

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

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A FINAL CURTSY

After 21 years, principal ballerina Chan Hon Goh performs her last dance with the National Ballet. *AL3*



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'Iron Butterfly' prepares for one last dance with the Ballet

Chan Hon Goh says farewell with return to *Giselle*

By MICHAEL CRABB

In the closing moments of *Giselle*, the celebrated Romantic-era ballet, the title character bids a permanent farewell to Albrecht, the repentant, two-timing lover who jilted her in Act I. It's a role National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Chan Hon Goh has danced more times than she can probably remember, but tomorrow, as she returns to *Giselle*, it won't just be Albrecht to whom she's saying goodbye.

After 21 years with the Ballet — 15 of them as a principal dancer — Goh is hanging up her pointe shoes. Her already sold-out final performance on Sunday afternoon will be Goh's farewell to NBC and to the thousands of fans who have followed her long and distinguished career.

For a ballerina, deciding when to quit is perhaps the hardest decision of her career. Ballet history is blemished with the spectres of ballerinas — fetishized and enabled by their sentimental, self-deluding fans — who have clung on too long, becoming desiccated caricatures of their former selves. Others have quit prematurely and lived to regret it.

Goh is 40, by ballerina standards a relatively ripe age. Yet Goh has held up well and might, she says, have continued a few more years had it not been for a whiplash-related injury incurred three years ago. It occurred as Goh was driving to ballet class, reconditioning her body after the birth of her son Aveary. The injury's effects lingered, causing chronic pain and, as Goh puts it, leading to a "constraint of mobility." Goh admits that she was initially in denial about what she had to do. "I kept dealing with it quietly." But the pain and constant visits to the physiotherapist began to take their toll. Eventually, with the advice and support of NBC artistic director Karen Kain, Goh began planning her retirement.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances, Goh observes, she has little cause for regret. Her long career has been illustrious, and she will go out dancing one of her most acclaimed and favourite roles.

Born in Beijing, Goh started a new life when her ballet-teacher parents, Lin Yee and Choo Chiat Goh, settled in Vancouver in 1977. As described in Goh's 2002 autobiography, the family lived humbly in a rented basement apartment as Goh's parents, her principal teachers, struggled to build their business. Today, the Goh Ballet Academy is among Canada's most respected private schools.

In 1988, Chan won a silver medal at the Adeline Genée Competition in England. The English National Ballet offered her a job, but Chan was set on continuing her training at New York's School of American Ballet. The jury that assessed Goh's application for a Canada Council grant was impressed, but conveyed its opinion that she was more than ready to join a company. A few days later, Goh auditioned for the National Ballet where, apart from occasional international guest engagements, notably with The Suzanne Farrell Ballet of Washington, D.C., she has spent her entire dancing career.

At NBC, Goh quickly emerged as a popular and versatile ballerina, delicately poised with a charming stage persona. Yet offstage she was known for her steely professional focus, hard work and determination. Says Karen Kain: "Chan is the epitome of the iron butterfly, incredibly delicate yet incredibly strong, and she's good at everything." And not just as an artist.

In 1996, Goh and her dance teacher/choreographer husband, Chun Che, designed a new pointe shoe and launched a company to make and market it. "Principal by Chan Hon

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Goh," of which Goh is president, has a head office in Vancouver and expanding manufacturing plant in China. Although Goh modestly characterizes it as a "boutique operation," the company sold about 20,000 pairs of Principal shoes last year.

The end of a dance career can be a traumatic experience, and there will likely be tears aplenty on both sides of the footlights on Sunday afternoon. But Goh already has a rich life awaiting her: raising her son, fostering her shoe business and returning to Vancouver to familiarize herself with the workings of her ageing parents' ballet academy. "I love to teach," she says.

The ballet world may be about to witness Goh's farewell to the stage, but they've not heard the last of her. **■** *Giselle* opens at the Four Seasons Centre tomorrow and runs until Sunday. Call 416-345-9595 or visit ballet.ca for tickets and information.

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Chan Hon Goh dancing in *Giselle*.

SIAM RICHARDS