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WENDY  
WHELAN  
A STAR  
IS REBORN

# A *Ballerina* in BARE FEET

WENDY WHELAN BREAKS INTO  
BRAND-NEW TERRITORY WITH  
RESTLESS CREATURE. BY SYLVIANE GOLD

**W**endy Whelan is taking a busman's holiday from her day job, which, many would agree, is being *the* preeminent ballerina at New York City Ballet (and maybe everywhere else). In a master class at Jacob's Pillow, she's telling 22 pre-professionals they're "awesome" as she gives corrections and hard-won performance tips. Afterwards, she cheerfully poses arm-in-arm with each of the students, who capture mementos on their cells. Finally, she folds herself into a chair as they sprawl on the floor to ask questions.

Like her dancing, her responses are bracingly forthright and, when appropriate, poetic. How she came to the School of American Ballet from Louisville at 15. How she joined NYCB in 1984, right after the death of George Balanchine. How much she loved "the modernity, the economy, the attack" of his choreography. How her super-strong technique and angular physiognomy propelled her into the "tomboy" parts rather than the "girly-girl" roles she hankered after. And how the sleek, contemporary look that caused her (and her critics) grief was appealing not just to her bosses, Peter Martins and Jerome Robbins, but to the outside choreographers who came to NYCB to make new work. They offered the "huge gift," she says, of seeing more in her than she saw in herself.

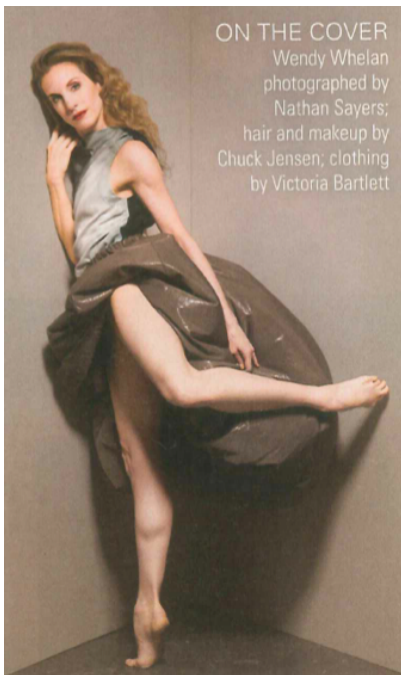
She expounds on her favorite ballet (*Liebeslieder Walzer*), her biggest challenge (full-lengths), the choreographer she most regrets not having worked with (Jiri Kylián).



At this issue's cover shoot, peerless New York City Ballet prima Wendy Whelan posed barefoot (and with contemporary choreographer Kyle Abraham, above) in tribute to her experimental Restless Creature program. Visit the *Pointe* channel on [dancemedia.com](http://dancemedia.com) for behind-the-scenes footage from the shoot.

ON THE COVER

Wendy Whelan  
photographed by  
Nathan Sayers;  
hair and makeup by  
Chuck Jensen; clothing  
by Victoria Bartlett





Whelan with Alejandro Cerrudo  
in *Restless Creature*

When someone asks for a prescription for career success, she offers two words: "Try everything."

Whelan is emphatically not the "do as I say, not as I do" type. In recent years, she's ventured away from the familiar precincts of Lincoln Center to work with downtown eminences like Shen Wei, Dwight Rhoden and Stephen Petronio. She's dipped a toe into film, acting in Pontus Lidberg's *Labyrinth Within*. And now, at 46, with the end of her ballet career on the horizon, she's in full "try everything" mode.

She explains that to her, ballet feels something like her child. "This is the one thing I've cared for, cultivated and thought about for my whole life," she says. "It's not something I can imagine throwing away. I can only imagine cultivating it more, in a different way. When you look at your art as your child, you will do whatever it takes to feed it, because you want it to thrive."

Which is precisely why Whelan is at the Pillow. Temporarily discarding her pointe shoes, she will be dancing later in the summer with four postmodern choreographers in an evening-length program of duets they have made especially for her—"sort of like taking my child and putting it in a new school," she says. She calls the project *Restless Creature*—"restless" because that's why her

