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Whelan is a 'creature' beautifully transformed

By Janine Parker

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CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN/JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE

Wendy Whelan and Joshua Beamish perform his "Waltz Epoca" during the "Restless Creature" program at Jacob's Pillow.

beautifully fey line between ballerina and creature. “Creature” suggests wildness, though in fact Whelan is a master of reserved clarity. But she is one of those artists who submerge their physical selves into their art in such a way that humanness is, for a few sublime moments, transcended.

And the “restless” in “Restless Creature,” the program Whelan stars in this week at Jacob’s Pillow? It explains why Whelan gathered up four contemporary choreographers to create works for her using their individual movement vocabularies, artistic sensibilities, and stylistic idiosyncrasies: She wanted the challenge.

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The result is a stripped-down affair. For Whelan and the project’s creative director, David Michalek, it’s all about the process, and not about the pedestal. The four duets — choreographed by Kyle Abraham, Joshua Beamish, Brian Brooks, and Alejandro Cerrudo, who each dance in their own works with Whelan — all begin with the stage already exposed, and end without bows.

On opening night Cerrudo’s “Ego et Tu” looked like it was still in sketch form, but there are some arresting images. Cerrudo whooshes Whelan around and around, her outstretched feet just skimming the floor; hovering, wing-like arms make references — actually, fairly direct quotes — to George Balanchine’s “Serenade.” Whelan even places one hand over Cerrudo’s eyes and, walking behind, propels him forward.

Whereas in Beamish’s “Waltz Epoca,” it’s Whelan who at first seems manipulated. The two move quirkily, etching stiffly angled shapes; often a strange beat or two off, they conjure mechanical dolls stuck in stuttering counterpoint. Beamish splits his body in two, his head and torso a-wiggle above precise legs; for the first part of the dance, he may be a threatening puppet-master who has Whelan under his spell. Gradually, little tendernesses affect them. He leans a cheek into her offered palm; she swoons to the side, and when he catches her, she looks at him, wonderingly. When she stalks off, he falls over, momentarily bereft. She returns clad in a long maroon skirt, transformed, her movements now flowing and generous. It’s his turn to be led, until they join and waltz about the stage, finally almost in synch, their heads making abrupt little off-meter circles.

RESTLESS CREATURE

Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, Becket
413-243-0745. <http://www.jacobspillow.org>

Closing date: Aug. 18**Ticket price:** \$39-69

In his sensuous “The Serpent and the Smoke,” though Abraham (the serpent, it appears) is taken by Whelan’s beguiling trail, the relationship feels like a kindred one. The piece is part mysterious ritual and part opiate dream; the two often dance in unison, with lots of curvy, sinuous, and fast-winding arm movements spiked with thick pauses, the dancers now hovering on one leg. In those striking poses, Whelan looks like a regal flamingo; if she’s not as articulate during the quicksilver undulations, just give her time. Like Mikhail Baryshnikov, she’s a physical genius who’ll figure it all out.

It’s in Brooks’s luminous “First Fall” that we see Whelan’s fated, melancholy facet. The opening of the duet is a tour de force of breathtaking ceaselessness: The two swirl, dip, rise, and turn together, rarely losing contact with each other. As a hand touches an elbow, the elbow flows out; a brush on a shoulder causes the shoulder to drop and curve. In dark contrast, the remainder of the duet is a series of heartbreaking déjà vus, as Whelan steps up, like a zoned-out somnambulist, onto parallel demi-pointe and pitches forward or backward; each time, Brooks anticipates her fall, and catches her, softly, absorbing her weight like a humble safety net. The spare, repetitive movement, rather than dulling with each iteration, instead builds until we are in a poetically hazy space between desperation and hope.

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