



The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1HMm49o>

DANCE

Review: Wendy Whelan's 'Restless Creature' Is Full of Jagged Rhythms

By **GIA KOURLAS** MAY 27, 2015

Wendy Whelan, one of the most extraordinary ballerinas of her generation, doesn't want to be a ballerina anymore. In the long-awaited New York premiere of "Restless Creature," postponed from last year because of hip surgery, Ms. Whelan does more than experiment with another form: She commits to contemporary dance. At this stage in her post-New York City Ballet career, it feels more like an arranged marriage, but if this showcase proves anything, it is that Ms. Whelan, 48, shouldn't stop dancing anytime soon.

In "Restless Creature," performed on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, she dances with four male choreographers — Kyle Abraham, Joshua Beamish, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo — who have created duets mainly set to live music. It's a refined, moodily lighted program, lasting just an hour even with costume changes. It makes sense that David Michalek, a photographer and visual artist who focuses on portraiture (and is Ms. Whelan's husband), is creative director. In spite of Joe Levasseur's frequently dusky lighting, these bodies — chiseled as if carved from marble — are framed in a way that allows them to be seen.

But the choreography only intermittently displays Ms. Whelan's feather-light luminosity. She's a world of contradictions: earthy and ethereal, angular and soft. Mr. Cerrudo's "Ego et Tu," set to a mix of music including Max Richter and Philip Glass, begins with Mr. Cerrudo darting from one foot to the other as his swishing

arms thread through the air. He covers his eyes and scoops his hands to the side. Is he the restless one?

Ms. Whelan, in a pale, backless dress by Karen Young, parts a curtain and enters from the back of the stage; she echoes his arm movements, but with a more voluminous wingspan. Once together, they tap heads, and he dips backward; seconds later, she dives through his arms. It's generic: These slippery bodies stop one beat short of anguish. Mr. Abraham's "The Serpent and the Smoke," set to music by Hauschka and Hildur Guonadottir, is even less of a whole, though, as with "Ego et Tu," it shows a choreographer dancing his work the way it's meant to be danced.

Mr. Abraham's opening solo possesses such force that his whiplash arms are a blur. When Ms. Whelan joins in, she follows his shapes, but not his jagged rhythms. The struggle is between form and mawkishness; in the end, Ms. Whelan lets her hair loose and whips her head and arms as she exits. Mr. Abraham remains in the shadows.

Mr. Brooks's "First Fall," set to music by Mr. Glass, relies on tasks of falling and catching, with an abundance of those ever-interlacing arms. Increasingly, it becomes overwrought as Ms. Whelan, in a yellow dress, leans on Mr. Brooks and then flattens him to the floor. Mr. Brooks is certainly meticulous, but "First Fall" comes off like a choreographic exercise.

Ms. Whelan, now in red, comes closest to finding her poetry in Mr. Beamish's "Conditional Sentences," set to Bach, in which polished footwork weaves between parallel and turnout positions, and the arms, while quirky and gestural, have a courtly air. Ballet is a ghost in this duet, which really seems a tale about two people learning how to dance with each other while still remaining themselves. Much of "Restless Creature" is about displaying the external; here, subtly and buoyantly, Ms. Whelan is able to draw from the inside out. It comes back to that creature word: She's a living thing, and with Mr. Beamish it shows.

"Restless Creature" continues through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue,

at 19th Street, Chelsea; 212-242-0800, joyce.org.

A version of this review appears in print on May 28, 2015, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: Seeking Her Own Poetry in Contemporary Duets.

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