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Artistic Director

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Chan
Hon Goh
(centre)
and Zdenek
Konvalina in
Giselle.

Classic tale for dancer with class

With *Giselle*, veteran ballerina Goh says goodbye

It was, in its way, the beginning of the end of a beautiful friendship.

Principal dancer Chan Hon Goh took centre stage at the Four Seasons Centre Wednesday to begin the difficult process of saying goodbye to the legion of fans whose hearts she has won in her years with the National Ballet of Canada.

And frankly, it is hard to imagine a better role to celebrate the career of this still-vibrant artist than the title role in Peter Wright's enduring vision of *Giselle*. A staple with the company since it entered the repertoire back in 1951, *Giselle* is, finally, not merely a classic in the realm of story ballets, but the perfect showcase for a dancer at the top of her form as well.

Which is precisely where Goh sits as she heads into a willing but well-earned retirement — a seasoned artist capable of combining the precision, skill and technique of a lifetime's training with every ounce of the artistry, grace and passion it takes to transform a dancer into a leading lady.

In *Giselle*, of course, the arc of the story is every bit as demanding as the choreography of the master, and in transforming herself from a

simple, even silly maiden — the toast of her village — into a tragic heroine Goh demonstrates conclusively that she is leaving her profession at the top of her form.

With Zdenek Konvalina cast as Albrecht, the young nobleman who masquerades as a peasant to win favour with *Giselle*, Goh hits the stage as a study in youthful femininity, only barely aware, it seems, that every man on stage is madly in love with her.

Principal among those men, of course, is the forester Hilarion (Piotr Stanczyk), whose wooing of the lovely young maiden is suddenly derailed by the arrival of a courtly stranger.

And, of course, it all blows up when *Giselle* discovers that the young stranger with whom she has fallen madly in

love is really a young nobleman who is already engaged to another.

Driven mad by grief, she kills herself, setting in motion a second act where Goh can truly demonstrate the depth of her skills. Given the chance to save a repentant and therefore redeemed Albrecht from the clutches of a gang of deranged spirits called Willis (the shades of women-wronged who roam the earth in search of terri-

ble vengeance), Goh brings a heart-breaking depth and maturity to the role, matching Wright's choreography with a compelling intellectual rigour that will be much missed.

Rather than age, Desmond Heeley's sets and costumes have instead acquired an air of precious and fragile beauty, somewhat in the spirit of Victorian greeting cards — a perfect setting, as it turns out, for a timeless story and a corps of artists determined to make the most of it.

In addition to the superb pairing of Goh and Konvalina, this production also offers stand-out pairings in Jillian Vanstone and Keiichi Hirano and Stacey Shiori Minagawa and Etienne Lavigne, bolstered by individual work from Stanczyk, Victoria Bertram (as *Giselle*'s mother), Heather Ogden as a truly chilling Queen of the Willis and from the artists of the corps de ballet.

But, finally, it is the flame-limbed Goh that Wednesday night's audience will long remember, for although she may have only one last performance with the company (at Sunday's matinee performance of *Giselle*), her long friendship with a Toronto audience will remain in our hearts and minds, one suspects, for a long, long time.

It may have been the beginning of the end of a beautiful friendship, but just the beginning — as long as those memories remain, so too will the friendship.



John
Coulbourn
STAGE

★★★★★

Giselle

The Four Season
Centre

Starring:
The National Ballet
of Canada

Choreographer:
Peter Wright