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Restless Creature
Wendy Whelan of City Ballet with Brian Brooks in his "First Fall," one of four modern pieces, at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.

NANCY PALMIERI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ballerina Leaves Her Comfort Zone

BECKET, Mass. — Entering the world of modern dance, as she does in her program "Restless Creature," Wendy Whelan exhibits the same qualities of temperament she has shown for years as a principal dancer of New York City Ballet:

ALASTAIR MACAULAY

DANCE REVIEW

She's uncompromising, generous, bold, enthusiastic, adult, at the same time decisive and investigative. Few dancers in any genre show better that a work should be a process of self-discovery.

Though she's certainly capable of rapture and capriciousness, she does not easily lend herself to the lush or sensuous aspects of Ro-

Four guides lead the way into the territory of modern dance.

manticism; though capable of austerity and rigor, she does not easily embrace the proportionate harmonies of classicism. You're well aware of these contradictions in the four pieces in this world premiere program, which ended its run at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival on Sunday. Her physicality, especially above the waist, demonstrates striking tension

(sometimes), remarkable angularity (often), but also complex fluidity, as she plays with separate physical impulses at any one time.

Though she's never on point, she often arrives in fifth position or arabesque or other ballet positions and steps; the difference is that it's now as if from the outside looking in or as if those familiar devices have become just one segment of a greatly more catholic vocabulary. It's hard to think of another woman who could dance these pieces, by four different choreographers, half so strikingly. Everything about her is riveting, interesting, unusual, intelligent.

She's by no means the first ballerina

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Ballerina Leaves Her Comfort Zone to Explore Modern Dance

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let dancer to venture into modern dance. But no other dancer of prestige — in ballet or modern — can ever have devised a program of four duets in which each of the choreographers — Kyle Abraham, Joshua Beamish, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo — is also the dance partner. The central point that comes across is her versatility. The men all wear black or gray, but she changes from white to yellow, black or red; between dresses (of various lengths) and trousers; and she wears her hair pinned back or flowing. Unhesitatingly, lucidly, she shows four different styles, and four different kinds of drama.

Mr. Abraham and Mr. Brooks are New York choreographers with their own companies; Mr. Beamish is artistic director of Move: the company, in Vancouver, and Mr. Cerrudo of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. Starting in March, "Restless Creature" will travel to nine cities, including New York and London; it's a given that Ms. Whelan's comprehension of these new idioms is likely to progress as the tour proceeds. The choreographic dramas are heightened by Joe Levasseur's lighting — which is sometimes too forceful, however, in the exposure it casts on musculature.

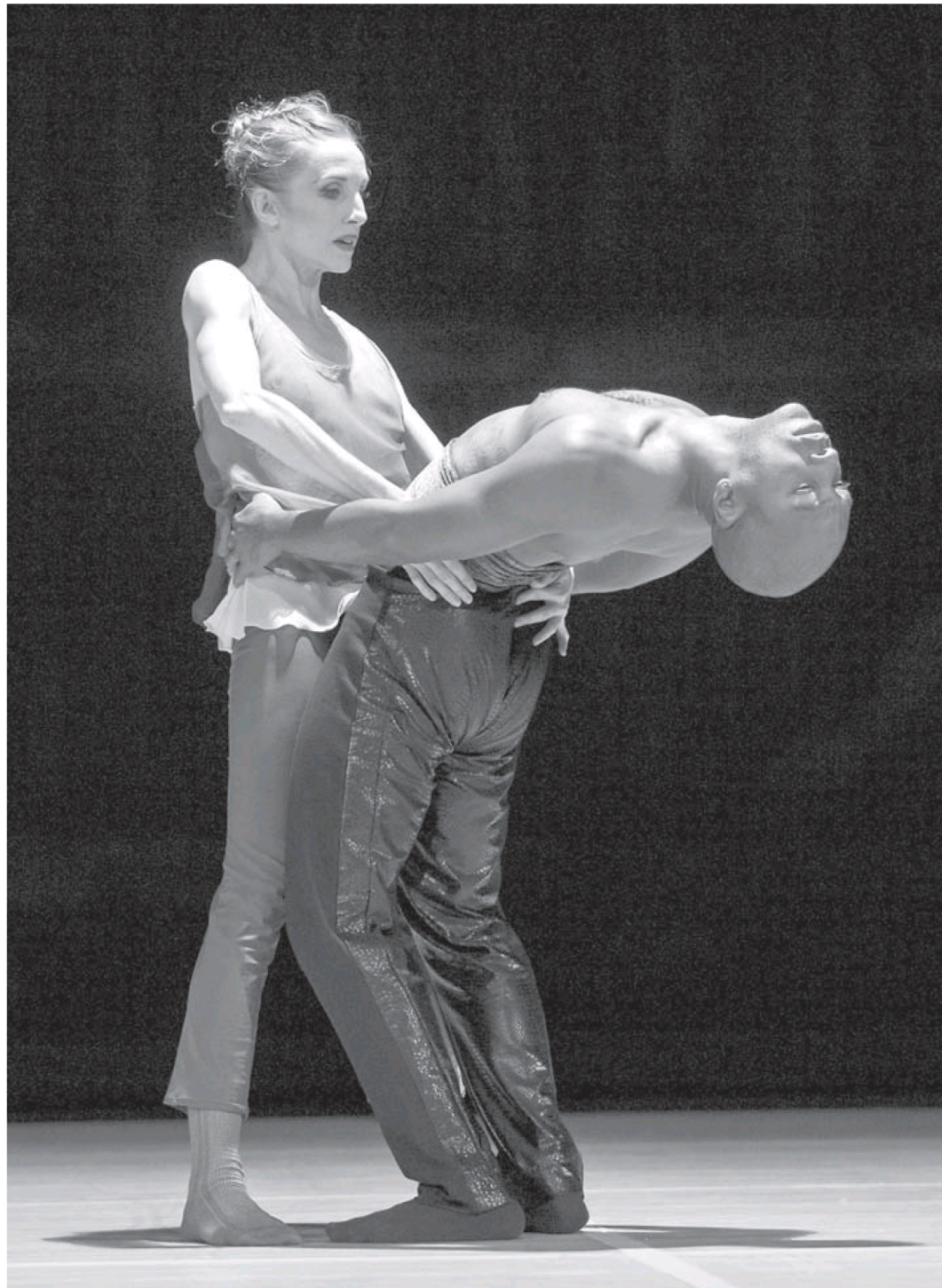
The adventure began last summer, when Ms. Whelan and Mr. Brooks came together at the Vail International Dance Festival to create "Fall Falls," set to Philip Glass music. Now, with the title "First Fall," this is the highlight and final item of "Restless Creature." Mr. Brooks is a juicy, vivid performer. In the opening, they

