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Putting emotions in motion

by Ashley Joannou Friday February 19, 2016 »

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Submitted Photo/David Cooper



One of Canada's top ballerinas, Chan Hon Goh, will be teaching a master class in Whitehorse next week at Northern Lights School of Dance.

For ballet dancers, certain routines, steps, techniques and exercises are burned into muscle memory.

Those who want to excel at the craft spend years in classes and in front of mirrors learning how to gracefully bend, hold and lift their bodies.

For Chan Hon Goh, a former prima ballerina at the National Ballet of Canada, the ability to layer emotions into those moves can make a big difference on stage.

“You can’t just be doing straight exercises on stage,” she said.

“All of a sudden, on stage, you’re expected to perform and be a character, tell a story or personify the music.”

Goh will be in Whitehorse next week giving a master class in ballet to local dancers. The class will focus on putting emotional elements into their everyday training.

“That’s a major difference, I find, when you have a dancer on stage just doing dance steps and an artist on stage who can actually make people cry or give people an emotional attachment, feel part of the story and be able to touch people,” she said.

The visit north is part of a national tour Goh’s been running since 2014. Whitehorse is the last stop on this year’s eight-city run.

“Each city is a new experience. Even though the days go by fast it really feels like a lot has been accomplished,” she said.

Submitted Photo/Kharen Hill



Goh retired from the National Ballet of Canada in 2009

One of the country’s most recognized and respected ballerinas, Goh retired in 2009 after dancing with The National Ballet of Canada for more than 20 years.

Goh joined the company in 1988 and became principal dancer in 1994. She was the first-ever principal dancer of Chinese heritage in the company’s history.

She was also the first Canadian to receive the silver medal at the Genee International Ballet Competition in London, England.

Whitehorse’s master class is happening at Northern Lights School of Dance on Tuesday, Feb. 23.

Dancers taking part range in age from 10 to 18. Two small groups of about 10 dancers each will get an hour with Goh, meaning there will be time for one-on-one attention.

The idea of connecting with emotions

after dancing with the company for over 20 years.

on stage is not a new concept and is usually part of good instruction, she said.

But younger dancers learning ballet often want to see improvements that are tangible. That means being able to go from doing two turns to doing three turns or getting your leg from 90 degrees to 120 degrees, she said.

“That’s something you can see. Whereas the emotional thing, that’s something that the audience and your teacher probably can see and you yourself don’t even really realize it, but you need to have that be nurtured and cultivated.”

In her class a 12-year-old dancer isn’t going to be asked to go too deep into a personal life experience to bring out the emotion, Goh said. The idea is to just get them thinking along that line when they dance.

“What I would do with them is have them tell me, ‘What do you hear in this music?’ Using music as the key to draw out certain emotions.”

Since retiring, Goh runs the Goh Ballet Academy in Vancouver. It’s a prestigious school her parents, ballet stars themselves, founded in 1978.

Any student who takes one of Goh’s master classes as part of this tour could earn a \$5,000 scholarship for the summer intensive program at the academy.

Goh said she’s looking for students with talent and the right positive energy.

“Time and time again you’re always being told what you can do better and how you can improve,” she said.

“So I want to make sure that within all of this they are able to still retain and gain this spirit, this level of belief in themselves that can’t be suppressed.”

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