

Community Voices: Chan Hon Goh

Dancers can only move forward by reaching inward, former ballerina says

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Many years ago, in my second season as a principal dancer of the National Ballet of Canada, I was called into a meeting with the artistic director. The meeting started with an overview of the upcoming repertoire for the next season. We started to discuss the different roles that I would be dancing and then, the ballet Giselle came up. "I don't think you're ready for Giselle" he said in a very matter-of-fact tone. "I don't believe you're able to tell the story."



The story ... I have known this story since I was eight years old. I have longed to dance this ballet since I joined the company. The story was basic: peasant girl falls in love; she is betrayed and stabs herself. She dies with a broken heart. I felt so angry that my artistic director would think that I wouldn't be able to tell the story. I was in shock, but more than that, I was so worried that he might be right. Up until that point in my career, I focused so much on being technically brilliant, aiming for perfection, working harder to get each step precisely because I thought my artistry was already there and it was God-given.

Upon hearing this unexpected assessment of abilities, I felt ill. But what can I do? Well, in my rage to rebel and prove otherwise, I first cut my hair really short as if to say, "I didn't care and I don't need long hair anyways because I'm not doing Giselle". Then I asked myself, "How would I tell a story through steps and emotions, through phrasings of the music and the subtleties of reactions, but without a single word?"

I was 26 years old and already a principal dancer of the largest classical ballet company in Canada. So I guess one could say I was a good dancer, but this was my turning point. I want to be an artist.

The perfecting of technique goes without saying, and the long hours of repetitions and polishing of steps all are a part of a dancer's everyday necessity, but I was so fortunate that from that point in time on, I was able to make a departure from doing dance exercises to living the dance. With any given repertoire, be it a story ballet or an abstract ballet, my sense of character, intensity or pairing with the music have all since that season had meaning.

From then on, the beauty and joy of living my roles versus practicing my steps, and the ability to apply my personal life experiences to my interpretations of the repertoire, made me fall in love with ballet over and over again.

While working with Suzanne Farrell and her company at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, I heard her remark in rehearsal that the great George Balanchine once said, "There's no such thing as an abstract ballet. Put a man and a woman on stage and already there's story."

For the past three years I have been mentoring teenage aspiring dancers to reach their fullest potential physically and artistically. There are some who have the tendency to be fearless technically but may be inhibited when it comes to letting go of their emotions. There are many factors at play, especially in the teenage years, but my approach is to never have them do what I do when I demonstrate. Don't imitate because that is still fake. I would like them to show me their own interpretations through their own understanding.

Helping students technically at this stage of development is extremely important as well, and overcoming physical barriers goes hand-in-hand with producing a well-rounded dancer.

If anyone thinks that ballet is about high kicks, multiple turns, big jumps and doing steps on your toes, please think again. For the remaining 15 years that I was a principal dancer with our national company, I grew to find a vital dimension by constantly discovering new ways to personify the music. and searching for the soul of each character. It was not about being Chan Hon Goh on stage but being the person in the ballet.

Going back to my story of Giselle: That year, the company started to schedule rehearsals a few months into the new season and I once again was in disbelief because I saw my name on the casting list. And although learning how to tell the story came slowly, I was given a huge opportunity to try. I danced my first performance of Giselle while on tour in Saskatoon 10 months after that meeting and while I'm sure that first performance was not memorable, I hope that my farewell performance of this ballet in May of 2009 was. I chose to dance Giselle for my retirement because for me, this ballet embodied all aspects of a ballerina and I had an incredible story to tell.

Chan Hon Goh is director of the Goh Ballet Academy. Goh Ballet's Nutcracker runs from Dec. 19 to 23 at the Centre for Performing Arts.

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