

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

DANCE ■ CHAN HON GOH

The National Ballet loses its 'iron butterfly'

BY PAULA CITRON

It's hard to imagine there will be a dry eye in the house when principal dancer Chan Hon Goh performs her final *Giselle* at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre on Sunday.

In February, an emotional Karen Kain announced at the National Ballet of Canada's annual general meeting that Goh would retire this spring after a glittering 20-year career.

The ballerina told Kain in confidence two years ago that the 2008-09 season would be her last, after the dancer suffered neck injuries in a car accident in 2006. The advance notice gave Kain time to plan. "I did program *Giselle* for her," says Kain, the National's artistic director. "Her interpretation is one of the best there is with her ethereal quality, her beautiful arms and that unbelievable jump. It's amazing how she just seems to spring out of nowhere and hide the power it takes."

The jump is the cornerstone of Goh's brilliance in the role of *Giselle*, one of the most coveted in classical ballet. The ballerina must transform from spirited peasant girl to a ghostly apparition. She has to appear lighter than air, a delicate shade in the afterworld, and



Goh's last performance is Sunday. KEVIN VAN PAASEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

when Goh jumps, it's as if she's floating weightless in space.

"She kills her pointe shoes, working at them, making them so supple that they make no sound when she lands," says her colleague Elena Lobsanova, 22, who counts herself lucky to be noticed by Goh. "In my apprentice year," she says, "Chan corrected me in my centre work during class. She had all that knowledge that she wanted to pass on to me. She is one of the most approachable dancers in the company and you can always ask her questions."

The 40-year-old ballerina is just as elegant offstage as on. Not just Lobsanova finds her approachable; colleagues say she is gracious to everyone through the ranks. Hard-working and disciplined in the studio, she is humble in her craft and generous with her praise, sending hand-written notes to other dancers. She is universally respected, always a diplomat and an island of calm before every performance. Says frequent dance partner Aleksandar Antonijevic: "In this crazy, hard-edged world, there is someone who has stayed a caring human being, and that's Chan."

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She wasn't cut out for the corps de ballet: 'I wanted those spotlight roles'

Kain, however, is quick to underline the Goh dichotomy. "She may look tiny and fragile, but underneath she is strong physically and psychologically. She has will and determination. She's smart and organized. Chan is the quintessential Iron Butterfly."

Fellow principal dancer Heather Ogden calls her "a superpower. Just look at all the things she juggles in her life and always with grace."

Outside of the ballet world, Goh is the mother of Aveyary, her two-year-old son, and an impresario who produces dance shows. Her 2002 autobiography, *Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina's Life*, co-written with Cary Fagan, is aimed at the young reader and portrays Goh as a role model for immigrant children to follow their dream. She and her husband Chun Che, a respected dance teacher,

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also manufacture dance shoes under the company name Principal by Chan Hon Goh at their ever-expanding factory outside Beijing. Che designs the ergonomically correct shoes while Goh supervises the promotion. It is the hard-headed business woman talking when she describes the company's various lines of pointe shoes, ballet slippers and dance boots. "There are 6,000 dance retailers in North America," she says, "and we're in 100 of them. We have a big market to attack."

Dance is the family business. Her mother and father were principal dancers with the National Ballet of China before immigrating to Canada when Chan was 8. In Vancouver, the couple eventually opened the Goh Ballet Academy, which is now one of the most prestigious training institutions in the country. One aunt started an important ballet school, while another founded a dance company, both in Singapore. Her late uncle was the New York-based, much acclaimed choreographer Choo San Goh.

Goh believes it is the vicissitudes of her early life that contributed both to her iron will and her sensitivity. While her parents had had well-established dance careers in China, when they first came to Vancouver, life was hard. Goh's father took a job at a plant gutting fish, her mother worked at a dry cleaners and

her grandmother as a cleaning lady to make ends meet. "On one hand," she says, "I couldn't be a producer or a company executive without having gone through the hard times that strengthened my character. On the other, ... I'm easily hurt and I try not to show it. I'm good at covering up my feelings."

Being an immigrant child was difficult, she says. "I was an outcast in a mostly white neighbourhood. I realized at 8 that you have to prove yourself and be good at what you do, or be laughed at."

"You have to learn the importance of keeping your head above water," she says. "You have to be tough to make your mark." Schooled by her parents, Goh was accepted into the National in 1988. "Lucky for me," she says, "I got noticed right away because I didn't know how to be a corps

de ballet member. I wanted those spotlight roles." She performed a solo in *La Fille mal gardée* in her first year and the pas de deux from *Le Corsaire* in her second, both at Ontario Place.

While still in the corps, Goh danced the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* and *Lise in La Fille mal gardée*. Other great classical roles followed, and Goh was promoted to principal dancer in 1994. She is considered one of the finest classicalists in the company, but she also excels in the neoclassical Balanchine repertoire and has created roles in original works, such as *Summer in James Kudelka's The Four Seasons*.

"When Chan first joined the company," says Magdalena Popa, who coaches the principal dancers, "her father approached me and told me to take care of her, as if he knew I'd be working with her one day. ... She has proved to be

one of the most versatile dancers, whether in strong technique roles like Kitri in *Don Quixote* or the transparent lightness of *Giselle*."

Goh never fully recovered from the injuries she sustained in the car accident, and says it has forced her to recognize she can no longer push herself as she once did. "I need intensive physiotherapy and massage in order to dance," she says. "It's a vicious circle; I push, and everything seizes up again. Although I hide the pain well, I don't want it to become an excuse for bad dancing. I told Karen that I thought *Giselle* would be a good way to say goodbye. By leaving now, I'll be remembered for all the right things."

» Chan Hon Goh performs the lead role in the National Ballet's *Giselle* at the first performance tonight and the final performance on Sunday (www.nationalballet.ca).