

## Toronto

Gary Smith

Chan Hon Goh's final full-length performance was a magical afternoon of exquisite technique marked by daring dramatic interpretation of *Giselle*. Goh, who has performed with the National Ballet of Canada for twenty years, was in top form for this Romantic-era ballet with a mood-drenched account of love balanced at the still point. In the first act of what is often referred to as the ballerina's Hamlet, Goh found the shy, naive warmth of a sensitive young soul attracted by the handsome demeanor of a wily suitor.

She danced the ballet's sweetly etched opening pas de deux with Zdenek Konvalina, a thoughtful and considerate partner who showed off the ravishing Goh as if she were a porcelain princess with a wildly beating heart. The moments of surrender between these two were acted with playful passion. It was easy to see why the young, inexperienced *Giselle* fell in love with a man she barely knew but desperately longed to marry.

Goh found all the lyrical beauty in the ballet's second act as she suggested perfectly the ballet's notion of redemption and forgiveness. She was matched by Konvalina's Bourbonville-like jumps in the extended dance of death that forms the focus of the second act.

The contrasts in Goh's dual images of *Giselle* from act 1 to act 2 were superbly realized. This was never just a sense of technical dancing but always a fully fleshed dramatic vision that came from the heart and the soul. Her grace and beauty radiated across the footlights, creating a chemical reaction with the sometimes cool Konvalina, suggesting love bursting with desire and pleasure, finally reduced to unspeakable sorrow.

Peter Wright's version of this moody ballet, set in Desmond Heeley's charming production, has been in the National Ballet's repertory for almost forty years. It's a work the company has almost always danced with vigor and passion, as it did here, adding depth and surety to Goh's thrilling performance. It was difficult to believe that she, just past forty herself, is leaving the dance stage for other pursuits. She looked so strong and happy you could easily believe, aside from her dramatic maturity, that she was a young dancer in her prime. But after having her first baby and returning to ballet several years ago, she was injured in a car accident that has plagued her with constant pain. Dancing has been difficult for her, but you'd never know that by this brilliant performance.

Among the supporting cast, Victoria Bertram was a superb mother, suggesting all the fear and foreboding this woman feels as she watches her daughter dance toward danger. Bertram has played this part for many years and she knows exactly how to maintain focus through the important mime moments. Tomas Schramek has also danced in *Giselle* for many years, going from a boyish, impetuous Albrecht to his present role as a grizzled Duke of Courland. He gives a detailed performance that suggests the way maturity denies romance in favor of politically appropriate alliances.

Alejandra Perez-Gomez suggested a haughty yet kindly Bathilde, confused by *Giselle*'s reckless spirit and shocked by Count Albrecht's reckless playacting. Perfect, too, was Piotr Stanczyk's simple Hilarion, a man tortured by love that's not meant to be. Xiao Nan Yu's dark, densely rich Myrtha was a Queen of the Wilis to fear and honor. Her powerful movement, hollow forbidding eyes, and strong evil arms suggested a creature of frightening possibility. Supported magnificently by a strong female corps that suggested a synergy of darkness that could destroy anything that challenged its ultimate authority, the dancers moved as one living organism.

The dancing throughout was crisp, clean, and uncluttered. Polished perfection extended to the peasant pas de quatre, with Keiichi Hirano, Jillian Vanstone, Étienne Lavigne, and Stacey Shiori Minagawa evoking young love bursting with joy. In the dances of the young villagers there was a buoyant energy that defined the romantic fervor of youth.

At the center, though, always in perfect focus, Goh's delirious performance was etched in the imagination. It was a perfect ballet for her to dance as a farewell present to her many fans. She looked radiant and bowed sweetly at the end as the Four Seasons Centre went wild. "I'll miss dance," she said in an interview, "but it's time to leave gracefully. I'll always be a dancer in my heart and soul, but there's a time to stop performing. I'll find other ways to explore my talents, to give something back to the art that has enlivened my spirit."