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Chan Hon Goh on Change and Giving Back

NEWS

The principal dancer turned teacher and her cross-Canada master class tour By Emma Kerson

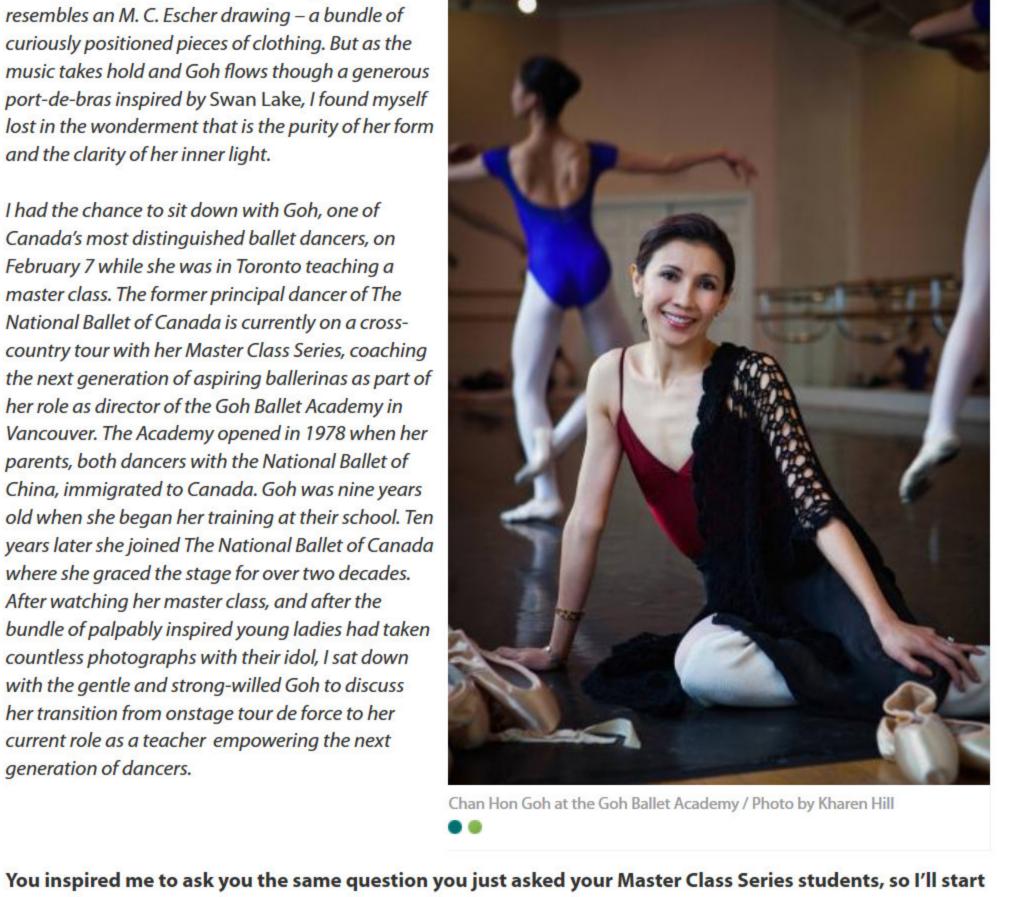
FEATURE

G+1 ≥ Email Vancouver's Chan Hon Goh's teaching attire resembles an M. C. Escher drawing - a bundle of curiously positioned pieces of clothing. But as the

COLUMNS

music takes hold and Goh flows though a generous port-de-bras inspired by Swan Lake, I found myself lost in the wonderment that is the purity of her form and the clarity of her inner light. I had the chance to sit down with Goh, one of Canada's most distinguished ballet dancers, on February 7 while she was in Toronto teaching a

master class. The former principal dancer of The National Ballet of Canada is currently on a crosscountry tour with her Master Class Series, coaching the next generation of aspiring ballerinas as part of her role as director of the Goh Ballet Academy in Vancouver. The Academy opened in 1978 when her parents, both dancers with the National Ballet of China, immigrated to Canada. Goh was nine years old when she began her training at their school. Ten years later she joined The National Ballet of Canada where she graced the stage for over two decades. After watching her master class, and after the bundle of palpably inspired young ladies had taken countless photographs with their idol, I sat down with the gentle and strong-willed Goh to discuss her transition from onstage tour de force to her current role as a teacher empowering the next generation of dancers.



