



Scene

For week starting Thursday, December 12



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Sweet Nutcracker

Vancouver's Goh Ballet overcomes Centre for Performing Arts scare to unwrap a seasonal favourite with all the trimmings » **C3**



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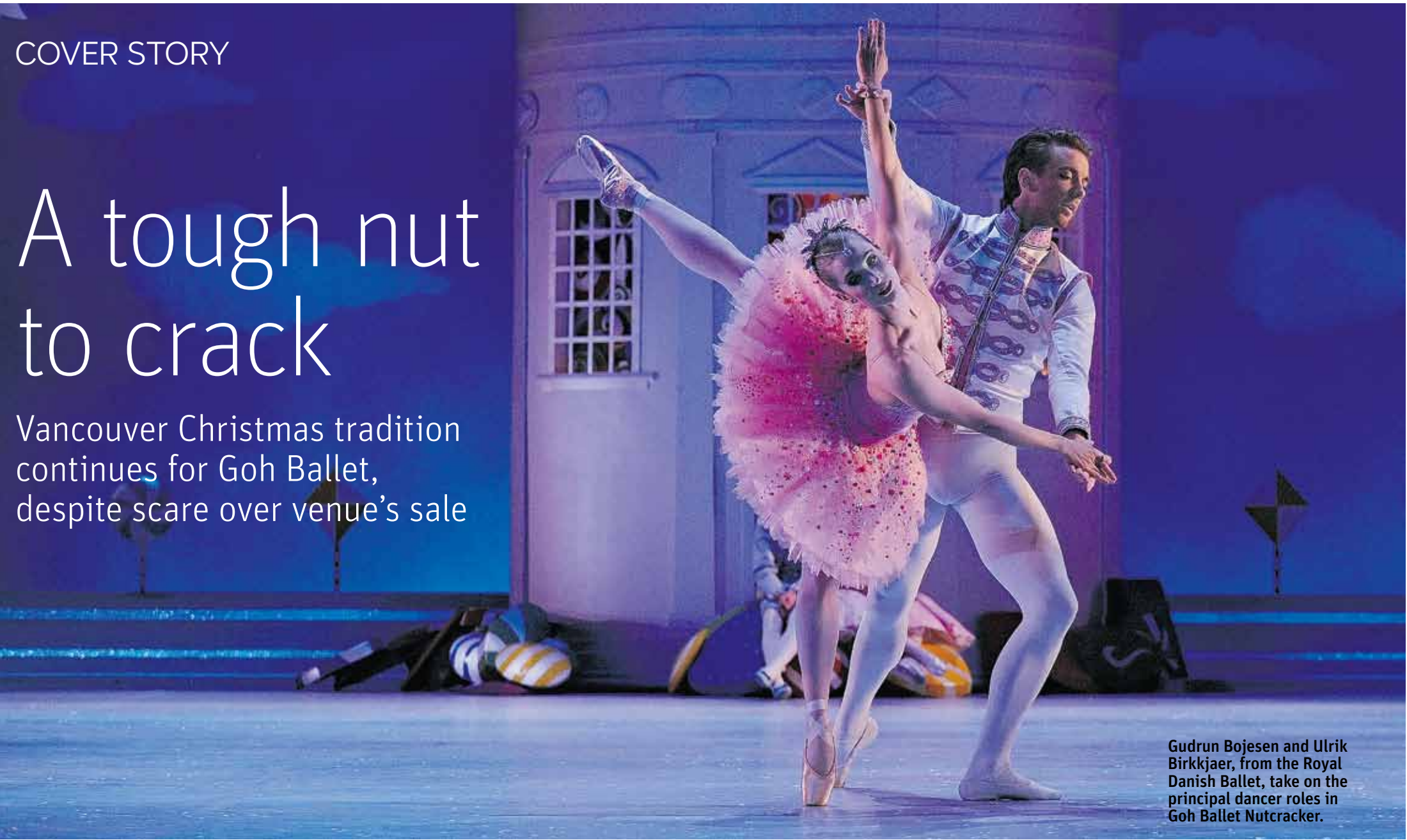
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Gudrun Bojesen and Ulrik Birkkjaer, from the Royal Danish Ballet, take on the principal dancer roles in Goh Ballet Nutcracker.

COVER STORY

A tough nut to crack

Vancouver Christmas tradition continues for Goh Ballet, despite scare over venue’s sale

Goh Ballet Nutcracker
Saturday to Dec. 22 | The Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts
Tickets: \$32 to \$83.25, plus charges, at 1-855-985-2787 or ticketmaster.ca

DEBORAH MEYERS
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

When the curtain goes up on the Goh Ballet Nutcracker at The Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts on Saturday, a collective holding of breaths will be released around and about Seventh Avenue and Main Street. That’s the headquarters of the Goh Ballet Academy, which will present its Nutcracker for the fifth year this Christmas, a production that was threatened with the sale of The Centre to Westside Church last spring.

“It was really unsettling how we heard the news, back in early May,” Chan Hon Goh, Nutcracker executive producer and Goh Ballet Academy director, says over tea on a cold evening the week before the run.

