

## Ballerina Chan Hon Goh Turns to Teaching

By Kelly Ryan, *Parents Canada*

Photograph by: Dina Goldstein



Prima ballerina Chan Hon Goh trades in her tutu and takes on the family teaching business.



it's May 30, 2009, and three-year-old Aveary Che leaps with glee as flowers and balloons rain down around him on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre in Toronto. The tribute is for his mom, Chan Hon Goh, principal ballerina of the National Ballet of Canada. She retired from the stage that night. In a career spanning more than 20 years, Goh danced all her favourite roles – from Juliet, to Odette/Odile (Swan Lake) to the title role in Giselle. But now she wants to devote more time to that most important role –mother. That said, Chan has not left the dance world completely. How could she? Dance is in her blood. Both her parents performed with the National Ballet of China, but fled the country

in 1977 during the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after emigrating to Vancouver, they established the now internationally renowned Goh Ballet Academy. Back then, they knew their young daughter Chan enjoyed dance classes, but didn't recognize her passion to pursue a career on stage. They weren't sure she had the talent, but encouraged her to do the best she could. She knew she would have to prove herself to them and to others.

Now after one of the most celebrated careers in Canadian ballet, she is the new director of her parents' school. It is truly a family affair. Her husband of 13 years, Chun Che, is vice principal. A former principal dancer with the National Ballet of China, he made the transition to teacher and choreographer after a car accident ended his performing days. And little Aveary now takes dance classes himself. Chan talks to ParentsCanada about her transitional year, and as an educator has some advice for parents struggling to maintain balance in their children's lives.

**PC: How has your first year of retirement from performing been? Was it a big adjustment?**



CHG: It's a huge transition, and not just the obvious, in terms of not performing as part of my daily regime. It's also finding who I am as mentor, and as somebody who makes decisions instead of taking direction.

**PC: Which role do you prefer – the one being told what to do, or the one telling others what to do?**

CHG: Both have their ups and downs. When I was a ballerina, my big responsibility was looking after myself. And the priority was me. Everybody catered to me. "The lighting is too bright – dim it. My dressing room is too far from the stage – move me." Now I'm in a role where I want to create the formula that works for them, because that was created for me, and it allowed me to perform at my very best.

**PC: How much was being a mom part of your decision to retire?**

CHG: It certainly had a role in helping me make my decision. I understood that when I decided to have a child, my priorities would be different. But I was a dancer first, before I was a mom. And dancing takes first priority to a dancer. In terms of being a mom, and a woman, I felt that I was missing out a bit too, and that sense of guilt was always with me – because I don't get to tuck him in, or I don't get to share time with him because I've got to go and rehearse.

**PC: Aveary has seen you dance?**

CHG: He saw me dance in Romeo and Juliet and my final performance of Giselle. Now being a typical mother, I was always afraid my child would be the one to scream in the audience, and I wouldn't put it past Aveary to shout "Mommy!" So I kind of restricted him coming to my shows. But it was going to be my last show, and I wanted him to see it. So the impressions of me dancing for him are those. He would say "Put your ballerina skirt on, let's dance together." He would put on any music – if it's ABBA, if it's Rod Stewart, we'd be twirling and dancing in the living room.

**PC: And does he take classes?**

CHG: Yes, because the music just spoke to him. He always moved to music, so even at age three-and-a-half I had him in a creative dance class, just to release some steam. He started last September with a pre-school class here, and he will have his first performance with his class – he'll be a little lamb.

**PC: Will you watch him as a dancer or as a mom?**

CHG: I can't help but assess him as a dancer, and it's so bad! Because then I'll see all the faults, and then I'll be like – oh who cares, he's not going to go into dance.

**PC: Do you want him to?**

CHG: I only want him to if he wants to, and I think that's the key. I think dance is one of those things that has to come from the heart. You have to be so self-motivated and you have to love it so much. I really encourage every parent to expose their child to dance at an early age. It helps their posture, it helps their discipline, it helps them work as a group, and in taking instruction. But then at the age of 12 or 13, saying 'well, how many hours of dance should we do' – it has to come from them.

**PC: We have parents across Canada who are getting their kids ready to go back to school, and they're struggling with that. How much can you let your child decide about extracurricular activities without fearing their lives are going to become unbalanced?**

CHG: That's one of the huge responsibilities of being a parent, wondering if I've made the right decision. When you have someone who just loves to dance, that is your key, first of all. In my mind, over scheduling are having children do activities that they're really not that into. But when it comes to dance or something they're passionate about, and their bodies and their teachers say they're capable of doing more – don't deprive them of the chance to be at their best. Certainly take care of their health and make sure they don't get behind academically, but don't say 'you're doing too many hours of dance' – because maybe that's really what it takes to become a professional, and you're really holding the child back.

**PC: How do you avoid putting pressure on your students, and watching for parents who do that?**

CHG: I see it coming from the parents. I sometimes overhear in hallways, the child in tears saying 'I have a headache' and the mom saying 'You get back into class.' And then I overhear other conversations like 'You're not doing this many classes; you're not going to make a living as a dancer.' And that's really hard and sad for me, because I'm not going to comment, I'm not

the parent. But if I'm asked for advice I'll surely offer it.

**PC: How different do you see Aveary's dance education compared to yours as a child?**

CHG: I knew as soon as I started my first ballet class at the age of nine that I was very serious about it. I think I was the only one that took it seriously – my parents didn't really want me to be a dancer.

**PC: And your father doubted you had the talent.**

CHG: Yes. It was really a shock to them that I wanted to pursue it as a career. But Aveary, his perception of dance is very different than mine. His is for the pure joy and expression. It allows me to see dance in a different light too, because I come from a very professional background. My parents were professional dancers, I trained in a professional program, my husband was a former dancer, so it's a profession to us. But through Aveary's eyes it's a joy of movement.



**PC: Beyond dance, how important do you think arts education is for kids?**

CHG: Oh, I cannot express, arts education is of tremendous importance to a youngster. I mean, it is that physical aspect of movement and understanding your body through dance or movement. If it's visual, painting or whatever, expressing yourself in a different form other than orally or in written words, that's opening up a whole new world for someone.

**PC: Does it worry you – all the cuts made to arts programs?**

CHG: Absolutely, it worries me so much. Because you know, I feel it will keep kids off the streets, off the computer, because you don't want them to be bored. And how fascinating is art? Art is entertainment; and how better to get through to somebody than through entertainment and teaching them at the same time.

**PC: You've decided to work just four days a week this year in order to spend more time with Aveary. Can you walk away on day five and go to the Aquarium or whatever you're going to do?**

CHG: It will be really hard. That's the thing – being a career-oriented person, how many more late nights do I want to pull? But you know, I will never get that time back with my son. And I will just regret it forever if I didn't take this time now. This first year was really me getting my footing. Now I see I don't spend enough hours with him. Yes, I'm going to be torn a lot, but I'm just going to have to say to myself, 'he deserves this time, and I deserve this time,' and take some advice from my parents, (laughs) 'just do as much as you can'.

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