

DIVINE

#WomenInspiringWomen: Former Principal Dancer, National Ballet of Canada, Chan Hon Goh

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It is difficult to select someone as our #WomenInspiringWomen subject on International Women's Day. In many ways, Chan Hon Goh is every woman. The daughter of immigrant parents makes her much like many other Canadians. She is a mother, again very similar to many women. What sets her apart is the fact that she is someone who reached the pinnacle of every dancer's career. She is the former Principal Dancer of the National Ballet of Canada. She is an artist, mentor and advocate for the arts. Finally, she is the Artistic Director of Global Dance Challenge and Director of Goh Ballet Academy.

As we finish the first quarter of 2020, Chan Hon Goh has been traveling more than ever before. The day of the interview, she literally just got back from TANZOLYMP in Berlin. TANZOLYMP are like dance Olympics with 40 countries represented and over 1,000 dancers participating. Goh took 5 Canadian students there between the ages of 14-17, who were competing in ballet and contemporary dance. They came back with 3 gold medals, one silver and one bronze for Canada. Goh was ecstatic that Canadians are being noticed internationally. In addition, she was teaching a Master Class Series presented by the Royal Bank of Canada across the country. She was kind enough to make time for us to discuss what it is like to go from professional dancer to judge and mentor, who inspires her and why the arts are so important.

As the former Principal Dancer for the National Ballet of Canada, you have performed hundreds of times. Which performances stand out to you the most and why?

Anytime a dancer makes a debut in a leading role it's quite a milestone. My debut in "The Nutcracker" was made at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. I was still very young [19 years old] and given the lead role. I can't say that it was my best performance, but it was definitely one to remember – just to go out there and do a principal part. Throughout my career, there were various ballets that were either created on me or brought in new to the company for me.

There were special partners that I would be paired with. I remember "The Sleeping Beauty", which was always one of my favourites, I was paired with this amazing dancer, Vladimir Malakhov and that was very special. When I did my first "Romeo and Juliet" I was paired with Rex Harrington who was such an experienced partner and I was doing it for the first time. To learn from him and to have the security of a partner that was so experienced and sharing the stage with him was very special. One very

memorable occasion, when I was dancing abroad, I was invited to dance in Denmark in “Swan Lake” with Erhan Colburg who was making his debut in the dance. To our surprise, the Queen of Denmark was there to watch. I think of those occasions and they were definitely the stand outs.



You have mentioned that early on, your career was about conquering and getting those milestones. How do you measure those milestones now that you are a mentor versus the Principal dancer?

I identified myself as a dancer. My life evolved in many ways with what I was doing onstage and those were the milestones that I was working towards. Now, I'm not on stage anymore, and mentoring students and producing shows is very different. There is a lot of work behind the scenes that is goes unnoticed that adds to the quality of a show and is part of the immense preparation of a dancer or student dancer.

My milestones now are the rewards that I see in the students. If I am able to assist them and help them make something possible. This may be giving them opportunities, to do a new piece of choreography that they weren't able to access before which could push them onto a new level or teach them a new step with more artistic output or nuance. Those are the breaking points that will make them better and their accomplishments are what I look forward to.



PHOTO: DAVID COOPER

Why is mentoring other dancers both through the Goh Ballet Academy and through the Masterclass series so important to you? How do you define yourself as a mentor?

This art form – dance – is passed down from generation to generation. You can learn from film clips or text books or by reading someone's biography but this art form has to be passed on in studio. The relationship I build with my students is very important. The quality of these productions that we are able to bring to life is important. You can't get the essence of dance any other way than through mentoring and I am so happy that I have so many experiences that I am able to pass on. There are

different ways to overcome challenges and instill the confidence that can be learned and built by dancers. Now, in my way, I try to pass that on to my students.

You have been judged as a dancer as a student and then as a professional. How did your own experience change how you judge others both in the dance world as a jury member of international dance competitions and in everyday life?

I love this question. Coming from an immigrant family, being the first Principal Dancer of Chinese heritage in Canada's largest professional dance company how do I judge dancers and people in everyday life? I approach it with a lot of openness. There are certain criteria in dance that one has to abide by, but they don't have to be restricted in how they get there. It's like what the famous choreographer Balanchine says, "We should never be afraid to break the rules, but we should never break the law."

