

Julia Hoon Sook Moon - dancing through life

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Julia Moon, director of the Universal Ballet Company, poses for a photo at the company's home Universal Arts Center in eastern Seoul on Dec. 30.

member of the UBC in 1984 and has remained with the company since then. She retired as a dancer in 2001 to manage the company.

From classical to modern

Moon spearheaded the popularization of ballet in Korea in the 2000s. To bring ballet closer to the public, she introduced commentary and subtitles at the ballet performances.

The UBC's wide repertoire ranges from timeless classics such as "Swan Lake" and "Giselle" to the latest modern ballet pieces such as Nacho Duato's "Multiplicity" and Ohad Naharin's "Minus 7."

The private ballet company is also a pioneer in creating original Korean ballet pieces. The UBC premiered "Shim Chung," the first Korean full-length ballet, in 1986 and "The Love of Chunhyang" in 2007.

"We are still revising Shim Chung, nearly 30 years after its premiere. Chunhyang is another ambitious project, which needs some more work. I hope it can be a ballet representing Korea in three years time," Moon said.

Though Chunhyang premiered at Goyang Aram Nuri Arts Center in 2007, the ballet underwent significant transition last year. "We took a risk and changed the music to Tchaikovsky's works. I wasn't sure whether it was a right decision or not until the curtain first went up, but it turned out to be the right move. Tchaikovsky and the romantic tale of Chunhyang went so well together," Moon said.

Julia H. Moon, president and director of the Universal Ballet Company (UBC), had a very busy year in 2014.

The top private ballet company in Korea celebrated its 30th anniversary and performed in South America for the first time in Bogota, Colombia. Moon also won two awards — the Performing Arts Management Award and the Female Artist of the Year — for her outstanding leadership.

The director is modest about her achievements. "The award was not just for me, but I received it on behalf of the UBC," Moon said in an interview with The Korea Times at the Universal Arts Center in eastern Seoul. "We have great dancers and experts in each field, who supplement my weaknesses as a leader."

Before taking charge at the UBC, Moon was a professional ballet dancer and one of the first Korean ballerinas to achieve international success.

Moon trained at Sun Hwa Arts School, London's Royal Ballet School and L'Academie de Danse Classique de Princess Grace in Monaco. She was a founding

Moon wants to complete the Korean ballet trilogy with the adaptation of "Heungbu and Nolbu," a tale of two contrasting brothers. "Shim Chung was about filial duty and Chunhyang centered on love and a pure life. The brotherly affection of Heungbu and Nolbu is another traditional value of Korea we hope to impart through ballet," the director said.



Julia Moon, center-right, instructs dancers during a rehearsal

When the UBC completes the full-length Korean ballet trilogy, Moon also wants to work on smaller one-act pieces with a Korean motif. "Now our company has a good repertoire of full-length works. I think we need shorter Korean original ballet or modern ballet to be performed at gala performances, summing up our traditions and values," she added.

Many Korean dancers now eye abroad, dancing with the best troupes across the globe.

UBC is home to a handful of Korean dancers currently dancing with internationally acclaimed troupes, including Lee Sang-eun of Dresden's Semperoper Ballett, Jun Eun-sun of the Royal Swedish Ballet, Han Seo-hye of the Boston Ballet and Rhee Hyon-jun and Son You-hee of the Tulsa Ballet.

As well as UBC's dancers that head outside the country, the company welcomes international talent to dance in Korea. Currently, two of the company's principals — Konstantin Novoselev and Zhen Huang — are from overseas and there are many more among the soloists and corps de ballet.

"We are 'universal,'" Moon said, smiling. "Ballet is a universal language and it is natural for us to be open regardless of nationality."



Dancers of Universal Ballet perform during the Korean premiere of Nacho Duato's "Multiplicity" at LG Arts Center in Seoul in April 2014.

Future of Korean ballet

Korean ballet has been developed at breakneck speed and many Korean dancers have established careers both inside and outside the nation. However, it has not yet had its own homegrown masterpiece or Korean choreographers behind it.

"European ballet has a history spanning over 400 years, but we boiled it down to 40 years in Korea.

Individual dancers are among the best in the world, but we need infrastructural development," Moon said.

Moon emphasized that more regional ballet companies would help the Korean ballet world to move to the next step. "I danced at the Washington Ballet, which was a small company with some 21 dancers, but such regional companies are the grass roots of American ballet. Retired dancers can share their experience at regional companies, leading to balanced development of the ballet world," Moon said. "Local companies need to work without worries for the next year's funding."

Discovering and supporting new choreographers is another task of the UBC.

"Great dancers become great choreographers and they need time to experience and build up their own choreography. Talented young dancers now retire and start working on their pieces," Moon said. "We have been dashing forward for 30 years to build the foundations and now it's time to work with more experimental pieces with young choreographers. It will take time for Korea to have an outstanding choreographer, but they have to get the experience. The UBC is ready to make this happen."

This private ballet company is heading for another adventure this year, headlined by the premiere of Australian choreographer Graeme Murphy's "Giselle."

"He is a celebrated choreographer known for modernizing the story of classical ballet. The new Giselle will be completely different from what we have seen," Moon said. "It will satisfy both the dancers who take a step further in the combination of classical and contemporary choreography and Korean ballet fans who want something new."