



by Michael Crabb

Exit Centre Stage

Chan Hon Goh retires from the National Ballet of Canada



Near the end of the National Ballet of Canada's 1993-1994 season, then Artistic Director Reid Anderson summoned to his office one of the company's most recently minted principals, Chan Hon Goh. Anderson told Goh he was "very, very happy" with her dancing. It was just the encouragement the self-confessedly insecure, approval-seeking young ballerina craved; but then came less comforting news. Anderson told Goh that he was considering her for *Giselle*, but was "not convinced" she had the necessary acting ability.

As she recounts in *Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina's Life* — Goh's 2002 autobiography written with Cary Fagan — she was crushed. She longed to dance *Giselle*, yet Goh, too, harboured doubts about her capacity to go beyond the steps and inhabit the role dramatically.

Typically, Goh decided to do something about it and spent the summer studying privately with an acting coach. Feeling the need to achieve some sort of personal breakthrough, she also for the first time in her adult life — and with an imprudent lack of forethought — had her lovely long black hair cut short.

Bad move! When the casting sheet for *Giselle* was posted, Goh found her name among the chosen few; a thrill for her,

but a headache for the wig department.

Goh made her *Giselle* debut that fall of 1994 for a student audience in Saskatoon. Later during the company's Western Canada tour she performed the role in her adopted home city, Vancouver, with family, friends and much media in attendance. After that show, Anderson took her aside. "I'm glad I was wrong," he graciously conceded.

Skip forward almost 15 years to another city, Toronto. It's the afternoon of Sunday, May 31, 2009. The magnificent, 2,000-seat Four Seasons Centre has long been sold out. There is excitement in the air. Diehard fans can be seen bearing bouquets, tightly wrapped to improve their projectile chances across the opera house's wide orchestra pit come curtain-call time.

It is Goh's official farewell to the company she's called home for 21 years and she's dancing *Giselle*, partnered by the estimable 30-year-old Zdenek Konvalina. They've already danced the May 27 opening performance without benefit of a full stage rehearsal, as evidenced by the occasional rocky moment; but, four days later, with the emotional stakes as high as they can get, Goh and Konvalina click like a partnership made in heaven and she dances out her career in a blaze of artistic glory.



Goh did not *dance* Giselle. She *was* Giselle. When, in the quiet closing moments, Giselle vanishes forever, the audience is so hushed they can hear Konvalina release a spontaneous, heartrending sob. Albrecht's remorse doesn't get more real than that.

If Anderson had seen Goh dance that May afternoon, he would have been very, very glad he was wrong!

In the circumstances, you could have expected Goh to indulge her emotions in a flood of tears during the almost 15-minute standing ovation. Instead, laden with flowers, surrounded onstage by her colleagues, family and — to the delight of Aveary, her three-year-old son — a sea of red balloons, she is radiantly happy, enjoying a moment of triumph that even

National Ballet of Canada Artistic Director Karen Kain had worried might not happen.

Goh, unbeknown to most of her audience, had achieved her goal to dance her way to retirement in her favourite role despite the impediment of a chronic injury.

In 2006, Goh was in a car accident in Vancouver. She was driving to a ballet class, in the process of reconditioning her body some two months after the birth of Aveary. Goh incurred what she describes as a "whiplash type" injury. From then on she experienced a nagging pain that decreased the mobility of her neck and shoulders. It took steely determination and a great deal of physiotherapy to keep her going.

Ironically, it had been a car accident that had effectively ended the performing career of her husband, Che Chun, at a similar age more than 20 years earlier. He made an almost seamless transition into full-time teaching. Goh, however, still wanted to perform, yet she knew it was time to start planning the end of her dance career.

"Without the injury," says Goh, now 40, "I might have continued two or three more years, but dealing with the pain and going for therapy was cutting into my family time and I knew this could not go on."

Her impending retirement was announced early this year. Goh, who had confided in Kain early on, admits that once the news became official the reality of her decision was emotionally roiling. "I had some crippling moments dancing Juliet in March. I really crumbled emotionally." Yet, despite the sadness of the ballet itself, Goh's emotions were buoyant for her farewell.

