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QUOTABLE

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WENDY WHELAN ON DANCING BAREFOOT, PAGE 7



Wendy Whelan embraces contemporary choreographers.

By SIOBHAN BURKE

After 29 years with one of the world's most demanding ballet companies, some dancers might start to feel worn out. Wendy Whelan, the New York City Ballet principal, has the opposite problem.

"I'm a strange case," Ms. Whelan said recently at her Upper West Side apartment. "I have a lot of energy, a lot of interest, a lot of desire. I want to keep exploring. But I'm in my mid-40s, so it's just different. They have to make space for the new people, and I understand that. But I still have so much left."

Long considered City Ballet's most strikingly modern ballerina, Ms. Whelan, 46, is venturing beyond the traditional ballet world, where dancers routinely retire by 40, to satisfy her desire for challenges. In her new project, "Restless Creature," she sought four on-the-rise, contemporary choreographers — Kyle Abraham, Joshua Beamish, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo — to create a series of duets for her. Each choreographer will also be Ms. Whelan's partner as she sheds familiar ways of moving and slips into new ones.

The four works — in one hourlong program — will have their premieres on Aug. 14 at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Mass., which co-commissioned the project. A multicity tour will begin in March 2014, stopping at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan in April.

"I was completely intrigued by how different from myself they were," Ms. Whelan said when asked why she chose these choreographers. "I wanted to feel what they felt, in my body. I kept thinking, that would be a real test of how interesting and good you are as an artist."

Speaking of Ms. Whelan's goals, Mr. Abraham, 35, said: "She told me that she wanted to be transformed. She said, 'I want to try on what you do.'"

While "Restless Creature," in some ways, is a leap into the unknown, it is also a logical step for Ms. Whelan, who, since joining City Ballet as a 17-year-old apprentice, has thrived in the most adventurous repertory. Celebrated for her lucid, assured intensity onstage and her voracious curiosity in the studio — all expressed through her distinctively angular physique — she has originated roles in works by William Forsythe, Wayne McGregor, Alexei Ratmansky and, most notably, Christopher Wheeldon. From 2007 to 2010, Mr. Wheeldon gave her an off-season home in his troupe, Morphoses. More recently, she has been a guest artist with Stephen Petronio and the Martha Graham Dance Company.

"She really is a contemporary dancer within the ballet vocabulary," said Emily Coates, 39, a former City Ballet dancer and the director of dance studies at Yale University. "I think for Wendy, ballet vocabulary is a convenient scaffolding to slither through, to find movement within it that's very much her own."

"She's a kind of one-woman pioneer of neo-neo-classical ballet," Ms. Coates added.

For Ms. Whelan, the process of creating new ballets — the electricity of working one-on-one with a choreographer — has fed that inquisitive spirit. "It would always charge and excite me," she said, emphasizing her experiences with Mr. Ratmansky



Left, Wendy Whelan and Kyle Abraham rehearsing Mr. Abraham's "Serpent and the Smoke," which is part of the program "Restless Creature." Below, Ms. Whelan at Lincoln Center.

barefoot — "to find a real physical, tactile connection to the floor," Ms. Steinberg said — after decades in ballet slippers and that symbol of all things ethereal: point shoes.

"That's pretty huge," Mr. Brooks, 39, said in a phone interview. "In one way, it's lowering the heel five or six inches. But that six inches is generations. It's a lifetime. It's a history."

The shoeless sensation, Ms. Whelan said, was liberating.

During a recent rehearsal at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in Manhattan, Mr. Cerrudo, 33, who is the resident choreographer at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, watched Ms. Whelan swim through a luscious, tangled phrase. "You can melt more," he told her.

"Ballet is for the most part very up-up-up-up," Mr. Cerrudo explained later by phone, "and I'm continuously asking her to go down-down-down. She has the up-up-up so much in her that it's hard to switch. But she's doing it."

Similarly, Mr. Abraham, who directs his own New York company (as does Mr. Brooks) said he hopes to infuse Ms. Whelan's "linear sense" with his more "undulatory quality."

Ms. Whelan said she loves the change of direction. "I'm fascinated by how to get my weight in the ground, how to drop everything down," she said. "I feel like it's such a natural arc as a dance artist." From her seat at a table, she leapt to her feet, gathering her wiry frame into one piercing vertical trajectory. Then just as swiftly, she plunged into a wide, low stance, knees deeply bent, spine swaying gently.

"I actually feel like, being this age, I have something more interesting to say than I did when I was 25," she added. "Something real and worked and experienced."

Mr. Beamish, 26 and based in Vancouver, described Ms. Whelan as "young in her body, young in her search for challenge." Echoing his colleagues, he spoke rapturously of Ms. Whelan's inexhaustible work ethic and down-to-earth demeanor.

While Ms. Whelan has no firm plans to retire from City Ballet, the transition is clearly on her mind. She admires Mikhail Baryshnikov for delving into postmodern dance after his ballet career. "I didn't see that as something he did for his stardom, but for his artistry," she said. "And that's what I want to do. I don't necessarily want people to go, 'Wendy Whelan's next show!' I want people to say, 'Who's Wendy Whelan having a conversation with next?'" (The next conversation will involve female choreographers, she said.)

Mr. Brooks, who showed a draft of his duet at the Vail International Dance Festival, said that conversing with Ms. Whelan through movement has shed new light on facets of his work. He often experiments with convoluted, intertwining arms.

"The arms are folded and they're breaking, they're confusing and cluttered," he said. "And can you imagine? Wendy Whelan doing this? It's like looking at a diamond."



and Mr. Wheeldon. "Chris and Alexei, they make work especially for certain dancers. It's not like, 'This is my piece, and you're in it.' They focus on the individual."

In 2008, Ms. Whelan and Benjamin Millepied starred in Mr. Ratmansky's "Concerto DSCH," choreographed for City Ballet. Writing in The New York Times, Alastair Macaulay, who has given Ms. Whelan mixed reviews over the years, observed, "The finest beauties of the second-movement pas de deux for Ms. Whelan and Mr. Millepied lie in modest details: some lifts that touchingly hover only at nonspectacular heights, some skimming lifts where Ms. Whelan — never more touchingly intimate with her music — softly beats her legs in time to some rippling triplets in the piano part."

But such opportunities have dwindled. Mr. Ratmansky turned his attentions to American Ballet Theater in 2009; Mr. Wheeldon left Morphoses in 2010; younger stars at City Ballet began to flourish.

"I was kind of like a plant that was getting dry, and I needed a big glass of water," Ms. Whelan said, adding that the "Restless Creature" choreographers "are giving me that."

Since diving into the project last year, she has found herself in richly unfamiliar territory.

"She really is learning new languages," said Risa Steinberg, a Juilliard professor and former José Limón dancer who assisted with rehearsals for "Restless Creature." In Mr. Brooks's rehearsal last winter, she encouraged Ms. Whelan to dance