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Chan Goh steps up to the future

Ballet Academy head is positioning company for the future

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Chan Goh says she always keeps in mind the goal of preparing dancers for international careers. ‘I would say that we are trying to break new ground, while remembering what we excel at.’

She danced her last performance with the National Ballet of Canada on May 31, 2009. Not long after, she came back to Vancouver and took the reins at the Goh Ballet Academy from her parents, Choo Chiat Goh and Lin Yee Goh, who had built the school with dogged vision and sweat equity over a period of more than 30 years.

At 44, Chan Goh is as lithe, luminous and thoughtfully spoken as ever.

While she will modestly say that directing the school “continues to be a huge learning curve for me,” she is making choices and changes that are positioning the Goh Ballet Academy for the future.

“The last four years have been about absorbing and processing, day to day and step by step,” Goh says. “Our standards are certain and recognized, but part of my approach is that you can’t be complacent. The globalization of information has affected the dance world as well. As a dancer you now need to be intelligent enough to pull from many sources.

“Another thing that’s different is the supportive component outside of the studio. What can you do to cross train? What can you do to understand stylistic differences between, say, a Romantic ballet and a Bill Forsythe work? How do you prepare yourself for a new crop of choreographers that expect dancers to be able to do everything?”

One of the ways is generational change in artistic staff: More than half the teaching faculty at the school was added in the last four years. Another is continued focus on pas de deux training from the age of about 13 or 14, something few schools in Vancouver do in a sustained way.

“I would say that we are trying to break new ground, while remembering what we excel at,” Goh explains. “I want to push our horizon, always with the goal of preparing our dancers for international careers. I am not interested in cookie cutter dancers. We train individuals. That is how we’ve been successful in the past. You take a young student. She may not be God’s gift to dance, but you see something that others don’t have. It’s our job to recognize that, and bring it out.”

What Goh also recognizes is the need for capital expansion, the school having outgrown the heritage building in Mount Pleasant her parents presciently bought all those years ago, back when Main Street was a walk on the scary side.

“We love the neighbourhood and are proud of the fact that we’ve contributed to its development.”

Simply from the point of functionality, she needs more space — the school recently downsized from five offices to two in order to make the studios a little bigger — and says she is looking at a couple of collaborative prospects as well as talking to developers who may be interested in a partnership.

Still, four years after retirement, does she miss the dancing life?

“I confess that I do miss Chan Hon Goh as a dancer,” she says, tellingly speaking of herself in the third person. “It is tremendously hard work requiring tough physical output, focus and determination. Then it was all done for me.

“Now it is my turn to give back. Having parents who were dancers, I was always braced. I always knew it was a short career. I could have danced another three or four years, but it was important to me to finish on top, and on my own terms. I wasn’t interested in living the life but having to cover up. But I will always miss the experience of performing, because there is nothing like it.”

Deborah Meyers, Special to The Sun

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