



New Nutcracker production seeks dancers

Goh Ballet is looking for about 200 young performers to mount the Traditional favorite.

By Kevin Griffin, Vancouver Sun, September 12, 2009

The Goh Ballet is looking for about 200 junior to professional ballet dancers for its \$700,000 production of *The Nutcracker* that it hopes will become a Christmas tradition in Vancouver for the decades to come.

In charge of mounting the most ambitious project the school has ever undertaken is Chan Hon Goh, a principal dancer with the National Ballet until her retirement earlier this May. As the artistic coordinator of *Nutcracker*, she recognizes the huge challenges involved in mounting a ballet with all the new choreography, costumes and sets that entails.

“It’s a huge financial investment –artistically, it’s a huge undertaking as well,” she said in an interview.

“Many people have said, “Why are you doing it this year? It is a bad economy.” You know, I remain naively positive. It’s very important to do this. If we wanted to find an excuse not to do it, there would be tons of excuses at any given year.”

A major step in the creation of the ballet takes place Sunday at the Scotiabank Dance Centre. Goh and choreographer Anna-Marie Holmes will be looking for scores of young dancers at open auditions.

They start with senior females at 1 p.m. and end with junior males and females at 5 p.m. The youngest performers must be six and older. Dancers don’t have to pre-register, but are encouraged to save time by filling out the registration form at www.gohballet.com and bringing it to the auditions.

“Our whole idea was to build an experience for aspiring dancers to be in a show with professionals,” Goh said.

“We just thought that it’s important for kids to have this experience to know that each year they can progress into something new. This is really about community involvement and giving everyone an opportunity to participate – that’s the reason for the open audition.”

Goh said *Nutcracker* will be looking for about 140 youngsters and another 60 advanced to professional-level dancers for two casts. As well, each season *Nutcracker* will hire a professional couple to dance two of the major roles.

For the inaugural *Nutcracker*, Karen Kain, the National's artistic director, has loaned two of its principal dancers: Sonia Rodriguez and Piotr Stanczyk.

Goh recognizes what a generous move that is, especially as it comes exactly when the National will be putting on James Kudelka's stunning version of the *Nutcracker*. "It is very, very gracious and generous of Karen," Goh said. "I'm asking them to be here for a week. To be able to relieve these dancers from the production in Toronto is not easy. I'm grateful for her support."

Goh's own experience dancing *Nutcracker* during her 20-year-career with the National was a major reason she decided to mount a new version. She knew once a top quality *Nutcracker* has been created, it can be produced for decades.

In her second year with the National, Goh's first full length performance was dancing the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy in Celia Franca's *Nutcracker*. Goh remembers it fondly because Franca, who founded the National Ballet 1951, rehearsed her in the role.

"I wore costumes that Veronica Tennant and Vanessa Hardwood and Karen Kain wore – although I could never share with Karen because she was way taller than me," Goh said.

Goh was also with the National when the company decided to mount an entirely new and big-budget *Nutcracker* by Kudelka. Goh knew exactly what that meant as she once again danced the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"I was the Sugar Plum Fairy and I was told that the Sugar Plum Fairy tutu cost 4,500 dollars," Goh recalled. "I'll never forget that: My jaw dropped. It was so gorgeous. We made four or five of those.

While Goh Ballet's version won't be that extravagant, Goh vows it will be a quality production. By involving so many children, Goh is borrowing another idea from the National: Kudelka's *Nutcracker* includes about 65 children every year.

Goh said the budget for *The Nutcracker* is about \$700,000, but the company has saved in the neighborhood of \$200,000 by having the costumes and sets all designed and make in China by Zhang Dinghao and LI Ming, who are famous in their homeland.



Chan Hon Goh, Director of Goh Ballet; Photo Credit: Sian Richards

Goh said the connection with China came through her parents, Choo Chiat Goh and Lin Yee Goh, who started the Goh Ballet Academy in 1978. Born in Beijing, Chan Hon Goh immigrated to Canada with her parents when she was eight.

The Nutcracker is being produced by the academy's non-profit Vancouver Goh Ballet Society. Although she deferred all choreographic questions to Holmes, Goh said the Goh Ballet's *Nutcracker* will have some original elements in a "classical, traditional version."

Goh said *The Nutcracker* has been years in the making. Internally at the academy, staff started talking about doing an original production about three years ago. But talking is one thing, doing quite another. The idea started to move towards reality last year when Holmes was approached to choreograph.

Now Goh feels the clock is ticking faster and faster as December approaches. As a dancer, she had to show up prepared to perform, but didn't have to worry about the details of putting on a show. Now she does.

"Now, I'm behind the scenes and ah, there's a gazillion things to think about," she said. "I'm learning. I have very high standards as a professional and I want to provide the dancers with what they need."

Goh has even thought carefully about the dates for the performances. She was able to book five performances at The Centre for the Performing Arts in Vancouver from Dec. 17 to 20. According to research done by the National Ballet, the weekend just before Christmas is the most sought-after time for *Nutcracker* tickets.

At the performances in The Centre, Tchaikovsky's score will be performed live by the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra led by Kenneth Hsieh.

"We're really counting on community support because we're involving the community" she said. "It has to be good – and I'm confident of that. I want people to come out and see it. That's how you can support us: Come out and see it".