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Opinion: Dance evolves, but artistry risks suffering

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By Chan Hon Goh

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**Chan Hon Goh is director of the Goh Ballet Academy and former prima ballerina of the National Ballet of Canada.**

With National Dance Week set for April 22-29, it's a good time to take a look at the dance scene across Canada and how it has evolved in the last five years.

Dance remains an important component of Vancouver culture, and only recently our city played host to the Vancouver International Dance Festival, attracting hundreds of dance enthusiasts to watch many performances from a wide range of companies, including Goh Ballet, the academy and youth company I direct.

As someone who has been a principal dancer and producer of dance in Canada for more than 20 years, I've had the privilege to see the evolution in attitudes and priorities of dancers. I now travel at least three times a year to adjudicate as a jury member, audit international dance competitions, or for dance festivals, and therefore continue to see these changing trends

internationally.

I see aspiring dancers aged 9-28 strive for placement, potential job offers, scholarships and affirmation of their potential abilities.

For dancers of all ages, higher jumps, more pirouettes and looser limbs is the goal. The sky is the limit when it comes to technique, but what about artistry?

Artistry, the essence that separates dance from sport or any other physical activity, is increasingly neglected. Young dancers tend to favour and admire demonstrations of superior technique, during which a dancer can defy gravity, spin for many counts and have extensions that mimic contortionists. Why shouldn't they? These steps are incredibly hard and take much dedication and practice. One certainly cannot be considered a good dancer if one doesn't have technique.

So what is the problem? These dancers are very dedicated, focused and have sacrificed plenty of regular teen fun as well as family vacations just to be better. As the saying goes, "Practice makes perfect."

But does it? It's worth remembering that perfection does not exist in dance. Dance is an art form and doing endless repetitions will not make one an artist.

The missing component for the majority of young dancers today is the lack of consideration to the meaning behind the steps. What are you saying with that movement? As impressive as it is to accomplish remarkable feats of technical brilliance, to be an artist, one needs to transcend to a higher level and touch our emotions.

With emerging choreographers trying to break new ground, dancers must be much more adaptable and better versed in many genres of dance. This is a change from the past where it was acceptable, and encouraged, to study one particular form of dance in great detail and become an expert in that particular genre, whether that was ballet, contemporary, jazz, tap or any other form of choice.

To be versatile and keep pace with industry demands, dancers need to perform repertoire from different centuries during the same performance program. Is quantity over quality the way to "make it" in the dance world today?

The answer is no. Regardless of whether the dancer is from Moscow, New York or Vancouver, the answer remains the same.

Young dancers should not let the value of higher technical standards mask the invaluable need for artistic abilities when building a meaningful career. When I work with young dancers, it can be challenging to have them to think about the era in which the dance was created, the musical phrasings or the character's persona when their mind is on getting four instead of three pirouettes.

"We don't want to see a machine on stage," I would say. "We need the pirouette to be part of the dance and not the dance to be about the pirouette."

The pressure on today's dancers is stronger than ever before with the competition for places in dance companies and productions being fierce. Dancers strive to tackle multiple dance forms simultaneously as well as have the technical skill of the highest level.

However, I believe young Canadian dancers can make a greater impression and contribution on the international scene if they remember dance is an art and not lose sight of the artistry or meaning behind the dance. Capturing the emotion behind the movement is key.

Chan Hon Goh is director of the Goh Ballet Academy and former prima ballerina of the National Ballet of Canada. For National Dance Week, she is playing host to master classes in Vancouver on April 25 ([www.gohballet.com](http://www.gohballet.com))

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