



# Prima ballerina

*Chinese-born ballerina Chan Hon Goh has retired from the stage, but the busy mom, entrepreneur and Nutcracker producer is moving faster than ever*

By Michael Crabb

FOR MANY PRIMA BALLERINAS the end of a glittering stage career can be traumatic, but Chinese-born Chan Hon Goh's retirement in May from the National Ballet of Canada in Toronto has proved more a change of direction than an abrupt finale. Content to leave the limelight, Goh is pouring her energy and experience into an ambitious project she hopes will become a cultural heirloom for Vancouver, the city she now calls home.

After the justifiable indulgence of a Mediterranean cruise, Goh, 40, has taken on a different role as artistic co-ordinator of a new, \$700,000 staging of that popular, holiday season favourite *The Nutcracker*, produced by Vancouver's Goh Ballet, the performing division of the city's respected Goh Ballet Academy, founded more than 30 years ago by her parents, Singapore-born Choo Chiat Goh and Beijing-born Lin Yee Goh.

Private ballet academies across North America present *The Nutcracker* — a Christmas-themed fairy tale ballet — each December. What makes Chan's new production different

— apart from its lavish scale, with spectacular Chinese-made sets and costumes by leading designers Zhang Dinghao and Li Ming — is that it reaches beyond the Goh Academy to include young dancers from schools throughout the Vancouver area and beyond. It is not only a ballet but a community-building effort.

Chan selected in September the more than 60 students who will perform in *The Nutcracker* when it premieres at the Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts on Dec 17. Thanks to her continuing close connection with the National

Ballet of Canada, she has been able to add extra excitement to *The Nutcracker's* premiere by inviting National Ballet of Canada principal dancers Sonia Rodriguez and Polish-born Piotr Stanczyk to perform the leading roles.

Chan says her new role — a combination of artistic director, fundraiser, media liaison representative, general administrator and occasional rehearsal director for *The Nutcracker's* choreographer, Anna-Marie Holmes, is more demanding than anything she expected.



As a young girl growing up in China, Chan could never have imagined how far fortune — and hard work — would take her.

She was born under what her father considered the auspicious omen of a rising moon, glowing red, but not in the most promising circumstances. It was Beijing in the Cultural Revolution. Her parents, both principals in the Central (now National) Ballet of China, lived in relative comfort in a walled artists' compound, but nevertheless shared a two-bedroom apartment with another family.

Lin Yee, plagued by rheumatoid arthritis, switched from performing to teaching soon after Chan, her only child, was born. Lin Yee's classically trained husband, meanwhile, grew increasingly frustrated with performing only folk-based "revolutionary" ballets.

In 1976, he was allowed to leave for Canada to care for his ailing grandmother in Vancouver. His wife and daughter watched Chiat leave with no assurance they'd be able to join him — an emotional wrench that caused Chan pangs of lonely anxiety even into adulthood.

Fortunately, the family was reunited a year later. By then Chiat had launched what was to become a very successful teaching career in Vancouver and was soon formulating plans for a company. Chan, however, struggling to learn English and dealing with racial slurs in her largely white school, faced a difficult adjustment. Her stubbornness only fortified her determination to excel — but not, at first, in dancing.

Her parents, preoccupied with their ballet school, did not detect Chan's natural dancing talent. In China, they'd sent her to piano classes from an early age, not imagining that those long hands and fingers might one day grace a ballet stage. In Vancouver there was more piano — and singing lessons.

It was an aunt, Soo Nee, who gave Chan her first ballet classes. Even when her parents launched a children's program they did not consider their daughter a likely prospect. It took an aged former international ballet star, Anton Dolin, to remove the scales from their eyes. Chan's father had met Dolin during a brief sojourn in London as a teenaged ballet student. When the famous dancer was in Vancouver, he came to the Goh Academy, observed a children's class and singled out Chan. "She is going to be a beautiful dancer," Dolin declared.