Separate currents of motion seem to pass through a performer.

move as equals, playfully; she even partners him at one moment. It's here that we most clearly see the liquidity of her dancing and the restlessness in her program title: separate currents of motion pass intricately through her.

More memorable are the different ways, in the duet's second part, that she falls onto him: forward, but being held as she relentlessly paces ahead at an angle; backward, with him there like a mattress to catch her; sideways, holding a straight line from head to foot, while he supports her and slowly sinks to the floor. Several of these falls occupy two directions at once; the most memorable combination is falling sideways, sinking downward and pacing forward. Mr. Brooks is wonderfully selfless, allowing the focus always to fall on Ms. Whelan; and she takes to it as if to this manner born. These sequences alone justify the entire program; you feel the excitement of the pure-movement ex-

"Restless Creature" will travel to nine cities, including Boston, Pittsburgh and London, starting in March. It will be at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, N.J., on March 18; mccarter.org.; and at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan April 2 to 6; joyce.org.



NANCY PALMIERI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Wendy Whelan and Kyle Abraham in "The Serpent and the Smoke" in a move that reverses the sexes of a standard ballet image.

periment in every moment.

The program, which I saw on Friday, opens with Mr. Cerrudo's "Ego et Tu," set to music by four contemporary composers. He opens the proceedings with a solo; then he gives her a marvelous entry, carrying her onto the stage in a low lift before leaving her alone. When he rejoins her for a duet, they work together, often in flowing waves of movement. One image is close to a famous scene Balanchine's "Serenade," as she, embracing him from behind, covers his eyes with one hand and propels him forward. They depart in peace together, arms around each other's waists.

Mr. Beamish's "Waltz Epoca" is a succession of strong ideas that don't add up; we're too aware of this young artist continually trying to renew his claim on our attention. The piece takes its name from its music by Borut Krzisnik, which plays games with musical references (in one number you hear the opening line of the "Va, pensiero" melody from Verdi's "Nabucco"). Mr. Beamish, a half-shadowed voyeur, starts in a zone where Ms. Whelan can't see him; later an overhead light descends and he sets it swinging above her. In one passage, she dons a long red dress and waltzes with him. There's good dancing from both,

but it's intermittent.

"The Serpent and the Smoke" by Mr. Abraham shows him, bare chested, in constantly rippling motion: quick impulses course strongly up his body to alternating shoulders; gradually the duet shows her adding this to her vocabulary. The music is by Hauschka and Hildur Guonadottir. Here the dancers are soloists who sometimes meet for duets; at times it's Ms. Whelan who seems needy, vulnerable, studentlike.

In one arresting moment, however, Ms. Whelan holds Mr. Abraham by the pelvis as his head and torso arch away from her. If you reversed the sexes, you'd

have a standard ballet image — Ms. Whelan must have done hundreds of backbends in men's arms over the years — but I don't ever recall seeing it this way before. We're shown it in profile; the focus of Ms. Whelan's eyes upon Mr. Abraham's torso is a large part of the drama.

An evening so full of different images is hard to evoke and hard to assess. Only Mr. Brooks's "First Fall" is shaped with coherent authority throughout. Yet just because each of the other works is diffuse, they enrich the evening's serious journey into new terrain. The voyage into new idioms is one experienced by this ballerina and audience alike.