

DanceTeacher



PHOTO BY EMILY COOPER, COURTESY GOH BALLET ACADEMY.

How Canada's Chan Hon Goh Discovered Her Own Leadership Style at the Multigenerational Goh Ballet Academy



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March 7, 2025

Chan Hon Goh, CM, DLitt, may be the only daughter of Choo Chiat and Lin Ye Goh, ballet icons and founders of the prestigious Goh Ballet Academy and Youth Company Canada in Vancouver, but following in her parents' footsteps and taking over the academy after they retired was never a given.

In 2009, after retiring from a 21-year performance career with the National Ballet of Canada, where she was the company's first Chinese principal, Goh moved from Toronto to Vancouver with her husband and 3-year-old son to spend a year shadowing her parents, who were then in their late 70s.

"After being in Vancouver for a little bit and being in the thick of things, I felt that I could really add to where the school was at that point in time and make it move forward," she says. "I felt that I could bring fresh thinking and fresh programming and get the academy to the current decade."

In 2010, Goh became director of one of Canada's most decorated dance institutes, where she continues her parents' nearly 50-year legacy of training international ballet stars, with many joining the likes of American Ballet Theatre, Dutch National Ballet, and the Royal Swedish Ballet. She immediately tackled launching the academy into the 21st century by changing software systems, implementing new marketing strategies, and renovating facilities. To help the company out of its financial deficit, Goh increased initiatives to boost revenue by updating fees and tuition policies and expanding the school's reach into Toronto. She also thought of seasonal programs that could be inserted into the year, such as children's workshops and group coaching to enable artistic progress and sustainability.



CHAN HON GOH. PHOTO BY NSBKIM, COURTESY GOH BALLET ACADEMY.

"I feel like I'm a bit more forceful than [my parents] were," she admits. "They put a lot more of the human aspect into running the business." But now, 15 years into her directorship, Goh has adopted some of the leadership qualities of her parents. Her experiences counseling students, managing staff, and being a working parent herself have helped her develop greater patience, maturity, and empathy.

Here, Goh shares with Dance Teacher what she's learned about managing a multicity business, hiring staff, and creating connections that will sustain Goh Ballet Academy for many years to come.

You expanded the academy's reach into Toronto. What did you learn during that process?

As a director, you sometimes think: I don't need to justify my decision. But I think it's very important to explain why we've come to this decision. If someone could only come twice a week instead of four times, we wouldn't accept them. But are they all going to go into a professional ballet company? No, they're not. We're turning some kids away [in Toronto] who would love to dance with us, and it's about reevaluating and accepting that challenge. Allowing them to make some of these decisions and see where it takes them. We can't dilute or offer something substandard, but maybe now [we can offer] more of a choice.

As a teacher yourself, what qualities do you look for in hiring faculty? How do you know if someone is a good fit for your school?

I bring in teachers and choreographers who share our company culture of keeping up a certain standard and supporting the students through positive reinforcement, as opposed to criticism and negativity. I look for people who are generous with their time and generous with their colleagues. [People who] want to share and collaborate. There has to be that team effort and team spirit.

For the junior school, we try to bring in teachers who are certified through the Royal Academy of Dance, so they are able to develop the syllabus. In our senior school, we look at their professional track record and if they have their teaching certification [Vaganova Teacher-retraining program or Certificate in Dance Teaching (Ballet)].



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What advice do you have for other directors and studio owners?

Every opportunity you get to be part of the community, take it. You're spreading the word about you and your business. There will be members of the community who are not interested in ballet at all, but they see you supporting the hospital fundraiser or community event. You ask them, "Is there anything you can do for the arts? Would you like to sponsor a show? Would you like to sponsor food for our cast party? The venue for our volunteer-appreciation party?" Even if it's not money, but it's services, it is just as valuable.

Goh Ballet has been around for almost 50 years. What goals do you have for the academy in the future?

We've been around long enough to say, "How do we, through dance, help our community?" I'm hoping we get into the community and grow our offerings. We want to grow our adult and seniors dance offerings more. We have a goal to bring in more international students [to join our fully accredited youth company]; to expand our performances—right now we do two big performances a year and I'd love to do them four times a year; to find really good partners in the community that align with our values. How do we make dance more accessible without the financial constraints? That would be a big one for me, and that really needs partnership.