

Dance rising in the East

Guangzhou Troupe part of China's ballet upswing

By Dana Gee, The Province October 21, 2011



This year's Vancouver Chinese Cultural Festival delivers a rare opportunity for fans of dance.

The celebrated Guangzhou Ballet Troupe from China will make their Vancouver debut with Ballet Fusion - East Meets West at The Centre for Performing Arts in Vancouver Friday night.

For this event, the visitors will be sharing the evening's program with Vancouver's Goh Ballet. This is a big nod to the Goh folks as this marks the only time on this tour that the Guangzhou group has shared the program with another company.

Established in 1994 the Chinese troupe, headed by Dan Dan Zhang, will deliver a very diverse evening of dance, says Goh company artistic director Chan Goh.

On the bill are dances from popular Chinese ballets the Celestial Phoenix, Mei Lanfang, Dream of the Red Chamber as well dances from such international classics as Swan Lake, Romeo and Juliet, Giselle, The Nutcracker, La Bayadere, Don Quixote, La Sylphide and Cinderella.

"You know what's wonderful, the audience they get a real sense of what the company is capable of. The diversity of the company," said Chan Goh, who danced alongside Dan Dan Zhang over 20 years ago. "I think it is wonderful we are showcasing something as rich in background like Swan Lake and then bringing something which was created for their company to the stage."

The Goh dancers will perform a piece from The Nutcracker, which the company will be mounting for its third time this winter.

While the audience benefits from the exposure to one of China's top ballet companies the positives also wash over the dancers.

"This collaborative opportunity is a chance for Canadian dancers to develop a relationship and friendship with dancers from such a far away country," said Chan Goh adding that she remembers fondly finding herself in similar situations when she was an international dancer. "I can relate 100 per cent. I think the wonderful energy that is created is that we as dancers want to do our very best. When you are on stage you are learning from each other but you are also wanting to do your very best work out there."

Not known to tour very much, Chinese companies are still a bit of an unknown commodity on this side of the Pacific. But Chan Goh says thanks to rising economic fortunes and a government that is literally opening more doors (new theatres have been built in every major centre) Chinese dance is growing in leaps and bounds.

Chan Goh saw that reality firsthand this past summer when she travelled to China for the first Beijing International Ballet and Choreographic Competition.

"I got to see a lot, basically all the companies from China sent in competitors. It was a very high standard that gave me an even more in-depth look at the various companies and styles that are available in China. Dance and ballet have really flourished in China.

"The government it seems to be encouraging cultural development. This is all coming to forefront now."

The rising economic realities also mean more work for those involved in dance.

"There are six ballet companies in China and dancers have a very strong classical base, that stems from the Russian masters who went there in the 1950s. Now with the booming economics they can invite a lot of new choreographers to work, so they're developing their own voice their own style. Their young choreographers are able to make pieces with a Chinese story behind it."