

# Standing aplomb after all these years

## Goh ballet academy reaches milestone

BY DANA GEE, THE PROVINCE OCTOBER 7, 2012

In 1977, Choo Chiat Goh, Lin Yee Goh and their eight-year-old daughter Chan left their Beijing home and crossed the Pacific in a move to Vancouver.

Upon arrival, the Gohs, both former principal dancers for the Chinese National Ballet, soon realized they wanted to contribute to the success of their community's dance scene by starting their own academy.

"About a year after we arrived in Canada, my parents started the school," recalls Chan Goh. "My grandmother, who came a year after we did, basically brought me up because they were so busy with starting the school. They truly believed that Vancouver needed a professional training ground for dancers."

Today, the Goh Ballet Academy is a cultural institution marking its 35th anniversary. Chan, who enjoyed a long career as a prima ballerina for the National Ballet of Canada, said, that at the time, however, her parents were confronted by naysayers.

"People were very skeptical in the beginning. They wondered, how could Chinese dancers teach a western art form?" Chan explains.



*Mr. and Mrs. Goh dancing with the National Ballet of China in the ballet, The Fountain of Bakhchisarai. (1965)*

Bakhchisa-rai, a Russian ballet based on an Alexander Pushkin poem, was the dance that drew her parents together as a couple on and off the stage.

Their artistic collaboration came to an end when Chan's mother, at age 28, developed rheumatoid arthritis and had to stop dancing. Luckily, she was able to transition into the teaching.

"She found her way and became an excellent teacher," Chan says.

Now, the Gohs leave the day-to-day running of their precious school to their daughter, who, since 2009, has served as the school's director.



"(My parents) really had to prove themselves. They worked all the time and they taught everybody from the four-year-olds up to the adults."

More than three decades later, the schoolhouse on Main Street is home to more than 450 students at any given time.

The seeds of the school's success were planted in the early 1960s when Choo Chiat and Lin Yee met and fell in love while dancing for the Chinese Ballet.

Chan says The Fountain Of

"They still get involved," says Chan, who regularly welcomes her parents into the dance studio. "Now, they just have a much more relaxed schedule. I am really fortunate to have that mentorship around me - that reference around me. They come in and get involved, watch the progress of dancers. We talk about programs and plans and discuss repertoire."

But Chan points out that her many years away, dancing and developing her own style, is what gives the venerable school a broader base from which to work.

"I feel this huge responsibility to the school, a lot is self-inflicted, but I feel responsibility to not only keep the standards up but to keep raising the bar," she says.

"One of the key reasons that my parents like about me directing the school is that I bring my own influence, ideas into the school."

While the students are all brought in with the idea of developing and growing dancers, Chan points out that not every little girl is going to grow up to dance Swan Lake for a national company. Perhaps, they might develop an understanding and a love for dance and will carry that on into adulthood.

"We are developing not only dancers but developing future audiences for the art form," Chan says.

"The time that they are with us has to be really well spent and that they grow as dancers and lovers of dance.

"I don't think there is a formula except that we really pride ourselves on giving our students whatever they need - individualizing programs so they can bring out their personal best. I think that really is a strength for us."

And certainly these days that plan is paying off as members from the school raked in accolades at international competitions from Korea to Croatia.

"The first thing that strikes you, when you enter the GBA on Main Street, is the joy and the laughter. And, isn't that what it's all about?" asks Frank Andersen,

former artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet who was in Vancouver working with Goh dancers.

"Because behind the hard work and definite discipline there must be time for happiness, and after all, that is what, [the] audience wants to see on stage - that the dancers are having great time - and they sure are here."

Anderson is also working with the Goh staff on planning June's official anniversary gala, which is one of the many events that's in the works to help celebrate the school.



*Students of the Goh Ballet Academy (2009)*

On the list of plans so far are performances by Goh dancers at events around the city and of course the company's big to-do, The Nutcracker on Dec. 19-23.

The Goh seniors are in on the plans for this milestone mark as well as other GBA decisions. So, that said, you have to ask, does the dance family ever lock horns?

Chan pauses for a few seconds before answering.

"It is really hard to say, most of the time we agree on artistic plans," she said a slight chuckle in her voice. "My parents are artists in the truest sense of the go-with-the-flow idea. I like that idea, but someone has to say we have to do it this way."

So, all these years later, do Chan's parents still dance together?

"This is a secret because, dancers usually never go dancing ever as a pastime," laughs Chan. "But there is a lot done (in front) of a DVD player. Usually in a living room."

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