

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

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Chan Hon Goh
MAKING AN ELEGANT EXIT

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Chan Hon Goh

making an elegant exit
By KATHLEEN M. SMITH

For a ballerina still dancing at the top of her game, "retirement" is a misleading term. So when twenty-year National Ballet of Canada veteran Chan Hon Goh gives her final regular season performance in *Giselle*, a matinee on May 31st, it will be both the beginning of the end and a whole new beginning. Goh will also learn and perform Peter Martins' challenging *Valse Triste* for a National Ballet fundraising gala in



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Chan Hon Goh in *Swan Lake* / Photo by Lydia Pawelak

In *Romeo and Juliet* / Photo by Andrew Greenham

With Aleksandar Antonijevic in *Giselle* / Photo by Cjlla von Tiedemann

Next page, clockwise:

With artists of The National Ballet of Canada in *Giselle* / Photo by David Cooper

With her son Avery / Photo by Sian Richards

With Zdeněk Kavalina in *The Sleeping Beauty* / Photo by Cjlla von Tiedemann

In *Musings* / Photo by Bruce Zinger

In *Macbeth* / Photo by Cjlla von Tiedemann

In *Giselle* / Photo by Cjlla von Tiedemann

June. And then, she says, she starts a new life.

It will be a life with more than a few associations and connections to her old one.

Born in Beijing, Goh moved with her family to Vancouver where she trained as part of the family business at the Goh Academy. Her father and mother were principal dancers with the National Ballet of China and are famed pedagogues and trainers on the international ballet scene. Although she was not initially encouraged to become a dancer (Goh concentrated on classical piano in her junior years), her stellar career seemed pre-destined. Goh joined The National Ballet of Canada in 1988 and quickly became a darling of audiences and critics.

A principal dancer with the company since 1994, Goh has been the most elegant of ballerinas, bringing delicacy and emotional depth to the big classical ballets along with a startling technical purity and, despite her tiny frame, significant strength. She cites one of her favourite compliments, delivered by a hero, Suzanne

Farrell, the quintessential Balanchine ballerina and muse: "She said 'you're small, but you don't dance small.'"

It's true. The petite yet mighty Goh has impressed local dance buffs in *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Giselle* and *Onegin*. And she's had a parallel career as an international guest artist, most notably performing principal roles with Suzanne Farrell Ballet between 2000 and 2006. Reflecting on what she'll miss most when she leaves The National, Goh says it'll be these larger-than-life characters she's danced over the years and, she continues, "the ability to live the lives of all these characters on stage. I anticipate feeling reminiscent when I hear the music in the future. These characters have been so intrinsic to my life." Intrinsic perhaps, but Goh's life has never been just about dancing the big classical roles.

For an elite athlete and artist, Goh has been remarkably successful at coming up with the

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requisite focus and commitment while at the same time nurturing a family, running a ballet footwear design and manufacturing business with her husband, and producing large-scale dance events aimed at the wider arts and Chinese communities. Leaving The National will allow her to further explore these other endeavours. Interestingly, they all speak to Goh's desire to "give back", a gratitude for life-long blessings that have engendered a real sense of altruism and responsibility in this slender ambassador of dance.

The motivation behind her company – Principal Shoes – comes from having sustained multiple stress fractures to her feet early in her career and from watching other dancers similarly suffer. In an effort to find a better, more supportive shoe, Goh and her husband, former dance star Chun Che, ended

up designing one. "They are the only external thing we dancers depend on," she points out, "so they are very important." Goh and Che enlisted sports and biomechanics specialists to help with design and they have shared responsibilities – Che oversees design and manufacturing (the shoes are made in Asia) while Goh helps with marketing and promotion. The company has enjoyed success and modest growth and Goh looks forward to having the time to be even more involved with it.

Goh also is interested in delving more deeply into producing events such as *A Chinese New Year Celebration with Chan Hon Goh*, which took place at the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto earlier this year. Goh feels passionately about introducing ballet to more people and says she enjoys the challenges and detailed

logistics of mounting special one-off events that can reach new audiences and educate them about the dance form she loves so much. With similar spirit, she's very interested in teaching, referring often to "the influential teachers who inspired the courage in me to believe in myself." Goh goes on to quote Einstein, who famously remarked: "You have to have the right conditions to succeed." Nowhere is this more the case than in the rarefied and tremendously competitive world of classical ballet and Goh knows it.

If her famous family was influential in her entrée into professional ballet, her immediate family is also a factor in her decision to leave full-time performing. Goh admits that the prospect of spending more time with her son, who is now three, is enticing and increasingly compelling. "I didn't know what

Chan Hon Goh gives her final performance in *Giselle* on May 31st at 2pm with The National Ballet of Canada at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, Toronto. She performs Peter Martins' *Valse Triste* in The National Ballet of Canada fundraising gala, *White Hot*, on June 18th at the Four Seasons Centre, Toronto.

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a profound effect motherhood would have on me," she admits. "I was the kind of person who never minded putting in extra time on my work. But now there's this toddler who deserves and needs my time as well. There's a constant feeling of attachment, of worry I guess, that tears me." Goh talks about the need to prioritize, to delegate and we agree that this is the universal struggle for those who live life to the fullest. As she bluntly puts it, "You don't want to give anything up."

Despite a nagging neck and shoulder injury that has haunted her final years as a ballerina, Goh feels she is saying good-bye at the height of her career rather than from some point along a decline. But clearly the fallout from a car accident she suffered in 2006 has made the daily body battles that every dancer must face down even more of a challenge. "I have discomfort that just doesn't go away; it's constant." Three years after her accident, Goh is still taking time-consuming daily physiotherapy for injuries to her neck and upper body. It has definitely propelled her thoughts about leaving ballet and she says she has been discussing it with Artistic Director Karen Kain for about a year. This inability to bounce right back from fatigue or an injury has been a deciding factor, she agrees. And it's the great irony of the aging artist of the ballet: "Just as you become the kind of artist you aspire to be; your body can't keep up."

Of her final performances with The National, Goh says she's trying not to think

about how much they might sadden her. She worries, confiding that, "Emotionally, it might be too much for me." But she draws strength from the perennial task at hand and says simply, "I hope to dance well." As with any dance artist approaching any performance, this is truly the important thing. ~

Sommaire

Chan Hon Goh, danseuse du National Ballet of Canada depuis vingt ans, danse son dernier spectacle de la saison régulière dans une matinée de *Giselle* le 31 mai. Cela marquait à la fois le début de la fin et un renouveau complet. Première danseuse au sein de la compagnie depuis 1994, Goh a été une ballerine des plus élégantes, conférant délicatesse et sensibilité aux grands ballets classiques, tout en pureté technique éblouissante et, malgré sa petite taille, en force. Athlète et artiste d'élite, elle a connu un succès remarquable en conjuguant son engagement d'artiste, sa famille, la direction d'une entreprise de conception et de manufacture chaussons de danse avec son mari, et la production d'événements de danse d'hiver pour les communautés artistiques et chinoises. Outre des blessures persistantes au cou et à l'épaule survenues lors d'un accident de voiture en 2006, la famille proche de Goh compte dans sa décision de ne plus être interprète à plein temps. Son fils a maintenant trois ans. « Je ne savais que la maternité m'affecterait de façon si profonde, » avoue-t-elle. Goh dit qu'elle essaie de ne pas penser à la tristesse qu'elle pourrait vivre lors de ses derniers spectacles avec le National Ballet. Mais elle puise sa force dans la tâche immuable de son travail et dit simplement : « J'espère bien danser. » ~