

The Rising Sun of GOH BALLET ACADEMY

CHAN HON GOH TAKES
THE NEXT STEP IN
HER FAMILY HERITAGE.

BY MICHAEL CRABB

A framed photo hanging in a corridor outside her second-floor office shows former National Ballet of Canada star Chan Hon Goh captured in a moment of glory. There she is, surrounded by family, colleagues and a sea of red balloons, enjoying the tumultuous ovation of a sold-out audience following her May 2009 farewell performance in *Giselle*.

Inside the office there are more mementos of a celebrated 21-year dance career—posters, prize certificates and photos—but the always poised and elegant 41-year-old woman sitting behind the desk is looking to the future, not the past.

In the summer, Chan Hon Goh officially assumed a new role as director of the Goh Ballet Academy, a school launched in a Vancouver basement by her parents more than 30 years ago. Conspicuously located since 1985 in a converted bank building in the West Coast city's Mount Pleasant neighborhood, the school is now recognized as one of Canada's leading privately operated training institutions.

"I try to spend as little time in the

office as I can," says Chan. She'd rather be teaching and coaching the school's professional program students. Luckily her preferred habitat is only steps away. The sound of piano accompaniment echoes down the hallway from two of the adjoining smaller studios. Downstairs there are two larger studios, one of which can be sectioned off to make a total of five class, coaching and rehearsal spaces. Yet Chan accepts the often burdensome administrative responsibilities with the same determined attitude that helped her through a long stage career. "We are woefully understaffed in the office," she says. She has schooled herself in everything from labor laws and human resource practices to financial management and fundraising to support student scholarships.

Pacific Northwest Ballet Artistic Director Peter Boal says, "Chan had a very high goal of achieving the best she



Photo by Bruce Zinger, courtesy of The National Ballet of Canada

Waiting in the wings during
a performance of *Jewels*



With Ryan Boorne in James Kudelka's *Cruel World*

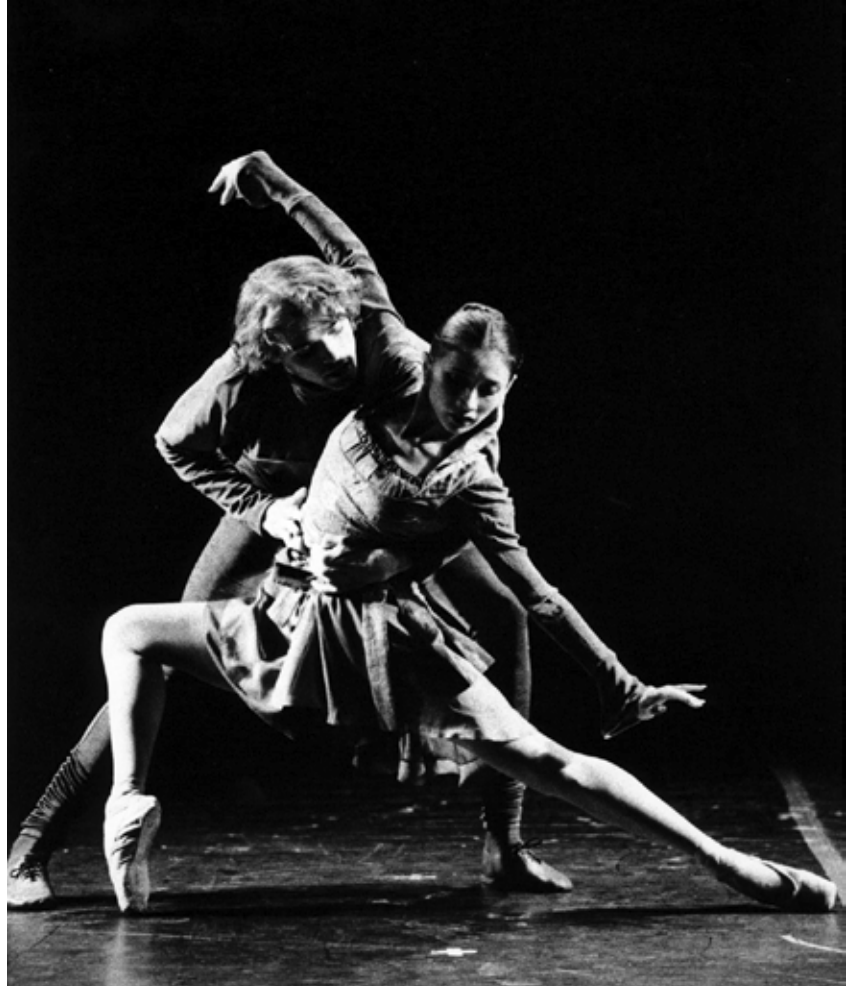
could possibly achieve onstage. She carries with her this quiet but quintessential work ethic, and she will lead by example.”

Boal, who readily accepted an invitation to teach during the Goh Academy's 2010 summer intensive, still cherishes the partnership he and Chan enjoyed in the later years of their performing careers as guests of Suzanne Farrell Ballet. “We kind of just clicked onstage,” he says.

PNB's connection with the Goh Academy predates Boal's 2005 move to Seattle. Former Goh graduate and PNB soloist Alexandra Dickson now teaches in the company's school. More recently another Goh alumna, Nicole Ciappone, completed her training at the PNB school and this season entered the corps at San Francisco Ballet. “We're always happy to see students from the Goh Academy,” says Boal.

