



Shawn Conner - Updated December 19th 2018

Goh's Nutcracker builds community as it grows

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Goh Ballet: The Nutcracker

When: Dec. 21-23

Where: Queen Elizabeth Theatre

Tickets: from \$37.50 at gohnutcracker.com

Ten years ago, Chan Hon Goh had just come back to Vancouver after dancing with the National Ballet of Canada. The dancer/choreographer realized that the city was without a Nutcracker to call its own.

"There was no regular presentation," Goh said. "It varied from the Moscow to Alberta Ballet to RWB. It was always a touring production, but for 2009 there was no other Nutcracker. So we decided to make one. We didn't want the city to miss anything."

Goh set about building her Nutcracker out of the Goh Ballet Academy, the school her parents founded shortly after emigrating to the city in 1977. Both had been dancers with the National Ballet of China in Beijing. In 2010, Goh took over the school, though she says her parents "would come and advise and consult."

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"There are so many pieces to this puzzle," she said. "I was quite naïve my first year. I had just stopped my performance career and I was learning the ropes, and thought, nobody knows how to do this. We're going to give it our best shot and put everything into it. After the first year I thought, now we know what we're doing. We have this wonderful template and we'll repeat that because it's the Nutcracker. But it's never the same year to year."

The show has stayed true to the original choreography, by celebrated Mission-raised dance artist Anna-Marie Holmes. But costumes and sets have changed or been added. This year, for instance, sees a new sleigh for the Snowflakes scene.

Some cast members date back to the first Goh Nutcracker, but the show is welcoming new dancers too. In late spring, Goh holds an open audition that's open to all dancers in the Lower Mainland.

"We love to have this be a community experience, and bring on new dancers in various roles, in various different age groups and calibres," Goh said. Performers age in range from six (as Mice) to professional actors in their 60s. (Goh Academy students range in age from six to 16.)

In addition, the production welcomes international guests, including two from the National Ballet of China and two from American Ballet Theatre.

"Our Herr Drosselmeyer is from Germany, our Sugar Plum Fairy is from New York, the Snow Queen from Beijing, and Mother Ginger is played by a local drag queen, Simone."

As with previous productions, Vancouver Opera Orchestra performs the score live. But this year will likely feature more musicians than in the past, owing to the generous orchestra pit at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

"It's a huge milestone for us," Goh said of playing the theatre, the production's largest home yet.

"It's quite daunting as well. There's a lot of pressure."

She first performed there as a ballet student in her teens, and later came back to dance in touring productions with the National Ballet.

Now, as Nutcracker heads into its tenth anniversary, Goh can look back with pride at building an annual tradition with enough of a following to expand into the local arts landmark.

"It was a dream of ours to build a Nutcracker that the community here could grow up with and follow," she said. "They know the intricacies, and see us mount it every year. That was the dream behind it."