

Julia Hoon Sook Moon aims to share beauty of ballet worldwide

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Universal Ballet president and director to lead company on tour of South Africa this month

More than 1,000 people gave a standing ovation in November last year at the finale of the Universal Ballet Company's "Shim Chung" at the Royal Opera House in Oman.

Two months ago in January, about 100 middle-aged women crowded a restaurant in Tokyo, Japan, to attend the fan meeting of UBC's young ballerinos Lee Seung-hyun and Kang Min-woo. The show "This is Modern 3," which took place few days later at the city's Parthenon Tama Cultural Center, marked a success.

Later this month, UBC will be heading to South Africa, invited by The Mandela at Joburg Theatre in Johannesburg to showcase "Swan Lake."

Performing throughout the world, UBC is experiencing its busiest time ever.

"It is just like how the status of Korea changed from being a recipient of global support to an aid donor. Before, we used to be determined to introduce Korea's ballet to the world but we are now talking about sharing our ballet with the world. I believe Korean ballet can bring a fresh influence to the world ballet scene," Julia Moon, president and director of Universal Ballet, told The Korea Herald.

UBC, one of the leading ballet companies in Korea, started to perform overseas in the 1990s, buoyed by Hong Kong Ballet Theater's artistic director Bruce Stievel's strong recommendation that it go to America.

The New York City Center show of "Shim Cheong" and "Swan Lake" in 1998 was the start.

"It is indescribable how nervous I was on the New York-bound-plane. On the stage, I could feel my toes trembling inside my toe shoes. It was the first time we were showcasing in the historic theater, and I knew that if we were badly received we would never be able to perform there again," said Moon who participated as the principal ballerina at the time.



Julia Moon, president and director of Universal Ballet. (Park Hae-mook / The Korea Herald)

Paul Szilard, an acclaimed U.S.-based agency that had flatly refused UBC before the tour, came back with open arms after seeing the 1998 New York show. The company has been organizing UBC's overseas performances ever since.

The changes did not end there. While UBC had to pay for all the costs for the overseas shows until 2004, for the "second season" of the company's world tour, which started last year, most theaters are inviting the company and paying for the costs. Moon said the next step was to make some actual profit out of the shows.

"I always tell my dancers that they have to keep up the good work their seniors did in 1998, so that their juniors can perform in even better conditions," said Moon, adding that while dancers back in the 1990s were strong mentally, dancers are now more confident and are in better physical condition.

Moon started as the principal ballerina of the company since its foundation in 1984, and has been leading the company since 1995. She both danced in and directed the company for about five years until 2001, which she remembers as a period when she could not focus on either side. Now she is totally devoted to leadership.

"Dancers say that they get nervous whenever I enter the studio. Though I am not harsh on them, they know what I expect," said Moon.

As much as her unhindered career, her one-of-a-kind marriage and family has always been under the spotlight. She was married in 1984 to a man who had passed away before the wedding, the son of Unification Church leader Rev. Moon Sun-myung. She is raising two children she adopted from her brothers-in-law.

Moon shook her head when asked if the public's interest in her private life was burdensome.

"That is my life, and I am grateful. Of course, things could have been better if he was still by my side. But love is only a momentary romance that requires a lifetime effort. It is not easy living alone, but there are also difficulties in living with someone. I am a romantic person, and I think it's not bad longing for someone through my entire life," she said.

"And I had an outlet. Ballet was my outlet — the way I could express my feelings."

Putting all her efforts and emotions into ballet, she contributed to last year's ballet boom here. To continue the popularity, Moon said that the foremost priority is to present high-quality performances every time. Successful overseas performances would also increase the Korean public's interest in ballet, she said.

While adding that discovering new talent and successful star-marketing is also important, Moon expressed doubts on the government's plan to establish a ballet academy in 2013. Dancers are already pouring out, she said. What is more important now is to make sure that they all get a stable job and settle the issue of male dancers' military service.

"In the U.S., there are huge ballet theaters like the New York City Ballet, and American Ballet Theater, but also many regional ballet companies. When dancers retire from major companies, they can work as ballet masters or directors at the regional companies.

"In Korea, however, there are only four ballet companies that offer a monthly salary and four major insurances. Most of the smaller ballet companies receive meager support from the government, and even that has been cut for some. Art needs continuous support," said Moon.