

MONTECRISTO

MAGAZINE

Goh Ballet's "Nutcracker" Turns 10

Standing ovation.

- STORY: [Jacqueline Ranit](#)

Inside the pristine studios of Goh Ballet Academy's new secondary Vancouver space in Oakridge Centre, anticipation pulses through the air. Over 20 young ballet dancers are preparing for Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Waltz of the Snowflakes*, an intricately-choreographed sequence in which the performers enter in pairs from opposite wings of the stage, like floating mirror images of one another. Each step and spin must be timed perfectly, not only because this scene sets the tone leading into the second act of the much beloved *Nutcracker* ballet, but because Goh Ballet Academy director [Chan Hon Goh](#)—an icon in Canadian dance—is watching from the front of the room.

"It's been quite the build-up as we go into this 10th anniversary season," she says between rehearsals, looking composed and elegant as always in her warm-up attire. From Dec. 21 to 23, 2018, Goh Ballet's perennial Christmas production will see the curtain rise on its 10th year from a new resident venue: the majestic Queen Elizabeth Theatre. Along with the help of Emmy Award-winning choreographer [Anna-Marie Holmes](#), the 250-person milestone production also features a brand-new sleigh, fresh additions to the ballet itself, and music by members of the Vancouver Opera Orchestra.



For Goh, the first Chinese-born prima ballerina for The National Ballet of Canada, the *Nutcracker* occupies a special place in her heart. At the tender age of 19, she was given the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy, her first principal part after turning professional. “At that point, it was Celia Franka’s version,” says Goh, who fondly remembers the founder of The National Ballet coming to rehearse her personally for that special character. From her 2002 autobiography *Beyond the Dance*, Goh describes a magical scene in which she makes her grand entrance from the basket of a hot-air balloon. As she descends onto the stage, her eyes catch a glimpse of her parents (who both once danced with the National Ballet of China, and who together founded the Goh Ballet Academy in 1978) watching her with awe. “I really think of the *Nutcracker*,” she reflects, “as a launch of my professional career.”

Despite having retired from the stage in 2009, Goh’s life today remains vibrant and full of dance. Along with being a mother, leading a successful pointe shoe company (called Principal by Chan Hon Goh, which she co-founded with her husband), directing the academy, and watching her 15-year-old pupil Ashley Coupal become the first Canadian to win gold at the World Ballet Competition in Florida in 2018 (Goh also earned the Best Teacher Award), Goh is this year celebrating the 40th anniversary of her family’s business. And she shows no signs of slowing down, either: along with the new studio space at Oakridge (which can be viewed by the public as part of Westbank’s “Unwritten” exhibition that outlines development plans for the area), the academy is also planning to open a location in Toronto’s North York neighbourhood in 2019. “We want to be really aware of what the community

needs, what it takes to get us to the next level,” Goh asserts of the Oakridge decision. “So, opening up this studio was a tremendous, enlightening experience.”

Since its founding, Goh Ballet has been a go-to place for Vancouver’s most promising young dancers; it teaches technique, sure, but it also offers important lessons in perseverance, teamwork, and responsibility. And according to the ever-humble Goh, that success can be attributed to everyone who has come through her doors.

“I am very fortunate to have such a wonderful group of staff to work with and such an incredible group of dancers,” she says, before joining the next *Nutcracker* rehearsal. “They embrace challenge, they are really fighters. They fight to do better and they cherish the opportunities, which means a lot.” It’s heartwarming to see her interaction with the students, each of whom she calls by name. There is a definite consensus of admiration and respect here, and to see that translated energy play out onstage will be even more magical than the Sugar Plum Fairy.