"I imagined I'd be more nervous. There had been such a buildup to that last show. I wanted to dance it really well because I knew it would be such a lasting memory. In fact, there were no nerves. I felt so at home on that stage, really into the character. It was just a great two hours. It truly felt wonderful. Now I'm ready to move on."

Facing challenges has been a way of life for Goh. Although she was born — February 1, 1969 — under what her father, Choo Chiat Goh, considered the auspicious omen of a rising moon, glowing red, it was in Beijing in the midst of Mao Zedong's tumultuous Cultural Revolution. Her Singapore-born father and Beijing-born mother, Lin Yee Goh, were both principals in the Central (now National) Ballet of China.

They lived in relatively favourable conditions in a walled artists' compound, but nevertheless shared a two-bedroom apartment with another family.

Lin Yee, plagued by rheumatoid arthritis, switched from performing to teaching soon after Chan, their only child, was born. The classically trained Chiat, meanwhile, grew increasingly frustrated with the diet of folk-based "revolutionary" ballets he was obliged to perform and by 1976 was given permission to leave for Canada, ostensibly to care for his ailing grandmother in Vancouver. His wife and daughter watched Chiat leave with no assurance they'd be able to join him, an emotional wrench that caused Chan recurrent pangs of lonely anxiety even into adulthood.

A year later, the family was reunited. Chiat had launched what was to become



a very successful teaching career in Vancouver and was soon formulating plans for a company. Chan, however, struggling to learn English and subjected to racial slurs in her largely white school, faced a difficult adjustment, but her stubbornness only fortified her determination to excel.

Oddly, dancing was not among those areas in which there seemed an urgent need to excel. Her parents, preoccupied with building their new business, the Goh Ballet Academy, did not detect in their daughter any natural dancing talent. In China, they'd sent her to piano classes from an early age, not imagining that those long hands and articulate fingers might one day grace a ballet stage. In Vancouver, there were singing lessons and more piano.

It was an aunt, Soo Nee, who gave Chan her first ballet classes, until her parents launched a children's programme. Even then, as her teachers, they did not consider their daughter a likely prospect. Her turnout was poor and she lacked flexibility; insuperable shortcomings, so they thought.

It took an aged former Diaghilev Ballet star, Anton Dolin, to remove the scales from their eyes. Dolin, whom Chiat had met during a brief sojourn in London as a teenage ballet student, was in Vancouver and came to the Gohs' studio. He observed a children's class and singled out Chan. "She is going to be a beautiful dancer," Dolin told the Gohs confidentially.

After that, Chan's parents gradually accepted that their daughter seemed determined to pursue a career in dance. She made her public debut at age 13, dancing *The Butterfly Lovers* with another Chinese émigré — and former Central Ballet principal — almost two decades her senior, Che Chun. He'd arrived in Vancouver in 1978, danced with the Gohs' semi-professional company and already made a strong impression on Chan. By 13, a child's admiration had turned into a major crush. By her late teens, it evolved into a loving bond that has endured ever since.

At age 17, Chan, who had a singular lack of success in regional ballet competitions at home, entered the Prix de Lausanne and was among the list of finalists awarded a dance scholarship. Chan opted for a summer course with Rosella Hightower in Cannes. At age 18, she entered the Royal Academy of Dancing's Adeline Genée Competition and took home a silver medal.

Considering her options, Goh decided on further study at the School of American Ballet in New York. She applied for a grant from the Canada Council and was auditioned in Toronto. One of the jurors was James Kudelka, formerly a National Ballet of Canada soloist and by 1988 a rising choreographer based in Montreal with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Kudelka felt Goh was already company material and she was urged to audition for the National Ballet of Canada. Although, over-ambitiously, she'd imagined leveraging her recent competition suc-

cesses into a soloist contract, Goh agreed to join the company's corps.

In addition feeling lonely in Toronto, she was unhappy in the corps. "It felt like dancing in a cage," she later recalled. The advent of Reid Anderson as director the following season soon changed things. She was given more and more featured roles and steadily promoted through the ranks, achieving her goal of principal in January 1994.

