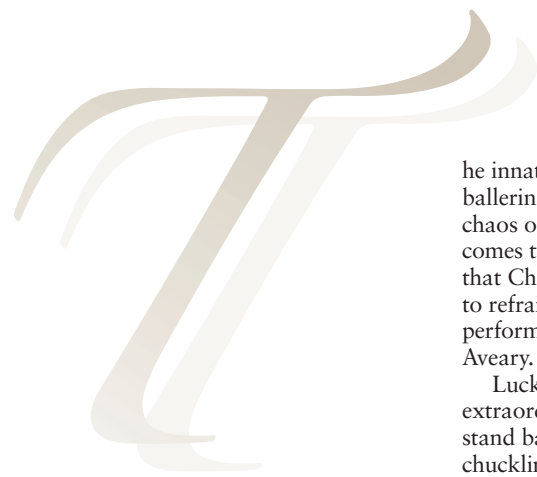


Command Performance

PRIMA BALLERINA **CHAN HON GOH** OPENS A NEW CHAPTER ON A FAIRYTALE CAREER AND DIRECTS A HOLIDAY CLASSIC.



The innate perfectionism of the prima ballerina is difficult to apply to the chaos of ordinary life, especially when it comes to children. So it's not surprising that Chan Hon Goh finds it a challenge to refrain from tweaking the dance performances of her 4½-year-old son, Aveary.

Luckily, she's used to exercising extraordinary self-discipline. "I try to stand back and just enjoy," Goh says, chuckling. She does admit that last summer she told Aveary to "smile more" in his role as a lamb in *Little Bo Peep*.

Goh's self-control, drive, and a gift for dance passed down by her parents, landed her some of the most coveted roles in the repertoire of both the National Ballet of Canada and Washington, D.C.'s Suzanne Farrell Ballet. Before she retired from the stage in May 2009, after 20 years with the Toronto-based company, reviewers praised "Canada's ballet superstar" in the grandest of terms.

"To watch her dance is to understand something of the essence of flight," said *Dance International Magazine*. "To experience her purity of musical expression (is) to know something about the way poetry makes movement into metaphor."

"In short, Goh is everything that makes the ballet beautiful," said *Nuvo* magazine.

Fortunately, at his tender age, Aveary can't be intimidated by such raves. Goh and her husband Chun Che — a former principal dancer with the National Ballet of China — don't just have big shoes for him to fill. The West Vancouver couple actually owns a ballet shoe-making business, called Principal Shoes by Chan

Hon Goh. In addition, Goh is director and Che is vice-principal of the 30-year-old Goh Ballet Academy.

Nevertheless, Goh, 41, doesn't concern herself with Aveary's career trajectory, and whether it will include jetés. "First and foremost, as a parent, you just want your kids to be happy, and loving what they do," she says. "Having been privileged to love dance most of my life, if that is going to give him the same kind of satisfaction and love, then, as a parent, I would, of course, support that."

As a matter of fact, her own parents didn't particularly encourage her to get into dance as a profession — but look how she showed them. She soared to the top of the heap internationally and now runs the school founded in 1978 by Choo Chiat Goh and Lin Yee Goh, former dancers with the Central Ballet of China. Choo Chiat and Lin Yee remain on staff at the academy as artistic director and principal, respectively.

Their only child first got the bug when she saw her parents dance in China. She remembers being impressed by "how the performers moved, and the beauty of the dance onstage."

As a newcomer to Canada at the age of eight, Goh couldn't speak a word of English. She feels that at the time, part of the power of dance for her lay in the fact that "In the dance studio, we were all equal, we were all doing the same vocabulary and learning it. The sense of achieving there, in the studio, really (lured) me."

Of course, turning that initial interest into your life's work isn't for everybody. As Goh tells the more ambitious parents

of students at the academy, "Dance is a profession that has to come from that individual."

Kids who want to turn this demanding pastime into their bread-and-butter have to be passionate. In addition to natural aptitude, they must "overcome the obstacles, the sore muscles, the challenges, the criticisms, the rejections. Your love for it has to be so strong in order to survive in the business."

Nurturing a child's appreciation of dance is a responsibility Goh takes seriously. She sees a great deal of talent at the Goh Ballet Academy — it has 450 students enrolled this year — and wants the kids' time to be well spent.

