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Risky behavior from an icon of dance

By Elaine Stuart

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New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan is used to the scene that took place at Manhattan Movement & Arts Center a few weeks ago: a throng of girls in pink tights and buns crowding outside a studio trying to catch a glimpse of her. But two days earlier, while rehearsing with up-and-coming choreographer Kyle Abraham, Whelan was the one who was star-struck.

The two were practicing Abraham's duet, one of four pairing the ballerina with a contemporary choreographer that will premiere at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival on Aug. 14 in a show titled "Restless Creature." The dance begins with a solo by Abraham, and Whelan watched wide-eyed as he oozed through the movements. "I have to stop thinking about trying to be you," she said a little later.



ELIZABETH LIPPMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE 14-11-03 6:30 PM

Wendy Whelan, performs in "Restless

Pillow Dance Festival this month.

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“Restless Creature” is a daring departure for the iconic Balanchine ballerina, who joined City Ballet in 1984 and was promoted to principal in 1991. Since then, she’s served as muse to master choreographers and performed as a guest artist on the world’s greatest stages. But this project, which is co-commissioned by Jacob’s Pillow, marks the first time she’s running the show.

Whelan handpicked her collaborators because their individual dance styles differed from her own. “I’m seeing what I can learn from each of them and how I can translate what they do in my own way,” Whelan said recently at Gibney Dance Center in New York City. “I’m taking their ideas and trying to expand on them for myself. There’s a lot of more, more, more, deeper, lower, higher, farther, faster.”

In addition to Abraham’s piece, the program includes duets created and danced by Joshua Beamish, artistic director of MOVE: The Company; Brian Brooks, artistic director of Brian Brooks Moving Company; and Alejandro Cerrudo, resident choreographer of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. “Restless Creature” will tour after its debut at Jacob’s Pillow.

Restless Creature

Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival,

Date of first performance: Aug. 14

Date closing: Aug. 18

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All of these artists were deeply honored — and somewhat befuddled — to be approached by such a giant of classical dance. When asked if it was intimidating to work with Whelan, Brooks answered, “It still is!”

“We all know her so well because of her extraordinary talent, but in the studio she’s so humble

Yet the stakes are equally high for Whelan, working in a different medium. Over the course of her long career, she has danced many contemporary ballets by choreographers including Christopher Wheeldon, Alexei Ratmansky, and William Forsythe, but these four works represent new terrain. While each duet has a distinct voice, the movement overall is more fluid and grounded than classical or even neo-classical ballet. (At an early showing of "Restless Creature," Whelan remarked that taking off her pointe shoes was like removing her bra.)

It was this challenge that attracted her. "About a year ago I was telling Alexei Ratmansky about this project and he was like, 'Well you know you're never going to be as good as the choreographers,'" Whelan recalled. "And I was like, 'I know!' But that's kind of the point. I'm not trying to outdo them at what they do. I'm diving into their world." She says City Ballet has been supportive of the endeavor, and she has no immediate plans to retire, but she's clearly thinking about the next phase of her career. She cites Mikhail Baryshnikov and Sylvie Guillem as role models who continued to evolve as artists with age. "I just want to keep taking steps in what I do, and it's hard to do that being 46 in a ballet company, to keep moving forward."

Whelan's eagerness to grow was apparent in a recent rehearsal with Beamish. The Canadian choreographer, who is 20 years younger than Whelan to the day, surprised her by adding a new section to his duet. "Josh, it's in 14 days!" the ballerina exclaimed as he walked her through some intricate partnering. But after quickly mastering a sequence she grinned and joked, "Old dog, new tricks."

"My movement is not 'Swan Lake,'" Beamish said afterward. "I'm asking her to do things that reference what she's always done, like a tendu or certain jumps, but I'm also asking her do things with her arms that make no sense. So it's like rewiring years and years of muscle memory to do something familiar in a way that's strange."

Many ballet dancers avoid being out of their comfort zone, but not Whelan. "I like to find open windows and open doors when faced with a challenge," she said. "I see a limit, but then I find a way to get past that limit. It's a creative thing. It's kind of like finding the answer to a puzzle or a math problem."

This impulse is where the name "Restless Creature" comes from. "Creature" stems from the verb create (and is a nod to the fact that her striking athleticism and sinewy physique have led her to be compared to one at times). And "restless" refers to "being restless after 28 years as a professional ballerina to do more and to find a new way of expressing."



She's not afraid to fail," said Brooks. "At her age and what she's achieved, for her to want to know more about the art form is pretty wild and so brave. It feels like a new beginning for somebody we wouldn't expect needs a new beginning." This, he believes, is what makes "Restless Creature" so exhilarating. "It's not just seeing a great dancer perform, it's seeing it with the knowledge that it is a huge risk."

Whelan rehearsing a duet with Kyle Abraham for "Restless Creature."

Abraham's style, which he describes as "a postmodern gumbo" of influences from Trisha Brown to Merce Cunningham to the clubs where he started dancing, is perhaps the biggest stretch for Whelan. (He was also the first choreographer she knew she wanted to work with, after seeing him perform.) "The first two rehearsals were really play dates," said Abraham, who also has his own company. He added that he was impressed by Whelan's willingness to explore foreign movements.

Toward the end of her duet with him, she lets down her hair, contracts her torso, and begins making slow waves with her upper body. Her supple back arches and rounds, ribs and abs rippling through her leotard. It's an arresting image — the prima ballerina turned inward in a quiet moment of vulnerability.

"It's been fun to feel myself literally opening up as an artist and a person," Whelan said, leaning forward and parting the air with her hands. "I never used to know how to do a body roll. That's a new thing for me. And it's like a new favorite food to try that movement."

Her eyes brighten at the metaphor. "It's kind of like when you find out you really like gelato, you want to eat gelato every day!"

"Restless Creature" will also be presented by Celebrity Series of Boston at the Citi Shubert Theatre March 28-29.

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