As a dancer, Goh projected a combination of fragility and strength. With her willowy arms she could seem as light as air, but she had a gazelle-like jump and solid technique that allowed her to command a broad repertoire. As she matured, Goh also shed what had sometimes seemed a controlled veneer of artifice to emerge as a compelling dance-actress, as much at home in comic as tragic roles.

Offstage Goh was renowned for her professional focus, discipline and determination. "Chan is the epitome of the iron butterfly," says Kain. "Incredibly delicate yet incredibly strong and she's good at everything."

Her outside guest engagements took her around the globe and included a notable succession of appearances with the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. She danced Peter Martins' *Swan Lake* in Copenhagen at the Royal Danish Ballet. She produced and headlined a touring troupe to Asia. She also reached out to Toronto's Asian community, earning a 2005 New Pioneers Award and

producing a number of Chinese New Year celebrations for the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto.

Goh also had interests beyond performing. In 1996, she and her husband designed a line of dance footwear and launched Principal

by Chan Hon Goh. Headquartered in Vancouver and with an expanding manufacturing plant in China, Principal sold about 20,000 pairs of pointe shoes, ballet slippers and specialty boots last year.

Although the family's new base will be Vancouver — Che Chun will return as a teacher to the Goh Academy —

Chan intends to remain “bi-coastal,” retaining a place in Toronto. “I’d like to

keep connected to the National Ballet somehow. I’d like to

contribute artistically as a teacher and coach. I know

the repertoire so well. And

I’d like to help in

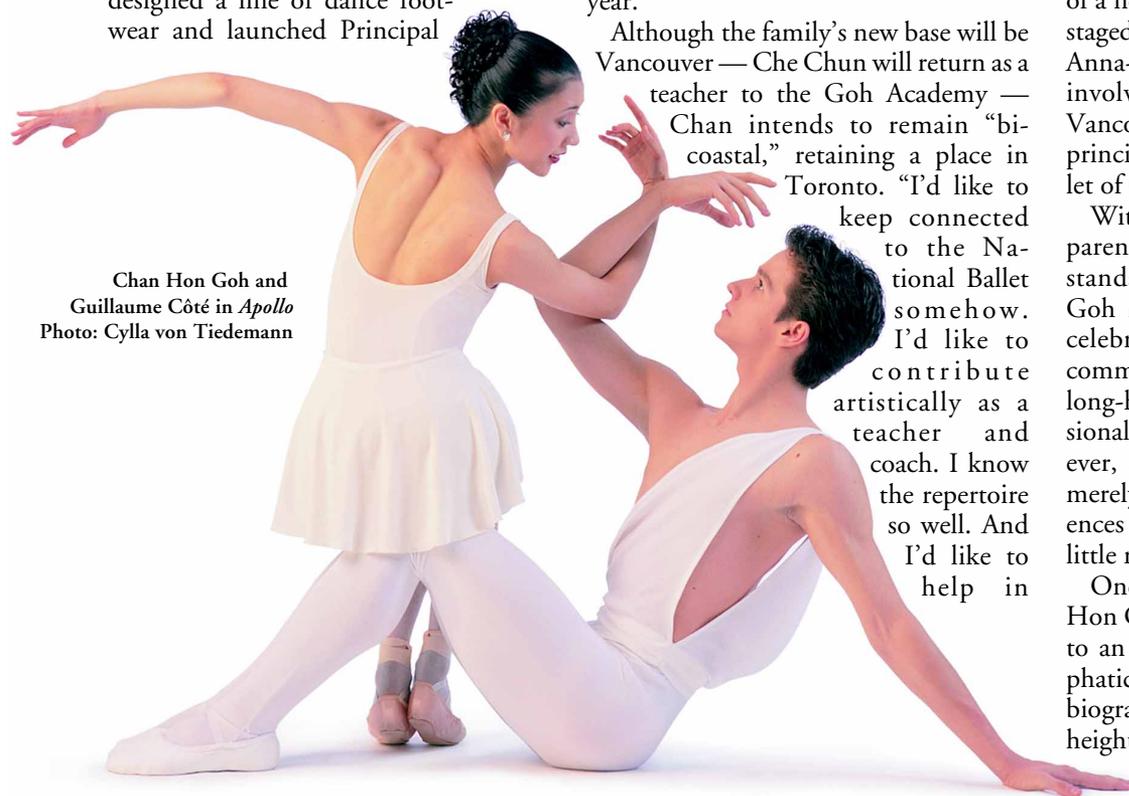
building a bigger audience for the company, specifically within the Asian community.”

