

Goh's Nutcracker celebrating 10 years

Timeless ballet set to return to Queen E

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There was a time when she didn't expect to hear that music ever again.

In fact, she hoped she wouldn't.
As West Vancouver resident Chan Han Goh co-ordinates the intertwining spectacle and sentiment of this year's staging of *The Nutcracker* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre – a production that includes 250 actors, dancers, gymnasts; malevolent mice and whimsical unicorns – she recalls when she first became acquainted with the Sugar Plum Fairy.

As a 19-year-old newcomer to the National Ballet of Canada, Goh saw her name on the cast list for what would be her first major role in her first full-length ballet.

"It was unforgettable," she says of playing the Sugar Plum Fairy.



Goh Ballet Academy director Chan Han Goh instructs a young dancer in the nuance of movement. Goh is currently preparing for Goh Ballet's 10th anniversary production of *The Nutcracker* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. PHOTO SUPPLIED

But it was also exhausting. While the ballet company might do eight

performances of *Swan Lake*, they tended to do 30 performances of *The Nutcracker*.

"I probably thought at that point, when I retire, I don't ever want to hear the *Nutcracker* music again," she

says with a laugh. "Every time I'd hear the Sugar Plum Fairy music – and they sometimes play it in restaurants

– I'd lose my appetite because that's a very difficult dance."

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It was Paris in the summer when he heard the heavens.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky had just begun the task of finding the music that would turn the *Nutcracker and the Mouse King* – a children's story published in 1816 – into a ballet.

The composer was on his way back to St. Petersburg after a stop in Carnegie Hall when he found himself in Paris, arrested by an instrument he'd never heard before.

It was the celeste, French for "heavenly."

Invented only five years earlier, the keyboard instrument had a delicate sound, similar to a glockenspiel but soft, ethereal; perfect, Tchaikovsky realized, for the Sugar Plum Fairy.

The Nutcracker debuted in St. Petersburg in 1892, complete with marauding mice, a toy that acted as a passport to a magical, sugar-sparkling worlds, as well as perhaps the most beloved ballet

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COMMUNITY BULLETIN BOARD

Email information for your North Shore event to listings@nsnews.com.

CORE DRAWING SKILLS

Master the fundamentals of drawing in this skill building introductory course Wednesdays, Nov. 7-28, 7-9 p.m. at Maplewood House, 399 Seymour River Place, North Vancouver. \$120. nvartsCouncil.ca/nov-7-28-core-drawing-skills/

PARKGATE SENIORS CRAFT SALE

Start your holiday shopping early and view a large selection of knit hats, scarves and stuffed animals, also handbags and cards Wednesday, Nov. 7, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at the Parkgate Community Centre, 3625 Banff Court., North Vancouver. myparkgate.com

REFERENDUM READY

An electoral reform information session with an overview of the systems and key issues Wednesday, Nov. 7, 7-8:30 p.m. at West Vancouver Memorial Library, 1950 Marine Dr. 604-925-7400 westvanlibrary.ca

CANADIAN FEDERATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN-NORTH VANCOUVER

Journalist George Orr talks about Uncomfortable Perspectives on the News during the CFUW's meeting Thursday, Nov. 8, 7 p.m. at the Royal Canadian Legion, 123 West 15th St. Guests are

welcome. 604-984-9556 cfuwnvwww.vcn.bc.ca

POLYNESIAN DANCE

7 CULTURE All ages are welcome to learn about the historical and cultural background of traditional Hawaiian, Tahitian, Maori dance followed by practicing the dances Thursday, Nov. 8, 7-8 p.m. at Parkgate Library, 3675 Banff Court., North Vancouver. nvdpl.ca

UNWIND KNITTING AND CROCHETING CIRCLE

Bring projects and share ideas, techniques and conversation with other knitters and crocheters Thursdays, Nov. 8-29, 12:30-2 p.m. at West Vancouver Memorial Library, 1950 Marine Dr. All skill levels welcome. 604-925-7400 westvanlibrary.ca

WALKING INTO THE PAST: MAKING HISTORY ACCESSIBLE ONLINE: WALTER DRAYCOTT'S GREAT WAR CHRONICLE

Commemorate the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day by exploring archival material connecting the war with North Vancouver Friday, Nov. 9, 11 a.m.-noon, Lynn Valley Library, 1277 Lynn Valley Rd. Meet at the library and then walk to

the North Vancouver museum. Free admission. nvdpl.ca

GENEALOGY FAIR

Experts will guide participants through their research and teach about a wide range of online and print resources Tuesday, Nov. 13, 4-6 p.m. at West Vancouver Memorial Library, 1950 Marine Dr. 604-925-7400 westvanlibrary.ca

