering with élan.

Vanstone and Minagawa, two of the most reliable National ballerinas, also did double duty as Myrtha's attendants Zulme and Moyna, and while they were full of zest and charm as the peasant girls, they were able to transform themselves into graceful yet fierce sprites in the second act.

One must also mention the brilliant work done by the corps de ballet, particularly the women as the Willis, and once again, conductor David Briskin made one listen to the beloved Adolphe Adam score with fresh ears in his subtle yet dramatic reading of the score.

*Giselle* has always looked good on the National, and the company is giving a beautiful send-off to a beloved ballerina with this production.

*Giselle continues at the Four Seasons Centre through May 31. Goh appears in the final Sunday matinee performance.*