"Really, you know, I'm helping them in building their future in pursuit of their passions," she explains. "I love to see them grow, whether they're 10 and they have that sparkle in their eyes and that little bit of awe when they experience, or are taught, a new step for the first time, (or are) a bit more advanced and they're 16 or 17 and preparing for an international competition."

Whether the student's objective is to excel or simply have fun, Goh believes that dance is a life-changing pursuit. Due to demand, the academy recently tripled the number of classes it offers for adults who feel called to the barre. Goh sees ballet as a useful tool for males and females of any age, enhancing their cultural and musical appreciation, coordination, physical alignment, sense of discipline, and ability to function as part of a team.

She describes a dancer's way of thinking as "more diligent and persistent

WORDS KATE ZIMMERMAN





Chan Hon Goh shares her love of dance with son Aveary. *Right* In a career spanning 20 years the prima ballerina danced all her favourite roles including *Swan Lake's* Odette/Odile with the National Ballet of Canada.

PHOTO DAVID COOPER

and responsible.

“And the work ethic — there’s a lot of self-motivation in a dance class. You have to push yourself and it’s reciprocated energy from the teacher that you can carry to every walk of life. (Ballet is) a wonderful way to come into a different world and for an hour and a half you are training and toning your muscles and dancing to music and doing something wonderful for your body.”

Maybe the increased interest in ballet classes is partly due to the popularity of television contest shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Battle of the Blades*, which pairs up figure skaters and hockey players. Goh, who has the typical working mother’s guilt when she’s not home early enough to play with Aveary, doesn’t watch a lot of TV. She has seen a few of these shows, however, and appreciates the freshly widespread enthusiasm for dance.



PHOTO THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA

“To have that kind of media attention and outreach to the general public is wonderful for our art form and to further create an audience base for the live performances.”

Whatever the reason, awareness of dance appears to be strong. When the Goh Ballet held open auditions for this year’s production of *The Nutcracker* last May, between 200 and 300 people, from age six to senior citizens, turned out for it. The production’s cast of 218 also includes principals from the National Ballet of Canada and Pacific Northwest Ballet.

Last year the Goh Ballet’s full-length *Nutcracker* had its world première and Goh, not yet the academy’s director, →



PHOTO: SIÂN RICHARDS - COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA

Win tickets to *The Nutcracker*

Four tickets to the Dec. 19 matinee performance of Goh Ballet's *The Nutcracker*, with principal dancers from The National Ballet of Canada and Pacific Northwest Ballet, and live music by members of the Vancouver Opera Orchestra.

Enter by email contest@lookmag.ca
Contest closes Dec. 1, 2010.

Chan Hon Goh, who retired from the stage when son Aveary was three, has made the transition to teaching and is enjoying her new role as director of her family's Goh Ballet Academy.

→ was its artistic co-ordinator. In addition to corralling the dancers, she hired the orchestra and children's choir, the lighting designer, and the technical people, and co-ordinated their schedules.

As a ballerina, she confesses, all those aspects of a performance were always handled for her. "Knowing this part of it now, I have so much more appreciation and respect for all of the people who work behind the scenes to make the show happen."

Goh's first role with the National Ballet was as *The Nutcracker's* Sugar Plum Fairy. She says frankly that she herself has danced enough Nutcrackers for one lifetime. Still, she sees *The Nutcracker* as a ballet that everybody ought to see at least once. This year, young Aveary will attend the Goh Ballet's production of it for the second time; he's also seen the National Ballet's version.

"The music and the storyline — it's the ballet of the season," Goh says simply. "December wouldn't feel the same without *Nutcracker*." ●



These North Shore dancers will share in the magic of *The Nutcracker* from the stage. They are among the many ballet students from dance academies across the Lower Mainland who will take part in the holiday classic, Dec. 16-19 at The Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts.

Carmela Whelan *Goh Ballet*
Dana Brown *Goh Ballet*
Charlotte Milley *Goh Ballet*
Elena Keith *Goh Ballet*
Katja Juthans *Pro Arte*
Zoe Glover *Pro Arte*
Samara Rittinger *Goh Ballet*
Danielle Gould *Goh Ballet*
Natalie Hobson *Goh Ballet*
Thalia Crymble *VJPD*
Zoe Newton-Mason *Goh Ballet*