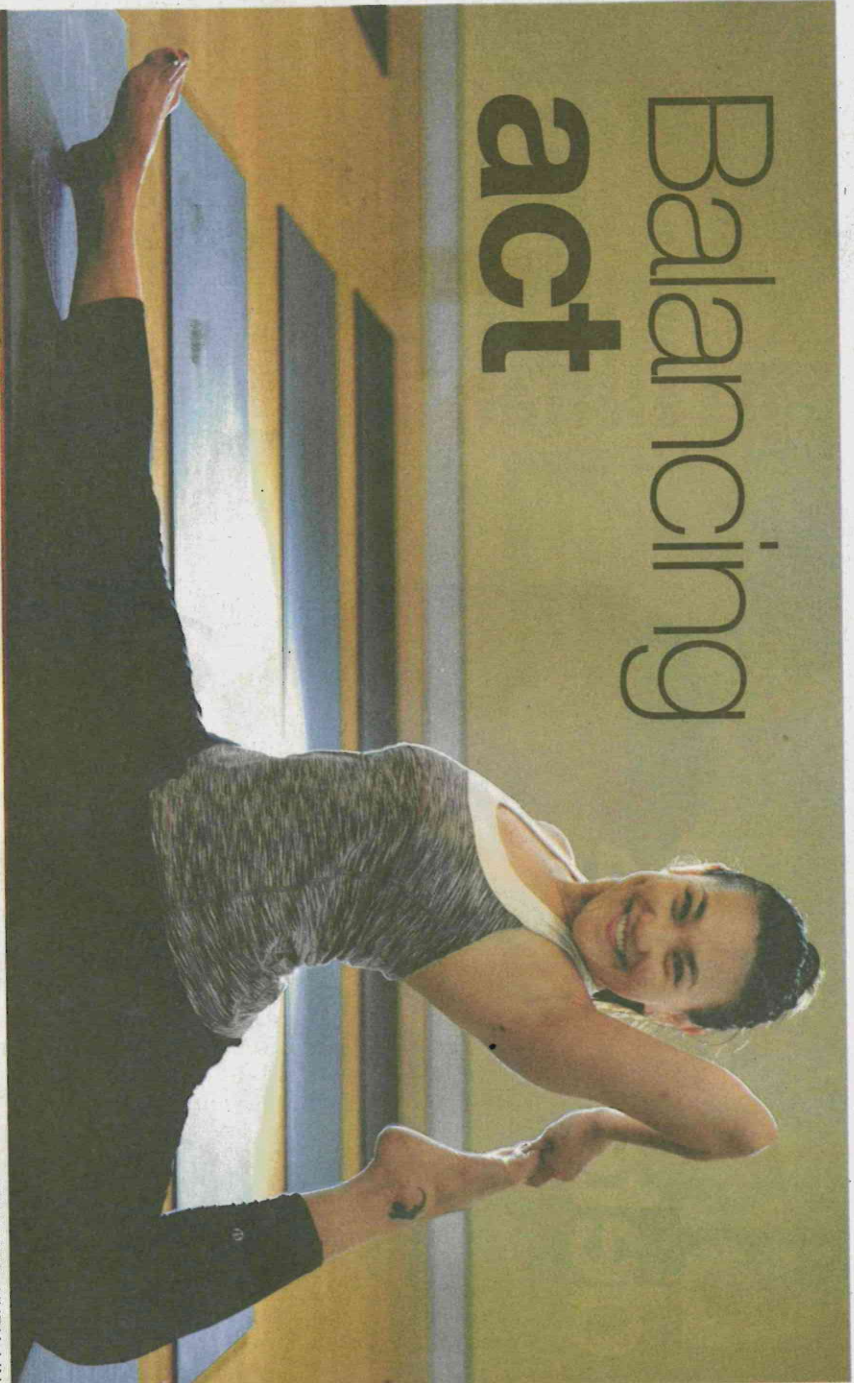


Balancing act



ST PHOTO: NURIA LING

Theatre director Loretta Chen tells **Lee Hui Chieh** how yoga helped her stay in shape despite multiple injuries and operations

When were you a fitness instructor?

I worked as a fitness instructor during my university days in Singapore, which was about four years.

It seemed like a fun thing to do when I was an undergraduate. It was a great way to make extra cash, stay fit and meet interesting people.

I was teaching Step Reebok. (Does anyone remember what that is?) So Reebok sponsored my shoes and apparel and I was even in an ad for it, which was aired here.