by simply asking, do you have a favourite ballet? That's so difficult because at different stages of my career I had different favourites. I'll give you my top three. My

all-time favourite has to be Sleeping Beauty. I loved everything there was about Princess Aurora. That was my childhood dream. But she and Sleeping Beauty changed because in the beginning, I was a first soloist, and I was so careful and nervous just thinking about the technical aspects, about how do I sustain the balance? How do I

make sure this is clean and precise? Then I worked with an amazing choreographer who said ballet can't be superficial. You can't just be smiling when you're wearing that tiara; you have to know the character. So as I grew as an artist, the way that I danced Aurora changed. You know her relationship to her parents and her relationship to the suitors, and when she pricks her finger there's the purity, the innocence. Making that character come to life changed for me. It's more than just the bourrées and the jumps. Romeo and Juliet is in the top three because later, that too was so much more than just doing the steps. I needed to convey emotion. I loved the roles where it gave the women some substance and wasn't just about a pretty face. It was difficult because sometimes this glorious cacophony of music would be playing and all you're doing is walking with your veil draped. How do you do that for sixty-four counts and make people cry? That's something

you just want to live over and over again. And then I danced Giselle for my retirement. I love Giselle, but I also love John Cranko's Onegin. That's four ballets. I won't hold it against you. For you, what is dance, and what is it in your life currently?

something because I didn't want to walk too much or load things into my trunk, and I was conscious because I

What I was going to rehearse later in the day dictated what I would have for lunch. It was very consuming that

I'm not dancing, I have to be real about everything. I have to live in this real world. I'm not the focus or priority

privileged world we were in to be dancers: to be able to live so many lives, to have brought emotion to people, to

be able to move people, to be able to affect the way people connect. That was really powerful. It's wonderful for

anymore. The things around me are. It's difficult to describe, but I look at dance and see what a beautiful,

me now to pass on these experiences and stimulate young thoughts to say, 'What if' and 'Could it be?'

Dance has changed. When I was a dancer performing onstage, that was the priority in my life. It was consuming.

Everything I did had something to do with what I was dancing. Simply put, I couldn't go to Ikea to pick up

had to save my calves because I had those thirty-two fouettés. It would depend on the season. Maybe it was a season that was not so taxing on my body.

way, not even consciously; I just did it because I knew that would be the best. Self-focus was a big thing when I was dancing. I had to make sure I looked after myself, that I had enough rest. I did whatever was optimal for me to dance my best. So now, what does dance mean? Dance means something so extraordinary and so beautiful because now when

Your career with The National Ballet of Canada spanned over two decades. Over that time, did you notice anything change in the landscape in terms of what it means to be a professional ballet dancer? Yes, I started as a teenager, so that's twenty-one years! It's always changing. It changes with the way society

adapt to many different styles. And there's a lot more scientific knowledge for looking after oneself, to support the dancing. More resources. That's fantastic. The more you know as a dancer, the easier it gets, or the more difficult it gets?

I think it gets easier because you've been through it all a few times. But I also think that my own expectations and

evolves. I certainly think the training has changed. I think the training shifts focus based on what choreographers

want and what the public enjoys watching. I feel ballet dancers now are way more versatile, meaning they can

I guess in ballet there is such a hierarchy within the company, and the more you do rise, it is more of a

standards rise, so then it's still just as hard because you're trying to constantly get better!

who can always keep pulling something out of you. That's a hard job.

public rise.

Yes! And there are expectations from the other side. But it's about the fulfillment to keep growing as an artist. Sometimes you don't see what you're doing, and sometimes you do see and you want to make it better, but it's also very dependent on the vision of the artistic director and what you're getting from your coach, the person

when you realized you were ready to retire, and what made you take that next step into teaching and mentoring? I always knew there were certain repertoires and things I wanted to accomplish in my career. I was so fortunate to

have done those and to have had such wonderful support from my company, from my directors, from other

artists; it was a wonderful time. But I also saw dancers who just didn't have any other interests; they didn't have

anything to fall back on or go into. I think because I have dancer parents, they were always saying, 'Dance is such

You decided to transition and now you're the director of the Goh Ballet Academy. Was there a moment

a short-lived career. What are you going to do after dance?' So even as a young principal dancer in my twenties, I thought, 'I want to take a course in this; I'm really interested in marketing; I'm really interested in knowing more about the law.' I was fascinated by many things. I met a lot of interesting people from different walks of life, and I admired their professionalism and what they did. So by the time I decided to look at retirement, I was a young mother with a little boy, and I thought eventually I'd do something else and I didn't want to start that something else too late. I would never want to dance at anything other than my highest point just to say I'm still dancing. I wanted to finish on a real high.

