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Plum role in Vancouver a learning curve for ballet star

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Most holiday seasons, Chan Hon Goh's major concern was stepping from a huge golden egg to dance the iconic Sugar Plum Fairy role in the National Ballet of Canada's *Nutcracker*. Now, 18 months after her farewell performance, Goh is still worrying about *The Nutcracker* but from a radically different perspective. Instead of dancing it she's producing it; a lavish, \$1 million version for the Vancouver-based [Goh Ballet Academy](#) that by all accounts has quickly won the hearts of local audiences.

Producing a new *Nutcracker* that Vancouver could embrace as its homegrown own was the first task Goh tackled after an illustrious 21-year career with the National Ballet. It was a major investment for the academy, founded by her parents after leaving China in the mid-1970s.

The academy, where Goh herself studied, quickly established a reputation for producing immaculately trained dancers. It already had a *Nutcracker* in which to showcase its talented students each December, but Chan persuaded her parents, Choo Chiat Goh and Lin Yee, to develop a spectacular new version that would incorporate students from several local studios and feature guest principal dancers in the major classical roles. And she called in Canadian-born veteran Anna-Marie Holmes, renowned for her staging of the classics, to choreograph it.

Despite her long experience as a dancer, Goh was taken aback by the minefield of logistical and financial issues she had to manage. "It was so much more than I expected and a real growing experience."

Staged for the first time in December 2009 at the 1,800-seat [Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts](#), it was a runaway hit, winning critical plaudits and drawing crowds in excess of 90 per cent capacity.

Exhausting as it may have been for the former ballerina, it was also enough to make her commit to doing what her parents had long wanted: to take over the academy itself.

Goh, 41, concedes that she "sat on the fence" for a while following her retirement from the National Ballet. She was uncertain of her capacity to run a major private ballet school. It was also a matter of psychological adjustment. "As a dancer, it was all me, me, me," she explains. "As a teacher and director it is constantly giving, giving, giving." *Nutcracker* convinced her that giving brings its own rewards.

Goh officially became head of the academy, where her ballet teacher husband Chun Che is now vice-principal, last summer. Before that she boned up on everything from labour law to financial management. And there was the teaching itself, something Goh knew was as much a gift as a learned skill. "For years my husband had always told me, 'It is much harder to be a teacher than a dancer.' But I had to learn that for myself."

With the holiday season now in full swing — and a 4-year-old son to keep entertained — Goh says she's happy to take some family time, especially after a second *Nutcracker* season she feared could be a disaster. Not that Goh had any artistic concerns, but knowing the limited scale and fickleness of the Vancouver market — and that they'd be competing with a couple of Canucks games during the six-show run — she wondered if they'd get an audience.

Complicating matters was the fact that Ballet BC had booked Alberta Ballet to present its colourful *Nutcracker* at the larger Queen Elizabeth Theatre, a situation Goh had unsuccessfully tried to forestall by offering the city the Vancouver-produced version in partnership with Ballet BC.

Fortunately for Goh, the Albertans did not arrive until Wednesday, so she got first crack at the market. Although the numbers were slightly down from 2009, the response was solid enough to suggest the accuracy of *Vancouver Sun* critic Kevin Griffin's enthusiastic original assessment of the Goh *Nutcracker*: "a Christmas tradition for years to come."



Former National Ballet dancer Chan Hon Goh coaches dancers in a rehearsal of *The Nutcracker* at the Goh Academy.

GOH ACADEMY PHOTO

Says Goh, "I must admit, I'm breathing a huge sigh of relief."