NORTH VANCOUVER TENANTS' WORKSHOP

Learn about your rights and obligations as a renter in North Vancouver Tuesday, Nov. 13, 6-8 p.m. Bowinn Ma, MLA Community Office, #5-221 West Esplanade Ave. Bowinn. MaMLA@leg.bc.ca

WIKIPEDIA EDIT-A-THON: LOCAL HISTORY EDITION

Librarians will show participants how to become editors to help improve Wikipedia's content about West Vancouver and the North Shore Tuesday, Nov. 13, 6:30-8 p.m. at West Vancouver Memorial Library, 1950 Marine Dr. Online registration required: westvanlibrary.ca

CAPILANO UNIVERSITY CREATING CONNECTIONS

Creating Connections is an

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From dud to beloved classic in 62 years

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music ever composed.

It was a dud.

“For the woman dancer there is very little in it, for art precisely nothing, and for the artistic fate of our ballet – it is yet one more step downwards,” wrote a critic of the day.

Even Tchaikovsky seemed to side with the critics.

“In spite of all the sumptuousness it did turn out to be rather boring,” he wrote in a letter to a friend. The great composer also dubbed what would become his signature masterpiece: “infinitely worse than *Sleeping Beauty*.”

But following that crucible of distaste and indifference, *The Nutcracker* saw a resurgence, in part because the story carried an appeal for one overlooked demographic: children.

On that St. Petersburg stage, one of the mice was played by George Balanchine. And while the ballet meant little to critics, it meant everything to Balanchine. It meant Christmas.

“For me Christmas was something extraordinary,” the dancer and

choreographer Balanchine once told writer Solomon Volkov. “On Christmas night we had only the family at home: mother, auntie, and the children. And, of course, the Christmas tree.”

With a \$25,000, 41-foot Christmas tree, Balanchine debuted *The Nutcracker* in New York in 1954 – 62 years after its underwhelming debut.

“Within a year it was a holiday blockbuster,” wrote Vanity Fair’s Laura Jacobs.

“If you’re going to pick an entry ballet we suggest you go to *The Nutcracker*,” remarks Goh. “For the students and for the dancers that participate, it’s a big part of their upbringing.”

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Growing up in China in the 1970s, Goh has memories of seeing her parents flit and fly about the stage.

“I watched so many performances,” she says. “My grandmother would always say that I’d be dancing in the aisles while the performers were dancing on stage.”

But she also remembers being forced to wait before she could officially walk up to the barre.

“They didn’t have private ballet schools,” she says. “It was all state-run ballet schools and the youngest age you could start was 10.”

But her training got a jumpstart when her family immigrated to Canada. Goh was eight years old and while she’d always loved to dance, movement took on a new importance in her life.

“I didn’t know a word of English when we immigrated,” she says, recalling the struggle to catch up to her classmates’ conversations through daily ESL classes. “I think I felt that dancing, that was something that was a constant. ... I didn’t need language skills when I was in dance class,” she says.

At 11 years old she sat down with her father and told him she wanted to train seriously.

“I actually didn’t have any inclination that I’d be a professional dancer at all. I just was in dance because I loved it.”

Following a colourful career including a stint as the prima ballerina for the National Ballet of Canada, Goh hung up her slippers in 2010 and tiptoed back to

West Vancouver.

Her career has come full circle, she says, discussing her role mentoring young dancers and offering them different ways to express themselves through the training ground of Goh Ballet.

She says there’s a “huge difference” between being a dancer and her current role as a teacher and producer.

“When you’re dancing, it’s all about ‘me.’ And it should be. The focus is on the dancer,” she says. “You need to do what is best for you in order to deliver the best performance ... but if you’re the teacher or the producer it’s really never about you. It’s about everything else.”

In order to make this year’s rendition of *The Nutcracker* distinct, Goh plans to outfit the theatre lobby with decorations and set pieces.

Until the moment the lights go down in the theatre, Goh will be hard at work.

“My job is kind of done when the curtain goes up,” she says.

But when the curtain comes up she can relax, she says, and enjoy the music once more.



Once the prima ballerina of the National Ballet of Canada, West Vancouver’s Chan Han Goh has dedicated herself to nurturing the talent of the next generation of dancers. PHOTO SUPPLIED



DANCING QUEEN Dancer and entrepreneur Pooneh Alizadeh was selected as one of the RBC Top25 Canadian Immigrant winners for 2018. Alizadeh, an Iranian-born dancer, opened the Academy of Middle Eastern Dance in North Vancouver to share a piece of her culture and to showcase dance as a form of therapy. PHOTO MIKE WAKEFIELD