We got an email telling us that our contract was cancelled, without any mention that the venue was being sold. When I was able to contact the church, we then had to wait almost a month before we heard their decision.”

December may seem a long way out from May, but Goh had already completed auditions, announced casting and was about to launch ticket sales. “I felt so caught,” she says, “because really there is no other venue in Vancouver that could house us. Finally we were told by the church in June that we could go ahead. They have been very helpful and very honest about the fact that they are new to the theatre thing.”

The Goh Nutcracker is a unique hybrid. Lacking a strictly classical ballet company with an affiliated school, Vancouver for years relied on touring productions of the holiday favourite. The Goh Ballet Academy stepped into this breach five years ago, commissioning a new production with choreography by Anna-Marie Holmes (a Canadian who is a former artistic director of

Chan Hon Goh steps up to the future

She danced her last performance with the National Ballet of Canada on May 31, 2009. Not long after, she came back to Vancouver and took the reins at the Goh Ballet Academy from her parents, Choo Chiat Goh and Lin Yee Goh, who had built the school with dogged vision and sweat equity over a period of more than 30 years.

At 44, Chan Hon Goh is as lithe, luminous and thoughtfully spoken as ever.

While she will modestly say that directing the school “continues to be a huge learning curve for me,” she is making choices and changes that are positioning the Goh Ballet Academy for the future.

“The last four years have been about absorbing and processing, day to day and step by step,” Goh says. “Our standards are certain and recognized, but part of my approach is that you can’t be complacent. The globalization of information has affected the dance world as well. As a dancer you now need to be intelligent enough to pull from many sources.

“Another thing that’s different is the supportive component outside of the studio. What can you do to cross train? What can you do to understand stylistic differences between, say, a Romantic ballet and a Bill Forsythe work? How do you prepare yourself for a new crop of choreographers that expect dancers to be able to do everything?”

One of the ways is generational change in artistic staff: More than half the teaching faculty

at the school was added in the last four years. Another is continued focus on pas de deux training from the age of about 13 or 14, something few schools in Vancouver do in a sustained way.

“I would say that we are trying to break new ground, while remembering what we excel at,” Goh explains. “I want to push our horizon, always with the goal of preparing our dancers for international careers. I am not interested in cookie cutter dancers. We train individuals. That is how we’ve been successful in the past. You take a young student. She may not be God’s gift to dance, but you see something that others don’t have. It’s our job to recognize that, and bring it out.”

What Goh also recognizes is the need for capital expansion, the school having outgrown the heritage building in Mount Pleasant her parents presciently bought all those years ago, back when Main Street was a walk on the scary side.

“We love the neighbourhood and are proud of the fact that we’ve contributed to its development,” she says.

Simply from the point of functionality, she needs more space — the school recently downsized from five offices to two in order to make the studios a little bigger — and says she is looking at a couple of collaborative prospects as well as talking to developers who may be interested in a partnership.

Still, four years after retirement, does she miss the dancing life?

“I confess that I do miss Chan Hon Goh as a dancer,” she says, tellingly speaking of herself in the third person.

“It is tremendously hard work requiring tough physical output, focus and determination. Then it was all done for me.

“Now it is my turn to give back. Having parents who were dancers, I was always braced. I always knew it was a short career.

“I could have danced another three or four years, but it was important to me to finish on top, and on my own terms. I wasn’t interested in living the life but having to cover up. But I will always miss the experience of performing, because there is nothing like it.”

Deborah Meyers,
Special to The Sun

DAVID COOPER
Chan Hon Goh is positioning Goh Ballet Academy for a bright future.



time it with you. He has to be watchful.”

Goh brings to the task of producing this show an enviable address book, the result of her 20-year career as a principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada.

Each year, she calls on principal dancers from major companies to join the cast in the lead roles of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier Prince, to bring dancers to Vancouver who would otherwise not be seen here. The production has hosted guests from the National Ballet of Canada, Pacific Northwest Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet.

This year, the guests come from the Royal Danish Ballet.

Goh guested with the RDB in the late 1990s, which is when she first saw Gudrun Bojesen dance. “Gudrun was in the corps de ballet then,” Goh remembers. “The director at the time was Maina Gielgud, and she always thought that Gudrun would go far.”

Bojesen will be partnered by Ulrik Birkkjaer, a young principal dancer with a Canadian connection: he won the gold medal at the National Ballet’s Erik Bruhn Competition in Toronto in 2007.

“We are not one of those Nutcrackers that say: Bring your own choreography for the pas de deux,” Goh says. “They learn Anna-Marie’s version, which will be new to Gudrun and Ulrik.”

This year for the first time, the visiting professionals will be offering senior and junior workshops for the cast. This builds on something Goh noticed particularly with Nutcracker 2012, when Cuban superstar Jose Manuel Carreno, recently retired from American Ballet Theatre, substituted for an injured Gonzalo Garcia.

“Jose helped our boys so much,” she says. “It was the kind of mentoring opportunity all dancers crave, but is all too rare.”

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