

Goh Choo San, Singapore's Master Craftsman in Dance

Yasuko Yeung

I am excited to write about Goh Choo San, the first Asian choreographer accepted by the ballet world both in Europe and America; the pioneer who brought “professional ballet” to “Singapore”. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1987, well before his time and before Singapore had started to seriously promote art in the country. There are few people in Singapore who were fortunate to witness first hand his genius, as Choo San was most successful in Europe as a dancer and as a choreographer in America, not in Singapore where there was still no professional ballet company. We are grateful to have the book* written by Janek Schergen (Artistic Director of Singapore Dance Theatre) and Goh Soo Khem (Choo San's sister) as a guide to Choo San's illustrious career.

Choo San was the youngest child of a family of ten children. His parents brought up their children with traditional values. However, Choo San became close to ballet when his elder sisters took up ballet. His elder sister Soo Nee trained at the Royal Ballet School in London and co-founded the Singapore Ballet Academy in 1958. This is where Choo San and his sister Soo Khem were trained. Soo Khim was accepted as the first Asian student at the Australian Ballet School and returned to Singapore and later in 1971 became Principal of the Singapore Ballet Academy. After graduating from Nanyang Primary School, Choo San studied at Raffles Institution. Despite his desire to pursue a career as a dancer, his father persuaded him to obtain a university degree and he studied biochemistry at the University of Singapore. After successful graduation, his parents finally gave their blessing and Choo San left Singapore to Europe in 1970 to pursue his passion for dance. In those days, there were very few Asian dancers at a professional level at the established ballet companies in Europe and America.

Fortunately, Choo San was offered a position with Dutch National Ballet. According to SDT's Artistic Director Janek, the company had a rich blend of classical and contemporary choreography including the largest repertoire of George Balanchine ballets in Europe. One can easily imagine that it



Choo San Goh



Rehearsal of Schubert Symphony

was a tremendous experience for young Choo San to be cast for such wide range of productions. Janek recalls that he had an extremely fast mind and possessed an acute musical sense. The qualities he exhibited as an individual were reflected in his abilities as a dancer as well as a choreographer. During his time as a leading soloist of the company, Choo San created his first ballets in a workshop environment. These small ballets brought him to the attention of Mary Day, director of the Washington School of Ballet in Washington DC. She offered him a position with her newly founded Washington Ballet. He took on the responsibility of both company teacher and resident choreographer and over the course of the next few years, his work became sophisticated and well known in the ballet community in the U.S. including Double Contrasts, Fives and Birds of Paradise.

It was around this time that he was commissioned by Mikhail Baryshnikov and created Configurations for American Ballet Theatre. Critics praised his work, saying that his work was filled with classical ballet vocabulary that seemed influenced by his Asian heritage. SDT's successful production last year “Romeo and Juliet” was originally made by Choo San for Boston Ballet in 1984. Post Gazette in Boston gave a glowing review: “The exquisite choreographic patterns of Choo-San Goh capture the Shakespeare tale in all its classic beauty as well as capturing the multi dramatic moods of the story. There was a definite grace about the full-length work. He filled the stage with glorious pictures, giving almost a renaissance portrait look of a masterpiece painting.” While based in Washington Ballet, Choo San constantly created new works, which helped the company to gain an international reputation. The Washington Post wrote that Goh “has propelled the Washington Ballet to international status on the Jetstream of his talent”.



Choo San as a dancer with Dutch National Ballet



Choo San and his family: Choo San, Soo Khim, their mother(from left), Soo Nee (far right)

The Washington Ballet made its debut in Singapore in 1982 during the Singapore Arts Festival at Victoria Theatre. It was the first time Singapore had seen Choo San's work and the reaction was strong and positive. Later Choo San created Schubert Symphony and Unknown Territory, both of which are now performed by SDT and very much loved by audience. Unknown Territory is based upon a traditional local wedding in Asia. The work weaved the emotions of the young couple, who had not seen each other till their wedding, and the traditional ceremony. The costumes are elegantly primitive. One can imagine how sensational it must have been when it was first performed in America in 1986!



Unknown Territory



Schubert Symphony

Choo San's tremendous achievement overseas was awarded by Singapore with the Cultural Medallion in 1987. His success also encouraged his sister Soo Khim and her close friend Anthony Then to found Singapore Dance Theatre, Singapore's first professional dance company in 1988. The mission was to create a platform for those who seek a professional dance career in Singapore and Choo San's works has become its foundation.

Unfortunately, Choo San did not live to the day of their first performance, Beginnings, one of his creations. He passed away in New York on 28th November, 1987. Now, 33 years later, SDT has blossomed to an internationally renowned company of 40 professional dancers. SDT's repertoire includes 11 works by Choo San which have become the identity of the company as the founders originally wished.

Prior to his death, Choo San had the idea of a foundation to further choreographic endeavors. He chose his close friend and ballet master, Janek Schergen, to be the artistic director of the Choo San Goh & H. Robert Magee Foundation. The centerpiece of the

Foundation has been its annual Choo San Goh Award for Choreography. Since its establishment in 1993, many choreographers and dance companies have been given financial awards to create new dance works in an effort to further develop choreographic talent.



Configurations
Documentary of the Making of
Configurations was filmed



Janek (Artistic Director of SDT) and Choo San

It has been 34 years since Choo San died. Time has advanced and Singapore boasts a beautiful theatre like Esplanade and SDT has become a fully-fledged professional dance company with an international audience. I wonder what Choo San would say if he read this article to introduce his life to the Japanese society in Singapore? When I hear about him from Janek and watch his ballets, I feel as if he is still alive. Though his ballets are performed around the world, Singapore is the best place to watch them. Bold and delicate, his ballets performed by Singapore Dance Theatre will inspire you and become an unforgettable memory.

Information & Photographs *"Goh Choo San Master Craftsman in Dance" (Janek Schergen/Goh Soo Khim), Singapore Dance Theatre



Schubert Symphony



Interview with Janek Schergen, Artistic Director of SDT

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The week I submitted this draft happened to be the week that SDT had an experimental production called Made in Singapore which showcased locally based choreographers. During the performance, we witnessed new local talent blossoming and we could feel the spirit of Choo San was very much alive. Though small in scale, it was delightful to be able to watch the art of dance creation, especially under the challenges of this pandemic.