



British Columbia · FINE ART OF SURVIVAL

Goh Ballet's Nutcracker gets pandemic reboot

The Vancouver dance school is offering a new twist on the classic Christmas tale

[Maryse Zeidler](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 21, 2020 7:00 AM PT | Last Updated: November 21



Dancers perform Goh Ballet's version of The Nutcracker which is being filmed this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

This is the second in a four-part series about artists, arts organizations and festivals trying to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic. Read the first part [about the Eastside Culture Crawl here](#).

It was mid-summer and already Goh Ballet director Chan Hon Goh was facing questions from dancers who would normally make up the 250-member cast of *The Nutcracker*.

The Vancouver dance school's production of the classic Christmas tale has been a holiday tradition for thousands of families since 2009. It's also a major professional development opportunity for dancers from across the Lower Mainland, including her school's students.

"It's been a very difficult time for the dance community," Goh said of the past few months, sitting in her office at the school's studios on Main Street.

This year, instead of a live show, Goh Ballet is presenting a filmed version of *The Nutcracker*, with a reimagined storyline. The film will be available for free for two weeks starting on Dec. 18 [on the school's website](#).

The film has a cast about one-third the size of the usual production, and instead of open-call auditions the school held limited auditions for its students.



Chan Hon Goh, director of Goh Ballet, performs a cameo as part of this year's filmed version of The Nutcracker. This is Goh's first performance since she retired as a professional dancer more than 10 years ago. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

For organizations like Goh Ballet, making it through this pandemic is about more than survival: it's about recognizing the importance of the arts for the audience, as well as for artists and other active participants.

"The arts, live performances — it's a necessity," Goh said. "Just because we can't do it now doesn't mean that we can't do it forever. And as an artist, as a mentor, we need to keep thinking of that and having that to hang onto for the future."



Choo Chiat Goh, co-founder of Goh Ballet, watches as crews film the school's pandemic version of The Nutcracker. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

Goh says the self-financed film was made possible with help from the Royal Bank of Canada, which usually sponsors the live annual performance.

In late summer she reached out to rising filmmaker Lukas Dong, with whom she had partnered to make a short film in honour of the school's 40th anniversary three years ago. Dong was onboard with the project.

She then contacted a Los Angeles-based writer to collaborate on the script. Goh wanted the story to reflect the difficult times people have been living through during the pandemic. The narrative they developed follows a young dancer who spends winter alone during the pandemic, but is reunited with his passion for ballet.

The story is partially based on the life of the production's principal dancer, Alex Stonehouse, who joined Goh Ballet's youth ensemble this September after a seven-year hiatus from dance.

"[Returning to dance] was a lot of hard work, hard training, but the payoff is so worth it to come back onto the stage," Stonehouse said.

"I'm feeling so lucky to have gotten this role. I feel like a lot of dancers have gotten quite low with this whole pandemic."



Strict social distancing measures were put in place during rehearsals and filming for Goh Ballet's Nutcracker in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

For dancers to practice their profession, they need access to the proper space and equipment. That includes sprung floors, open space and partners they can lift and twirl. But many studios have closed in the past few months, and those like Goh Ballet that remain open have restrictions in place to keep dancers apart.

And then, because of the [sweeping measures brought in to control COVID-19 in British Columbia](#), the school's classes were temporarily back on Zoom. The school believes it's exempt from the current restrictions on indoor high-intensity fitness classes, but is waiting to confirm with health officials.

- [How ballet helped the Goh family find their footing in Canada: an oral history of the Goh Ballet](#)



Goh Ballet's production of The Nutcracker provides performance opportunities for the school's dancers, as well as dancers from across the Lower Mainland. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

Goh admits that her school has taken a financial hit since the pandemic began. Class sizes have been reduced to increase the space between students, she says, but many parents chose not to enrol their children anyway because of their concerns about COVID-19.

Despite those challenges, Goh feels confident that the institution founded by her parents 43 years ago will manage to survive.

"We will get through this. It's not going to be easy," Goh said. "We just have to buy some time."