

National Ballet of Canada says goodbye to veteran principal dancer

Posted: February 09, 2009, 8:32 PM by Adam McDowell



In 1988, after seeing Chan Hon Goh dance for the first time, a Canadian ballet legend in her prime gave the 19-year-old dancer a piece of advice that stuck with her.

At the National Ballet of Canada's 2009-10 season announcement in Toronto yesterday, Goh thanked "the person who said, 'Everything you do is so right. You hang on to that.'"

Twenty-one years later, that same ballet legend had the duty to announce that Goh, a principal dancer since 1994, will retire as of May 31 after 20 years of with the company. "I'm sorry," said artistic director Karen Kain yesterday, struggling to hold back tears. "I'm not immune to feeling bereft when an artist chooses to end her career. And it always happens too soon in my opinion."

Kain observed, "For someone who appears so fragile and delicate, she has amazing strength." She later added, "I never could believe she could jump the way she did, because her little legs didn't seem to have all that much muscle."

Following Kain's rundown of the company's upcoming season — which, because of the faltering economy, will include a somewhat heavier-than-usual emphasis on the tried-and-true classics — Goh gave reporters and patrons a taste of her upcoming performance in *Romeo and Juliet* next month.

An observer might have agreed with Kain that the wiry dancer has a lot of strong performances left in her, but in an interview following the event, the award-winning dancer revealed that only time-consuming therapy has kept her 40-year-old body in tune since a 2006 car accident in Vancouver that resulted in a spinal injury.

"It didn't seem very serious at the time," said Goh in an interview following the performance, "but I never fully recuperated.

"I know how sad I'm going to be every time I hear certain music," after retiring she continued. Still, Goh will be glad to spend less time training and more with her family.

"I have lived out my dream of becoming a ballerina," she said.

Goh's departure won't be the only change. Executive director Kevin Garland said the company has suffered from the change in the economy, and has had to readjust its expectations for the current fiscal year from a surplus (last year's was around \$170,000) to a break-even situation.

In response to the recession, said Kain in an interview, "I changed a lot of things for this year. I brought back the classics. That wasn't part of my original thinking."

The season kicks off in September with a tour of *The Sleeping Beauty*, which visits Western Canada and Ottawa before arriving in Toronto on Nov. 13. Later ballets include *Swan Lake*, the perennial *The Nutcracker* and John Cranko's 1965 take on *Onegin*.

One offering at the less traditional end of the spectrum is a program consisting of *A Suite of Dances*, *The Four Seasons* and *24 Preludes* by Chopin (the last of which is performed in part in see-through outfits); the pieces were choreographed by James Kudelka, Jerome Robbins and Marie Chouinard, respectively. The season also includes two world premieres, by Jorma Elo and Edmonton-born Aszure Barton.

For full season details visit national.ballet.ca.

[Chan Hon Goh. Photo by Colin O'Connor for National Post.]