

National Ballet Principal Dancer feels part of her will die upon retirement
By: Victoria Ahearn

TORONTO — With her lithe limbs, graceful moves and youthful glow, National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Chan Hon Goh does not look like your typical retiree.

But such is life when you're a ballerina at age 40, especially one with injuries.

Goh, who hurt her neck and upper spine in a car accident in Vancouver three years ago, will deliver her final bow this Sunday in "Giselle" at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

As her parting performance draws near, she says she's cherishing every moment in her tutu.

"At times throughout this rehearsal period when I think, 'I will not be in this process anymore,' it truly gets to my emotions and I feel very sad because I think I'll miss it tremendously," the Beijing-born, Vancouver-raised beauty said in a recent interview.

"It's a voice that I've been able to speak with. It's my way of expressing and so I feel in many ways that a part of me will be dying."

"But not to say that I will not be involved in the arts in the future -- I look forward to that -- it's just that I won't be able to personify the music that I love so much on stage anymore."

Goh decided to retire a year ago after her physiotherapy sessions for her injuries started taking too much time away from her dancing and her family.

"I'd rather not have the situation deteriorate anymore," said Goh, who was injured in the accident just a few months after giving birth to her son, Aveary, now three.

"I thought I'd really like to finish off my dance career on a high note and be completely happy as opposed to letting the injuries get to me."

The dancer joined the National Ballet in 1988 after graduating from Vancouver's Goh Ballet Academy, established by her parents.

She has been a principal dancer with the National Ballet since 1994 and has appeared with numerous companies throughout North America, Asia, Australia and Europe.

In 2002, Goh published her autobiography, "Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina's Life," which was a finalist for the Norma Fleck Award for Canadian Children's Non-Fiction.

She's also won a silver medal at the Genee International Ballet Competition in London and the New Pioneers Arts Award for her contributions to dance in Canada.



People mingle at the opening of the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto. (CP / Aaron Harris)

Goh says she chose to close off her career in the title role of Sir Peter Wright's "Giselle" because it's the character she most identifies with and it's the most challenging.

"I chose 'Giselle' because in no other ballet would a character have to make such a drastic transformation," said Goh. "She goes from an innocent, country girl full of life, love and vitality to -- in the second act -- a spirit from another world where she has to transcend and express to the audience that she floats."

"So going from something very real to something that's very otherworldly, that's a true I guess recognition of what a ballerina can do."

Goh was to take her final bow in "Giselle" this Wednesday at the Four Seasons Centre but a second performance was added for this Sunday due to high demand. After Sunday, her only other performance with the National Ballet will be at the dance company's WHITE HOT fundraising gala at the same venue on June 18.

When Goh leaves the stage for good, she says she plans to become an advocate for the arts, continue her line of dance shoes called Principal by Chan Hon Goh, possibly write another book, and teach.

"I'm very excited about all that life has in store," she said. "Yes, I'm going through some tremendously sad moments when I feel like I will no longer be able to express on stage, but I'm also looking forward to being able to express in a different way, to be able to live life and learn about life as Chan Hon Goh, the woman, and that's a new future and that's something that I look to do full-heartedly."