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Royal Winnipeg Ballet soloist Yayoi Ban taking her final bow

ALL HEART, NO FEAR

JEN ZORATTI

AFTER 19 seasons with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, soloist Yayoi Ban will be hanging up her pointe shoes.

Her upcoming performances in fan favourite *Carmina Burana* and the world premiere of Cameron Fraser-Monroe's *Tel: The Wild Man of the Woods* at the end of the month will be her last as a company dancer.

"It's mixed feelings, for sure," says Ban, sitting in an empty studio at the RWB's Graham Avenue campus. "I'm going to miss dancing, and dancing with everybody. But I'm excited. I'm going to teach after this. I'm excited to share the knowledge and experience with students."

"Right now, though, I don't feel like it's real."

Ban started thinking about retirement at the beginning of the current season. At first, she thought she might try to make it an even 20 seasons — a nice round number.

But she also recently celebrated another nice round number: her 40th birthday in March. Most ballet dancers retire between the ages of 35 and 40, and Ban didn't want her career to end unceremoniously in injury.

"I wanted to decide for myself. I started feeling (like) my body's different. I could push a little bit more but, at the same time, I felt like I could do something else," she says.

Besides, she's pretty much done it all. In her time with the company, Ban has performed in many marquee roles in the RWB's repertoire, including Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*, Nancy in *Vai Caniparoli's A Cinderella Story*, Clara in *Nutcracker* and the title role in *Giselle*, as well as a broad range of characters in a career's worth of RWB productions mounted here at home and on stages all over the world.

"She's a very, very special dancer — I feel that you don't come across an artist like this very often in one career," says Tara Birtwhistle, the RWB's associate artistic director and former principal dancer.

"She has a beautiful elegance you can't teach, and is so open to new ideas and exploring different ways of

approaching different characters ... and she approached that with all of her heart and what appeared to be no fear."

Ban's family is flying in from Japan for her final performances. They may be her last, but they will mark a special first.

"My mom has never seen me dance with the company," Ban says.



Ban (née Ezawa) grew up in Chiba, Japan. Her mother's love of ballet was, in part, what inspired Ban to pursue the artform; her mom even took up ballet recreationally when she was in her 20s.

Ban's eldest sister took ballet lessons before she did, "but the teacher was too strict so she quit," Ban says.

But young Yayoi, watching her sister's class at the studio, was transfixed.

"I was like, (gasps) 'I want to do it,'" she recalls with a laugh.

BAN began her training at the age of nine at Rei Classical Ballet Institute and Momoko Tani Ballet, before moving across the world at 17 to further her studies in the RWB School Professional Division.

Moving to a new country on her own didn't scare her; Ban was just thrilled at the prospect of being able to dance every day.

"My mom thought maybe I'll come back after a year or something. But I knew I wouldn't," Ban says.

After graduating from the school's ballet academic program, she completed another two years in the Anna McCowan-Johnson Aspirant Program before being hired by the RWB as an apprentice in 2005.

She joined the corps de ballet in 2006, and then rose to the rank of soloist, a position she's held since 2014.

Ban actually learned about the company from her ballet teacher in Japan, who happened to be a big fan of ballet icon and former RWB principal dancer Evelyn Hart. Hart left the company the same year Ban was hired.



Royal Winnipeg Ballet soloist Yayoi Ban is retiring at the end of this season after 19 years with the company.

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● CONTINUED ON D4

YAYOI BAN ● FROM D1

So it was particularly auspicious when Ban was coached by Hart for the coveted starring turn in *Giselle* for the 2015-16 season.

"Giselle was my dream role, so that was amazing," Ban says.

Her turn in the dual lead roles of Odette/Odile in a production of *Swan Lake* in the previous season cemented the soloist as a star.

Birtwhistle coached Ban on the technically and artistically demanding Odette (white swan) and Odile (black swan), which are always performed by the same dancer.

During one performance, after Ban had transformed from sweet Odette into seductive Odile, Birtwhistle overheard someone in the audience insisting to his seatmate that it couldn't be the same ballerina.

"That's the peak of artistry right there, that she could be Odette/Odile and people actually thought she was a different person," Birtwhistle says.

Ban also had a stress fracture in her right foot during that production of *Swan Lake*.

"I really, really wanted to do it, so I pushed it, and I was so happy," she says. "I was off for a couple months after the show."

Pushing through *Swan Lake* with a stress fracture also means pushing through Odile's famous 32 fouetté turns, which require a ballerina to spin on one toe while whipping the raised leg around in quick, tight rotations.

"I was lucky that the stress fracture wasn't on my supporting leg so I didn't actually have to turn on my fractured foot," Ban says later via email. "I have no idea how I would have managed 32

fouetté if it was on the other foot."



"YAYOI is one of my most favourite people to work with," says former RWB second soloist Liam Caines, who retired from the company last season after 17 years.

"Now, I'm partially biased because she's also a really close friend of mine, but she has sort of a genuine authenticity to what she does that you can't train, you can't teach people that quality. As an audience member, there's a believability behind whatever it is she's trying to express. And then as a (dance) partner, she helps you become that much more immersed in (your roles)."

Ban's elegance and quiet intensity certainly shine through when she inhabits ballet's more serious roles, but she is also a gifted character actor and physical comedian, as anyone who caught her performance as Juliet's Nurse in February's production of *Romeo & Juliet* can attest.

Even in the studio, Ban is a performer. Caines recalls a time when choreographer Shawn Hounsell was creating 2011's *Wonderland* — a contemporary take on *Alice in Wonderland* — for the company and Ban, then in the corps de ballet, was workshoping her role as the Dormouse, who has a tendency to nod off.

"She'd do five steps and then fall asleep standing up, and I remember the whole room just being in stitches at what she cooked up pretty much immediately," Caines says.

That playful side of Ban can be unexpected if you don't know her, Caines



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Ban came to Winnipeg from Chiba, Japan, at age 17 to attend the RWB School.

says.

"She's not the loud extrovert trying to impose herself on whatever the situation is. Those moments where she really gets to turn the switch on sometimes take people by surprise," he says.

"I always say that she has this incredible, quiet leadership in her," Birtwhistle says. "She walks into a room and you notice her, but it's this calm energy. She is so committed to her artistry and the art of dance, but also being the quiet leader in the room to her colleagues."

Both describe Ban as humble. She's not a natural spotlight seeker. She rarely does press, apologizing (unnecessarily) at the beginning of our conversation for not being good at doing

interviews.

"I'm not good at expressing myself in words," Ban says. "Dancing is how I express myself. I'm going to miss that."

Ban and her husband plan to stay in Winnipeg. She's looking forward to spending more time with her two young sons, the youngest of whom was born during the pandemic, and beginning her second act as a teacher.

She wasn't afraid to move across the world to pursue her dream, and she's not afraid of what comes next after she takes her final bows — on her terms.

"That's a gift," Birtwhistle says. "To be able to choose this for herself is a wonderful way to step off the stage."

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