

Goh Ballet's *The Nutcracker* fetes a 10-year tradition

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Chan Hon Goh says building a new *Nutcracker* was a huge investment for the company. But 10 years later, attention to the details has allowed it to grow into an ever-evolving success.

At this time of year, Goh Ballet director Chan Hon Goh keeps a pen and notepad on her bedside table. That's because pulling off a 250-dancer *The Nutcracker* involves a lot of moving parts. Wrangling an army of cheese-throwing mice and separating the gauzy tutus from the candy-coloured soldier costumes: these are the kind of details that can keep you up at night.

"The worst thing for me is I'm so afraid I've forgotten something," the former National Ballet of Canada dancer tells the *Straight*, laughing as she talks over the

phone from the company's busy heritage quarters on Main Street. "If I wake up, as soon as I think about it I have to write it down."

Hitting the new venue of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, the Goh *The Nutcracker* is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. It's met with such success, it's easy to forget that, when the company built its full-scale new version in 2009, it was a huge feat. Goh and her team brought in former Kirov Ballet and Royal Winnipeg Ballet star Anne-Marie Holmes to choreograph it and secured live accompaniment by members of the Vancouver Opera Orchestra. Costing \$700,000-plus, it was years in the making.



On one level, it was a personal passion project for Goh, whose parents launched the academy in 1978 soon after emigrating here from China. Her own first principal role with the National Ballet was in *The Nutcracker*. Going further back, as a young ballet student at her parents' school, she had never had the chance to make the holiday classic her own yearly tradition.

"In big cities, people will go to *The Nutcracker* every year as a nostalgic thing. But growing up here we never had a regular *Nutcracker* to go to," she explains. "So I'm hugely emotionally invested. But it was a huge financial stride to build it properly....We had hoped to build a tradition and we really didn't know what that entailed. We just knew that if we had a good enough production audiences would come. And many come every year now."

Goh attributes some of that success to the version's crowd-pleasing blend of true-to-the-classic story line mixed with innovations like Mother Ginger, who has up to a

dozen gymnasts tumble out of her giant hoop skirt each year. The show also brings in stars from outside of Vancouver: this Christmas season, dancers from the American Ballet Theatre take on the roles of the Cavalier Prince and the Sugar Plum Fairy, with two artists from National Ballet of China in the roles of the Snow Queen and Snow King.

“We bring in artists from companies that would not necessarily tour to Vancouver,” Goh says. “We’ve had dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet, the San Francisco Ballet.”

Over the years, the show has evolved and grown. Goh admits her team learned a lot from the first year, when it had closer to 200 performers. “We have a template now to go from,” she reflects. “I think I’ve learned it’s the same as when I was a dancer: you’re never happy with the performance you just did, you always want to do better.”



This year, look for new unicorns in the Snow Scene; elsewhere, there are now dragonflies in the Waltz of the Flowers and a naughty black lamb in the Marzipan sequence.

Along the way, scenery, costumes, and props have been either meticulously restored or redesigned. One of the most daunting tasks is fixing the immense scrim. “It takes a lot of repair work,” Goh concedes. “We need either a gymnasium to spread it out, or sometimes in summer, when there are no dancers here, we can do it here. The people sewing it are actually working on the floor repairing the tears.”

It’s all worth it, she feels, for what the annual production offers the young dancers, allowing its performers to grow up along with it, working toward newer, more challenging roles. A party girl might someday take on the role of, say, the Arabian or Spanish dancer. There are still original cast members from 2009 who mentor younger members.

Making sure they’re all on track is a job that Goh admits is even harder work than her days as a ballerina at the National.

“I think my role is more complicated than it was when I was a dancer,” she admits. “When I was a dancer, I could just focus on what I needed to do and what I should do to perform well—all the things like having the right physio appointments or putting the right protein in my diet. This is so much more.

“I’m just super, super happy that it’s lived up to what we always hoped,” she adds, “and for that we thank the community for its support.”

The Goh Ballet presents *The Nutcracker* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre from Friday to Sunday (December 21 to 23).