Yeah, and I didn't know how to do anything. It was very different. I'm now just starting to trust my instincts. Being

open to learning is so important. I keep learning every step of the way because to allow yourself to learn allows

And to be a dancer is to be constantly learning. It never really stops throughout our lives.

you to keep up with evolution.

Master Class Series, what is it?

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FEATURE

Especially at this young age you're teaching.

You, in a sense, ended up taking over the family business!

some knowledge to young dancers, to give them the support, to give them any guidance or advice. Being in Vancouver on the West Coast, I knew that community. I have been back for seven years now, but I didn't know the rest of Canada. Canada is very ... broad. I started the Master Class Series wanting to know about the kinds of training, wanting to know where young dancers are now and to get to know them.

This is a key component to why I'm doing the master class tour, because I feel so fulfilled to be able to pass on

That's a first for me! I'm really looking forward to it. I don't think many people know the arts scene in Whitehorse! Well, I certainly don't. It's exciting that you're travelling to so many places. Do you notice a change in

Your tour is so vast geographically. I mean, you're going up to Whitehorse.

dancers when you go to different locations, or is ballet, ballet everywhere?

just dependent on who came to the class. What I have noticed is that dancers now in their classical training are not as pure because they do a lot of different genres. Today I talked a lot about the passé and where the foot should be because I see a jazz influence in there and just picking up the foot without that classical approach. Because they're young, these genres get mixed a little bit. The teacher really has to set that line and not cross it. This is ballet. The students are still finding their bodies, so I feel like I want to instill purity and values of classical dance. If there is one thing you learned throughout your career that you want to instill in these students of your

I think the most crucial thing is that there is such a difference between ego and confidence. As dancers, no matter

how old you are, you're told all the time that you're doing it wrong and how you should be doing it better. I think

the one amazing piece of advice I got from my dad was, 'Don't let them tell you you can't do it. Don't let them

make you feel you're not good enough. You have to have your own self-worth; you have to have your own

No, I notice, to generalize a bit, certain cities have higher standards, but that's not a fair evaluation because that's

confidence.' That confidence is so important because when someone tells you no, you have to have enough confidence to audition again. You have to have that confidence to say, 'I'm not garbage even though you just told me I am. I'm going to work on it to make it better.' That self-belief is so important. Many dancers are sensitive and emotionally weak. As all people are.

Yeah, it's so important. Everyone deserves to dance and to live this dream. So don't let people shoot you down. But I started this by saying there's such a difference between confidence and ego, and ego is something that doesn't fit into trying to become a dancer or artist. Ego prohibits you from advancing and then it creeps into something that's not real. It's what you think of yourself; it's not what everyone else is thinking, so don't confuse them!

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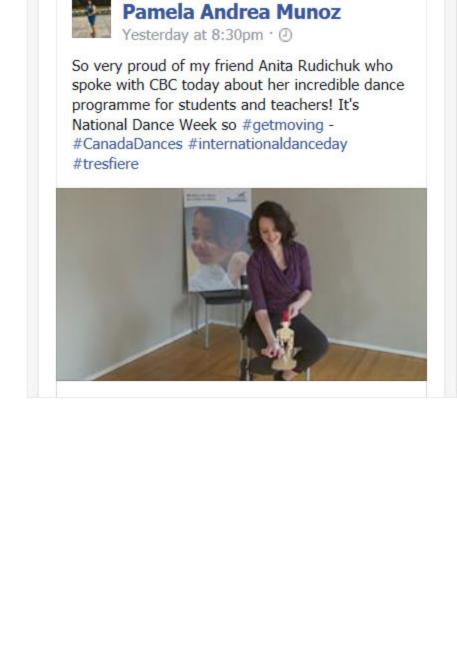
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