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Chan Hon Goh on Change and Giving Back

The principal dancer turned teacher and her cross-Canada master class tour By Emma Kerson

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Vancouver's Chan Hon Goh's teaching attire resembles an M. C. Escher drawing...



Chan Hon Goh at the Goh Ballet Academy / Photo by Kharen Hill

You inspired me to ask you the same question you just asked your Master Class Series students, so I'll start by simply asking, do you have a favourite ballet?

That's so difficult because at different stages of my career I had different favourites. I'll give you my top three. My all-time favourite has to be Sleeping Beauty.

Romeo and Juliet is in the top three because later, that too was so much more than just doing the steps. I needed to convey emotion.

And then I danced Giselle for my retirement. I love Giselle, but I also love John Cranko's Onegin.

I won't hold it against you. For you, what is dance, and what is it in your life currently?

Dance has changed. When I was a dancer performing onstage, that was the priority in my life.

What I was going to rehearse later in the day dictated what I would have for lunch. It was very consuming that way, not even consciously.

So now, what does dance mean? Dance means something so extraordinary and so beautiful because now when I'm not dancing, I have to be real about everything.

Your career with The National Ballet of Canada spanned over two decades. Over that time, did you notice anything change in the landscape in terms of what it means to be a professional ballet dancer?

Yes, I started as a teenager, so that's twenty-one years! It's always changing. It changes with the way society evolves.

More resources. That's fantastic. The more you know as a dancer, the easier it gets, or the more difficult it gets?

I think it gets easier because you've been through it all a few times. But I also think that my own expectations and standards rise, so then it's still just as hard because you're trying to constantly get better!

I guess in ballet there is such a hierarchy within the company, and the more you do rise, it is more of a public rise.

Yes! And there are expectations from the other side. But it's about the fulfillment to keep growing as an artist. Sometimes you don't see what you're doing, and sometimes you do see and you want to make it better.

You decided to transition and now you're the director of the Goh Ballet Academy. Was there a moment when you realized you were ready to retire, and what made you take that next step into teaching and mentoring?

I always knew there were certain repertoires and things I wanted to accomplish in my career. I was so fortunate to have done those and to have had such wonderful support from my company, from my directors, from other artists.

You, in a sense, ended up taking over the family business!

Yeah, and I didn't know how to do anything. It was very different. I'm now just starting to trust my instincts.

And to be a dancer is to be constantly learning. It never really stops throughout our lives.

This is a key component to why I'm doing the master class tour, because I feel so fulfilled to be able to pass on some knowledge to young dancers.

Your tour is so vast geographically. I mean, you're going up to Whitehorse.

That's a first for me! I'm really looking forward to it. I don't think many people know the arts scene in Whitehorse!

Well, I certainly don't. It's exciting that you're travelling to so many places. Do you notice a change in dancers when you go to different locations, or is ballet, ballet everywhere?

No, I notice, to generalize a bit, certain cities have higher standards, but that's not a fair evaluation because that's just dependent on who came to the class.

If there is one thing you learned throughout your career that you want to instill in these students of your Master Class Series, what is it?

I think the most crucial thing is that there is such a difference between ego and confidence. As dancers, no matter how old you are, you're told all the time that you're doing it wrong and how you should be doing it better.

Especially at this young age you're teaching.

Yeah, it's so important. Everyone deserves to dance and to live this dream. So don't let people shoot you down. But I started this by saying there's such a difference between confidence and ego.

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