So why did you stop?

I developed osteoarthritis at the age of 24. The meniscus in my right knee, which is part of the cartilage, tore three times – in 1999, 2000 and 2002.

Each time, I needed surgery as my torn meniscus prevented me from walking.

Surgery was the only option. The operations were done to “clean up” all the torn meniscus in the knee.

My muscles would atrophy with each operation.

I also had to undergo surgery for my bunions, which are misaligned, swollen and painful toe joints. I don’t wear heels as I am fairly tall but I had severe bunions which caused great pain.

In 1999, my bunions became inflamed, which later developed into a blood infection that required immediate surgery.

I opted to have both my bunions removed at the same time in 2007. I was wheelchair-bound for at least two months and completed my dissertation for my doctorate of philosophy then.

How do you keep fit despite these previous injuries?

My knee is still very weak and my sense of balance has been affected after the bunion surgery. I also developed poor body alignment as a result of these problems.

So I was quite sedentary. I attended the occasional pilates class and did brisk walking to stay active.

However, I have been practising yoga daily for the past four months. I do a variety of hot, vinyasa, yin, ashtanga and hatha yoga between one and 2½ hours each day.

The yoga has been seminal in improving my strength, alignment, posture and overall well-being.

Are you taking precautions to avoid injuries again?

Yes, no more high-impact activities for me, though I do miss kick-boxing and body combat classes. I used to push my body to extremes just to challenge myself.

But yoga is different. It inculcates mindfulness and awareness.

I practise yoga religiously now and am able to put aside my ego and say “no” to challenging poses that may cause pain or discomfort and channel my energy into challenging my focus, increasing my strength and improving the alignment of my body.

How did you get started on yoga?

I was aching as I pulled a muscle in my shoulder.

My friend in Toronto, who is a yoga teacher, literally pulled me by my collar, thrust a mat upon me and told me to do a downward dog (a yoga pose). I am so glad she did that as I have never looked back since.

What is your diet like?

It predominantly comprises salad, clear soup, congee with steamed fish, stir fried vegetables and tofu.

Do you count your calories?

No, I just make sure I have a variety of colours in my food – green, red and yellow (vegetables); some white (carbohydrates and white meat) and a little brown (meat).

How do you find the time to exercise?

When I am working on a production – and I usually work on two to three at a time – it is not uncommon for me to work for up to 18 hours a day.

What I do now is to block off my mornings – between 7am and 10am – for yoga so I have no meetings or rehearsals before 10am.

How do you relax and maintain a healthy work-life balance?

There is an adage that says love what you do and you don’t have to work a single day.

In a way, I never feel as though I am working as I love my work. Even on a tough day, I know I am fulfilled as I am blessed to be able to do what I love. But the downside is that I sometimes work 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Now that I practise yoga, there is greater balance in my life as I make sure I put aside time for my mat.

I also ensure that I always make time for friends and family.

BIO BOX

Loretta Chen

AGE: 35

WEIGHT: 60kg

HEIGHT: 1.7m

ABOUT HER: The theatre director used to be a fitness instructor until her right knee buckled due to wear and tear.

The younger sister of actor Edmund Chen, Dr Chen received her bachelor’s degree in theatre studies and the English language from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and her master’s degree in theatre studies from Royal Holloway, University of London.

She went on to attain a doctorate of philosophy in theatre, awarded jointly by the University of California, Los Angeles and NUS.

She is now the creative director of 360 Productions, a creative consultancy and public relations company. She set it up in Canada last year with writer-producer Jennifer Phillips, a Singapore permanent resident.

As an adjunct professor at the Centre for Women’s Studies and Education at the University of Toronto, she gives seminars and conducts workshops there. She also stages at least one production in Toronto every year as the artist in residence there. She will be restaging a feminist-themed production called The F Word in Toronto in March this year. The Singaporean spends half of her time in Toronto and the rest of it in Singapore.

What are the three most important things in your life?

Love, inspiration and health.

Without health, we are unable to experience all that life has to offer.

Inspiration fuels my creativity and allows me to always see the silver lining of a dark cloud.

And love encompasses all – family, friends, faith and life.

What is your secret to looking fabulous?

Happiness. Because joy is not found in things. It is found within.

Would you go for plastic surgery?

No. I am too freaked out by all the horror stories I have read and I have too morbid an imagination.

Do you think you’re sexy?

I am no J-Lo (American actress Jennifer Lopez) but I have a fun, fierce and fearless mind that I think can be considered attractive.

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