

# Ballerinas pointe to victory

Local dancers clinch top-place finishes at two renowned global ballet contests

**Lisabel Ting**

**T**hree young dancers have done Singapore proud by snagging top-place finishes at two prestigious international ballet competitions – the best showing by Singaporean dancers to date.

At this year's American Ballet Competition held in Massachusetts last month, Zecharie Tan, 15, and Sarah Kang, 16, finished top of their respective age divisions in the contemporary solo category, while Deborah Lau, 16, finished third in hers. There were between 20 and 30 contenders in each division.

Kang also came in second in the classical solo category.

The competition, which is for dancers aged nine to 19, draws about 150 participants each year and is one of the major contests for young dancers. It is known for letting participants attend masterclasses held by established practitioners. They include Ms Dinna Bjorn, former artistic director of the Finnish National Ballet and the Norwegian National Ballet, and Mr Michael Owen, director of ballet at the Walnut Hill School for the Arts in Massachusetts.

It also awards scholarships and offers training opportunities to dancers who do well, at institutions such as the Washington School of Ballet and the Joffrey Ballet School in New York.

Kang also impressed at the World Ballet Competition, one of the most prestigious international ballet events. This year's contest, which was held last month in Orlando, Florida, drew 175 participants from 18 countries.

She qualified for the finals in the pre-professional category, which is for those aged 14 to 17, and came in 11th out of 45 participants.

Although Kang has taken part in seven international competitions since 2009, she confesses to feeling jittery at the American Ballet Competition.

The Anglo-Chinese Junior College student, who turns 17 this year, had taken a year off competing internationally to prepare for her O levels last year.

"I was excited and slightly nervous when I was on standby in the wings, but when I started to perform, I began to enjoy myself and felt comfortable about being back on stage," she says. "After my bow at the end of the solo, I felt good but couldn't help thinking about the areas in which I could have done better."



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The three students train at Cheng Ballet Academy, a private dance school off Bukit Timah Road which was set up in 2007. It has about 250 students and runs basic classes for students aged three and above to advanced adult ballet.

Founder and director of the academy, Mr Cheng Hsienfa, says of the three girls: "I'm very proud of their endurance and perseverance. Their results re-affirm our belief that our students have potential and can do even better."

Taiwan-born Mr Cheng, 46, has danced with the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre in Taiwan, the Metropolitan Ballet Theatre and the Singapore Dance Theatre.

He took part in the New York International Ballet

Competition in 1987, where he was talent-spotted and won a scholarship to train at the Joffrey Ballet School. He moved to Singapore in 1995.

For his choreography and the outstanding performance by his students, he was given teaching awards at both the competitions this year.

"The international platform opens up our students' world, giving them new dreams, perspectives and goals, as well as exposes them to the myriad challenges and pressures of taking part in international competitions," he says.

Lau, an International Baccalaureate Year 4 student at the School of the Arts, agrees. She has been taking part in international competitions since

2011, but was initially worried about having to juggle ballet and a heavy academic workload.

She decided to take part in the recent competitions to gain experience and exposure.

"Watching the other competitors can be a real eye-opener," she says.

Mr Cheng plans to encourage all his students to continue taking part in competitions overseas. Since setting up the school, 20 of his students have competed overseas.

"If our students do not take part in these platforms, they won't understand what pressure is and how to push themselves further," he says.

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Ballet master Cheng Hsienfa (centre) and his winning students (from far left) Zecharie Tan, Sarah Kang and Deborah Lau