

Yuri Ng took gold at Genée – now he'll create solos for this year's contest.
Natasha Rogai meets the Hong Kong choreographer

Golden boy

This year the Genée International Ballet Competition will be held in Hong Kong. The original variations for participants will be created by local choreographer and former National Ballet of Canada dancer Yuri Ng, himself a former winner of the Genée Gold Medal. I interviewed him over the phone in Tokyo, where he was working on a piece called *Corpse de Ballet* for the Architzanz dance group, inspired by *Giselle* and with Kirov ballerina Sofia Gumerova as guest star. Ng comes over as lively and likeable, with an impish sense of humour and an enquiring mind. Articulate and quick, he thinks outside the box and is refreshingly ready to turn the tables and ask questions of the interviewer.

Ng started ballet at the age of six, when his parents enrolled him to study with Jean Wong, generally regarded as the doyenne of Hong Kong's ballet teachers. 'I had no idea

what ballet was but I recall happy feelings when I went to ballet classes: piano music, wooden floor, black tights, white t-shirts, capezio ballet shoes...' And also, something he particularly enjoyed, 'lots and lots of attention because I was the only boy in the class.' He continued to study, and from the age of 12 appeared with the Hong Kong Ballet Group, which stages public performances each year for students from

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local ballet schools working with professional choreographers and guest stars.

Originally, Ng had no intention of making a career in ballet and describes his having become a dancer as 'accidental'. Like



Yuri Ng (centre) with gold medalist Amanda Jane Davies and the Genée judges in 1983
 Photo: GBL Wilson

many children in Hong Kong at that time, his parents planned to send him abroad to study, but at 15 a surprise opportunity came up – after he danced the White Cat in *Sleeping Beauty*, the Ballet Group awarded him the Heinz Bosl scholarship to spend a year at the Royal Ballet School in London. Although his parents were supportive, the scholarship was not sufficient to cover living expenses as well



Corpse de ballet (Architzanz) Photo: KO1 Kubota

as tuition, and the project was put on hold while more funds were raised. In the meantime, Ng started school in Canada, joining a local ballet class to keep up his ballet. His teacher soon recognized this was not enough, and suggested that he audition for the National Ballet School, where he could receive advanced ballet training and pursue his academic studies at the same time.

Ng spent two years at the National Ballet School. For the first time he was able to receive training at a professional level and, as one among many male students, assess his own ability. 'I had always been the only boy, it was difficult to tell if I was really any good, as I had no competition.' There was also the challenge of moving from the RAD method he had studied in Hong Kong to the different demands of Cecchetti.

After moving to London to finally take

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up his scholarship at the Royal Ballet School, Ng won the Gold Medal in the 1983 Genée International Ballet Competition. This gave him a great sense of achievement because 'I had taken part before, when I was 14, but didn't do very well, so I wanted to prove that I could do better.' That year Erik Bruhn became Artistic Director of National Ballet of Canada, and Ng was recommended to audition. Accepted into the company, he danced there for the next seven years, specializing in the demi-caractere repertoire. Among his favourite roles were Bottom in Ashton's *The Dream*, the Carnival King in Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* and the Mad

Hatter in Glen Tetley's *Alice*.

One work which had special meaning for Ng was *Hot House: Thriving on a Riff*, choreographed by Danny Grossman to music by jazz legend Charlie Parker. Grossman's way of working with dancers made a strong impression, and remains an inspiration: 'He really created an environment for the dancers to feel comfortable and free to be themselves. It was the first time I felt I could really use my body to create my own language.' Ng recalls, laughing, that Grossman's methods included bringing beer into the studio to make people more relaxed. 'There was a lot of give and take, and I think the beer helped.' While he has never resorted to the beer tactic, Ng himself attaches great importance to giving dancers freedom and the confidence to contribute 'and not just take orders.'

After leaving NBC, Ng joined Les Grands Ballets Canadiens for one year, then went freelance, still in Canada. In 1993 his father became ill, and he returned to Hong Kong where he has been based ever since. He became interested in choreography early on. 'No-one ever taught me how to make dances, except for a few composition lessons at RBS. I simply enjoy the process of creating.' During his time with NBC, he participated every year in the company's choreographic workshop, where he 'experimented with ways to make things – not only dance – costumes, sets, music.' He also started to create works outside, his first full-length piece being *Nutcracker* for the Quinte Ballet School of Canada in 1987. His return to Hong Kong came at the right time, as 'dancing had become a habit, a job even' and he was ready to try something different. Since then he has worked as a teacher and choreographer, founded his own company, and created work

for professional dance companies, school groups and even Chinese opera.

His work has ranged from productions of the classics (*Sleeping Beauty*, *La Sylphide*, *Swan Lake*) to contemporary work, including a Chinese version of *Nutcracker* for City Contemporary Dance Company, substituting Chinese New Year for Christmas, and re-titled *Firecracker*. As a choreographer, Ng says 'ballet people think I am a contemporary choreographer, and others think I am a ballet dance maker... maybe I don't see a difference.' While his original work is often contemporary in feel, and avoids conventions such as the use of linear narrative (and 'no fouettés for the sake of fouettés'), Ng does feel that the language of classical ballet is still relevant. 'Ballet as a language is very flexible, it teaches control, form, a sense of space. A tendu is a tendu, but [the question is] what do you want to do with a tendu or tendu-related movement? A lot of my choreography relates to how I perceive space and form. Ballet gave me that sense of form. And without a foundation such as classical ballet, one would have nothing to break away from.'

Today Ng is Artistic Director of the Hong

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Kong Ballet Group where he took his own first steps as a performer. The tradition of the summer performance now continues on a bi-annual basis, alternating with the Young Ballet Stars Award, a competition for local students aged 7–25 which was started six years ago. As well as giving children the chance to perform individually, Ng sees this public exposure as a way of raising overall standards in Hong Kong. We can also use the Genée Competition to push standards higher. I will be choreographing one male and one female variation, each less than two minutes long, and will have five days to teach them to all the contestants. We need to challenge them.'

Hong Kong has dozens of ballet schools and three full-time professional dance companies, yet few local students become professional dancers. A career in the arts is often viewed unfavourably, with young people expected to get 'proper jobs' so they can contribute to the family's finances. It is also a culture where expectations centre on specific, concrete goals. 'Dance or art is not about immediate results. Of course, we have a goal, we know what we want to achieve, but it's not immediate. That's hard for Hong Kong people to accept.' Ng would like to help students here understand what he himself has learned. 'I would hate to do a job that was just a job. It has to be more than that.'



Corpse de ballet (Architzanz)
 Photo: KO1 Kubota