For many years, students from the Vancouver school have been collecting trophies at international competitions and progressing to professional careers with ballet companies across North America and beyond. Among the more recent notables is Canadian Alex Wong, who quit his principal soloist position at Miami City Ballet this spring in order to compete for the second time on “So You Think You Can Dance.” Wong, now recovering from the serious injury that forced his withdrawal from the popular show, says, “The Goh Ballet Academy was an integral part of my training, growing up as a dancer. I would not be where I am today without the Goh Ballet.”

Headline-making alumni, as Chan



Hon Goh appreciates, are good for publicity, but while Alex Wong may have drawn millions of television viewers, throughout the ballet world Chan herself remains the Academy's most illustrious graduate. Ironically, it almost didn't happen because her parents didn't think their only child had the makings of a ballerina.

Chan's Singapore-born father, Choo Chiat Goh, was one of 10 siblings, 4 of whom pursued successful dance careers. His late brother, Choo San Goh, became a noted choreographer in the United States. Two of his sisters founded companies and training academies in Singapore. As a young man, Choo Chiat decided he wanted to reconnect with his Chinese heritage

and explore the Russian-influenced ballet culture of his ancestral homeland. To his family's dismay, he moved to Beijing, where he met and married a young dancer, Lin Yee.

By the time Chan was born, her mother, plagued by rheumatoid arthritis, was making an early career transition into teaching. When Chan was 7, her family began considering leaving China to reunite with family in Canada and gain access to more opportunities available in the West.

Finally, in 1976, Choo Chiat Goh was allowed to leave for Vancouver on the pretext of caring for his ailing mother there. His wife and daughter waved good-bye with no assurance they'd see him again, an emotional trauma that, as she explained in her 2002 autobiography, *Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina's Life*, was to haunt Chan for years to come.

Happily, the family was reunited in Canada the following year. But while the Gohs busied themselves establishing a ballet school, it was actually an aunt who gave Chan, previously tutored in piano and singing, her first

“AS A DANCER IT WAS ALL ME, ME, ME. AS A TEACHER IT IS CONSTANTLY GIVING, GIVING, GIVING.”



Chan coaches Goh Ballet Academy students in a pas de deux rehearsal.

ballet lessons. Even when they took over her instruction, Chan's parents didn't even consider her prospects. It took an eminent visitor to convince them. After watching Chan in a children's class, the legendary former Diaghilev star Anton Dolin pronounced, "She is going to be a beautiful dancer."

Looking back on the career that followed, Chan admits she was unsure about her future beyond the stage, even when a chronic whiplash-type injury, incurred in a 2006 automobile accident, compelled her to acknowledge that an end to her dancing days could not be far off.

Chan knew that her aging, wearied parents viewed her as their natural successor, but she explains that she "sat on the fence for a while." She did, however, want to be close, so in the summer of 2009, Chan, her ballet teacher husband Chun Che and their then 3-and-a-half-year-old son left Toronto for Vancouver.

Chan's first project was to produce an ambitious new production of *The Nutcracker*, staged by Canadian-born Anna-Marie Holmes and involving not only academy students and members of

its Goh Ballet Youth Company but also recruits from a range of local studios, a true Vancouver community *Nutcracker*. Says Chan: "It was a huge undertaking; so much more than I expected and a real growing experience." And it whetted her appetite for the hands-on role of teaching, shaping and coaching young dancers. As she puts it, after *The Nutcracker* Chan became a "fly on the wall," learning about every facet of the school's operations.

Coming directly from a performing career, Chan's presence has had a revitalizing effect, something her parents recognized was needed if the Goh Ballet Academy is to grow and adapt to a changing ballet world. And Chan learned the truth of what her husband had told her years earlier: "It is much harder to be a teacher than a dancer."

"As a dancer," she says, "it was all me, me, me. As a teacher it is constantly giving, giving, giving." And, according to 17-year-old student Danielle Gould, now in her third year in the Goh Academy's Senior Professional School, Chan gives.

"She's a wonderful person and a

wonderful teacher. She brings this amazing energy. You feel she always wants you to do your best. Chan can definitely be tough and persistent, but in a good way."

Although the Senior Professional School does not impose a rigid syllabus on its teachers, Chan describes the training as "basically a Vaganova approach," with several months set aside for the Royal Academy of Dance syllabus. "It's really a blend of all these different styles," she says. This enables successful students like Gould to earn RAD exam certificates, all the way to the top Solo Seal. "Parents like to see something on paper," Chan says.

The Goh Academy, with a staff of six full-time and seven part-time teachers, has always enriched the training with a range of visiting guest teachers, something Chan believes is crucial in order to provide students with a range of approaches. During the 2010 summer intensive, for example, Chan added a performance workshop with instruction in acting and musical theater. She also wants the Goh Academy, whose Junior School has more than 300 students from age 4 to mid-teens, to extend its community reach.

Expansion is also on her agenda, since the school is rapidly outgrowing its current facilities. Former office space has already been sacrificed to make way for an extra studio. Further physical growth will mean either adding another floor or relocating.

Altogether it's been a steep learning curve for Chan Han Goh, yet nobody seems to doubt her capacity, least of all her parents. "Chan," says Choo Chiat Goh, "has the vision and dedication to carry the Academy into a new era." **DT**

Canadian arts journalist Michael Crabb is dance critic of The Toronto Star. His writing appears frequently in Dance Teacher's sister publications, Dance Magazine and Pointe.