After that, Chan's parents gradually acknowledged their daughter's true destiny. She made her public debut at age 13, dancing *The Butterfly Lovers* with another Chinese émigré — and former Central Ballet principal — almost two decades her senior, Che Chun. He'd arrived in Vancouver in 1978, danced with the Gohs' company and already made a strong impression on Chan. By 13, a child's admiration had turned into a major crush. By her late teens, it evolved into a loving bond that has endured ever since.

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At age 17, Chan, who had a lack of

success in regional ballet competitions at home, entered Europe's Prix de Lausanne and was among the list of finalists awarded a dance scholarship. At age 18, she entered the Royal Academy of Dancing's Adeline Genée Competition and took home a silver medal.

Considering her options, Chan decided on further study at the School of American Ballet in New York. She applied for a grant from the Canada Council and was auditioned in Toronto. One of the jurors was noted Canadian choreographer James Kudelka. He believed Chan was already company material and she was urged to audition for the National Ballet of Canada. Although she'd imagined leveraging her competition successes into a contract as a soloist, Chan was only offered a position with the company's corps de ballet.

In addition to feeling lonely in Toronto, she hated corps work. "It felt like dancing in a cage," she recalls. Gradually, she was given featured roles and steadily promoted through the ranks, achieving her goal of principal dancer in January 1994.

Chan the ballerina projected a combination of fragility and strength. With her willowy arms she could be as light as gossamer, but her gazelle-like jump and solid technique allowed her to command a broad repertoire. As she matured, Chan also shed what had sometimes seemed a veneer of artifice to emerge as a compelling dance-actress in both comic and tragic roles.

Offstage, Chan was renowned for her professional focus, discipline and determination. "Chan is the epitome of the iron butterfly," says National Ballet of Canada artistic director Karen Kain, "incredibly delicate yet incredibly strong and she's good at everything."

Her outside guest engagements took her around the globe and included a notable succession of appearances with the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. She danced Peter Martin's *Swan Lake* in Copenhagen at the Royal Danish Ballet. She produced and headlined a touring troupe to Asia. She also reached out to Toronto's Asian community, earning a 2005 New Pioneers Award in arts from immigrant agency Skills for Change and producing a number of Chinese New Year celebrations for the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto.

Chan might have kept dancing for a few more years but for a chronic injury. In 2006, she was

in a car accident in Vancouver. Chan was driving to a ballet class, reconditioning her body some two months after the birth of her son, Aveary. She incurred what she describes as a "whiplash type" injury that decreased the mobility of her neck and shoulders. It took steely determination and a great deal of physiotherapy to keep her onstage. Chan still wanted to perform but knew it was time to start planning the end of her dance career. "Dealing with the pain and going for therapy," she explains, "was cutting into my family time and I knew this could not go on." Yet no one watching her May 31 farewell performance would have guessed the physical challenges she'd overcome.

She'd chosen the great Romantic era classic *Giselle* as her farewell dance.

The magnificent, 2,000-seat Four Seasons Centre in Toronto was sold out. Excitement was in the air. Diehard fans came bearing bouquets.

Chan did not simply *dance* *Giselle*. She *became* *Giselle*. When, in the quiet closing moments, *Giselle* — by this stage in the ballet transformed from a heartbroken mortal into a tormented ghost — vanishes forever, the was audience so hushed you could hear Zdenek Konvalina, playing the male lead Albrecht, release a spontaneous, despairing, heartrending sob.

In the almost 15-minute standing ovation that followed, Chan could have been forgiven for shedding a few tears. Instead, laden with flowers, surrounded onstage by her colleagues, family and — to the delight of three-year-old Aveary — a sea of red balloons, Chan was radiantly happy. "I felt so at home on that stage, really into the character. It was just a great two hours. It truly felt wonderful."

Although the family's new base is now Vancouver, Chan plans to remain "bi-coastal," retaining a place in Toronto. "I'd like to keep connected to the National Ballet somehow. I'd like to contribute artistically as a teacher and coach. I know the repertoire so well. And I'd like to help in building a bigger audience for the company, specifically within the Asian community."

One thing is certain. Although Chan Hon Goh's days as a ballerina are finished, her contributions to Canada's dance and cultural scenes have emphatically not. 🌸

Photo by Bruce Zinger. Courtesy of the National Ballet of Canada Archives