In the bigger picture, in what I do professionally as a jury member, coming across young dancers, you may come to a variation that is meant to come from a certain time, a certain look and a certain style. Those are the laws that you cannot break, but how you interpret them is what I am open to and that is the individual quality that I look for. I am also trying to bring that out in my students. They should never be copycats of what I or any other dancers used to do. I want to bring some individuality out.

The understanding of the piece comes into play like when you read a book and understand a character. In musical interpretation, it's the same, but you think of where you put your accent. Some people have this skill naturally, and some need more direction. As a teacher, it is my job to pull it out of them. For me, once I listened to the music and studied the characters, it became my own. With some people, you have to dig a little deeper and try to give them imagery or metaphors to bring it out of them.

As women, we are often told that to be successful, you have to hold back your emotions. Dance is all about emoting with your face and body. What lessons about emotional intelligence can we all learn from dance?

The sense of vulnerability and being human. That human quality has so much to do with emotional intelligence. Potentially, and I am generalizing, as women, we have to make an additional effort to come across as being strong and to stand our ground. To

admit that we are human and vulnerable in some ways is important. To give ourselves forgiveness, because we are human and we can make mistakes and we can learn from them. It is how we grow. That is what we need to remind ourselves of.

I am pretty hard on myself. I hate mistakes and I don't like to have overlooked anything. I don't like to leave anything incomplete. As a mother and someone who is more mature now, it's not my first time having to make a difficult decision. We have to be more compassionate and that will be read by the people that you work with. If we are hard on ourselves, inevitably, we are going to be hard on others, and that little bit of compassion will go a long way.

You said that when you retired that you went from taking direction to making decisions. What advice do you have for other dancers or women in general making a big life transition?

It's tough. One of the things that I say to people when I have to make a decision is that I need to think about it. Sometimes we are put on the spot. The best that we can do for ourselves is to take more time mull decisions over; to sleep on it and know what you are getting into. When you have made up your mind, don't be on the fence. I feel like that once we have made that decision, and we know it is for the best, go into it whole-heartedly. Don't doubt yourself and don't have regrets.



You have been an inspiration and mentor to many young women. Who inspires you now?

I am inspired by people who are not pigeon-holed into one way of doing things. I love people like Oprah who have overcome adversity, have had to face challenges and prove themselves in each and every way. People like her that have gained success and have broken through the glass ceiling. Those inspirational women who are from different walks of life including dance. When I was growing up, it was all about the women that I saw on stage, but as I grew more mature, it was about the thought process behind it.

What is the biggest challenge to arts and culture in Canada?

Exposure is a big problem. We don't have enough outlets to show our work. Our society, in general, hasn't made arts and culture a part of our everyday lives. It's an add on when possible or if it interests us. I would like it to be part of our everyday, that we see it around us, that we can access it and that we care more about it.

We haven't been brought up with it being a priority. We have to think about getting arts and culture introduced into schools so that at an earlier age we can be exposed to it. Isn't it all about marketing and what's in our face? Arts and culture isn't in our face enough. As someone who believes in it, and has advocated for it, I try to see how we can convince the powers that be to program it more and be aware of the standard. Let's not miscommunicate these art forms.

It's often being sacrificed and yet, what are we without arts and culture? Everybody speaks to working toward a better standard of living. We care a lot about health and education, and we should. When we are well educated, and healthy, the arts feeds our soul. We are quite empty without that kind of spiritual guidance.

As a mother who has a very busy and fulfilling career, what advice do you have for other mothers out there?

The best piece of advice that one of my good friends gave me was quality time is very important and to never apologize for being a mother. We can apply it however we want. For example, don't say that "I'm sorry I have to go, because my kid is sick." I'm sure as professionals we will make up the time and rearrange our schedule to make up for the time lost. Being a mother is such a blessing. I am very busy and that quality time is very important. Those are the times when we create those amazing

memories. Be present and not distracted, even though it is easier said than done. Don't feel guilty, because we only get to live once, and we want to be happy mothers. If being a happy mother means that you are a career woman as well, then don't feel guilty.