Goh will also be extending her artistic management skills as the co-coordinator of a new Goh Academy *Nutcracker* to be staged this December by Canadian-born Anna-Marie Holmes. The project will involve talented students from many Vancouver ballet schools and feature a principal couple from the National Ballet of Canada for the opening night.

With Ballet British Columbia in apparent hiatus, there has been understandable speculation about whether Goh might deploy her experience and celebrity to rouse Vancouver’s Asian community and resurrect her parents’ long-held ambition to launch a professional company. At the moment, however, she deflects any such suggestion, merely venturing that Vancouver audiences do seem to yearn for something “a little more classical.”

One thing is certain. Although Chan Hon Goh’s days as a ballerina have come to an end, her career in dance has emphatically not. As she wrote in her autobiography: “For me, to reach for new heights is to be alive.” ▼

Chan Hon Goh and
Guillaume Côté in *Apollo*
Photo: Cylla von Tiedemann



Exit Stage Left: Nehemiah Kish

The departure of tall, talented National Ballet of Canada principal Nehemiah Kish to the Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen last summer may have alarmed his National Ballet fans, but it was far from a spur-of-the-moment decision on the Michigan-born dancer’s part. Kish had been mulling over the idea ever since graduating from Canada’s National Ballet School nine years ago.

During his National Ballet School student years, Kish had been taught by a number of visiting Royal Danish Ballet luminaries and had performed Bournonville choreography. On graduation, Kish took an intensive summer course in Copenhagen before joining the National Ballet where he quickly rose through the ranks to become a principal at age 23.

As an offshoot of its Bournonville tradition, the Royal Danish Ballet remains a powerhouse of male dancing. Historically, it has been a major exporter of great male dancers, among them former National Ballet of Canada Artistic Director Erik Bruhn. So it was no great surprise when a more recent Royal Danish Ballet alumnus, Nikolaj Hübbe, arrived in Toronto in 2003 as a National Ballet guest to dance the title lead in Cranko’s *Onegin*. Kish shared the stage with Hübbe, dancing the role of *Onegin*’s friend Lensky.

Hübbe returned to the National Ballet to teach, to set an arrangement of Bournonville variations and, in the fall of 2005, to stage a new production of *La Sylphide*. Kish was among those picked to dance the lead, James. A mutual admiration was taking shape.

So when Hübbe retired from New York City Ballet in early 2008 to return to Copenhagen and become artistic director of the company that had launched his career, Kish made the decision to contact him and sound out the possibilities.

“Working with Nikolaj made a huge impression on me,” says Kish. “So when I heard he was taking over as director in Copenhagen, I decided to act on something that had been at the back of my mind for several years.”

Kish arrived in Copenhagen last summer and was soon off on tour with the Royal Danish Ballet, making his company debut in *La Sylphide* in Beijing. Back in Denmark, he began learning new roles for an evening of Kylián works and danced the male leads in new productions of *Giselle* and *Cinderella*, followed by the *Nutcracker* and *Onegin*. Then came an all-Balanchine programme in March, followed by a May tour to Japan with *Don Quixote*.

Kish, still listed in the National Ballet of Canada roster for the 2008-2009 season, returned last December to appear in *The Nutcracker* and again in early March this year for *Romeo and Juliet*. But how much longer can Kish’s Toronto fans expect to see him?

“I live here in Denmark now,” says Kish. “I’d like to retain the connection although it’s harder to tell how realistic that is. Sometimes you have to make a career decision hoping you’re not closing any doors.”