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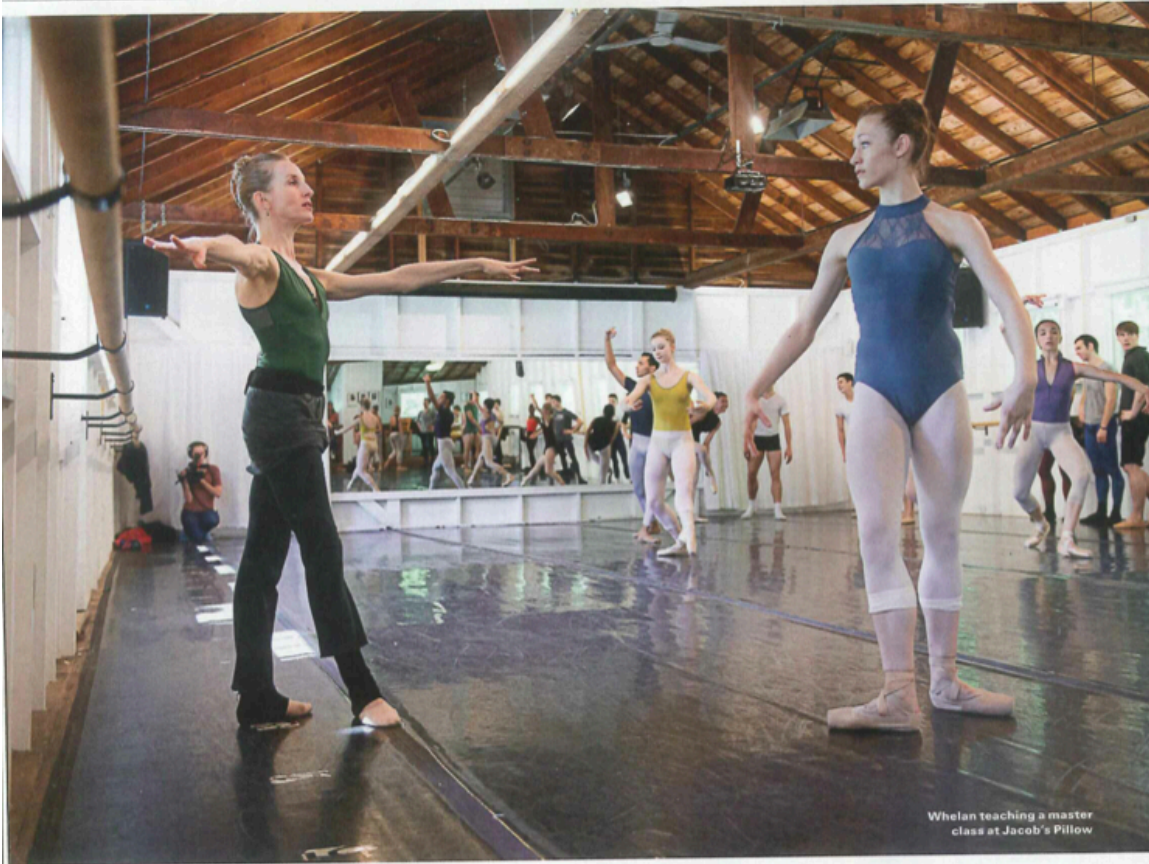
—WENDY WHELAN

mother put her in dance class as a toddler, and "creature" because it springs from the verb "create."

"Come back in August," she tells the Pillow students with a laugh, "and you can see Wendy thug."

The thugging comes by way of the hip-hop roots of Kyle Abraham. When Whelan first saw him at the Fall for Dance Festival, she thought, "If I could feel what it's like to slip into his shoes for a minute and to dance like that, it would be just phenomenal."

Asked if he'd be interested in joining *Restless Creature*, Abraham assumed Whelan was joking. "I started laughing," he recalls. "And she said, 'Would you ever consider making something on me?' I was like, 'Who wouldn't?'"



Whelan teaching a master class at Jacob's Pillow

Three other choreographers also said yes. Joshua Beamish made *Waltz Epoca*, a sometimes acidic elaboration on waltzing; Brian Brooks gave her *First Fall*, a striking exploration of gravity (first performed at Vail International Dance Festival); and Alejandro Cerrudo created *Ego et Tu*, an intricate study in close coordination. Bringing her ballet-bred clarity and dramatic intensity to each of these works, she looked right at home—fluid, rigid or acrobatic, as needed.

"Ballet—technique-wise—is about making shapes," she says. "These are a little bit more internal, like how your core is twisting to make that movement turn into that shape. It's coming from the inside out." The choreography has moved her out of her comfort zone, none more than Brooks'. "His sort of codependent choreography, where we are moving each other's limbs around to make the dance, is nothing I've ever done before," she notes.

It's not every day that ballet stars seek out such grounded, unfamiliar territory, though Mikhail Baryshnikov and Diana Vishneva have both made excursions into modern dance. "Working with contemporary choreographers kept Misha so invigorated and creative, and, I think, inspired," she says. "I wanted to try to follow that kind of lead. People think, 'Misha's Misha.' I see that, but I also see that I can do it for myself, in my way."

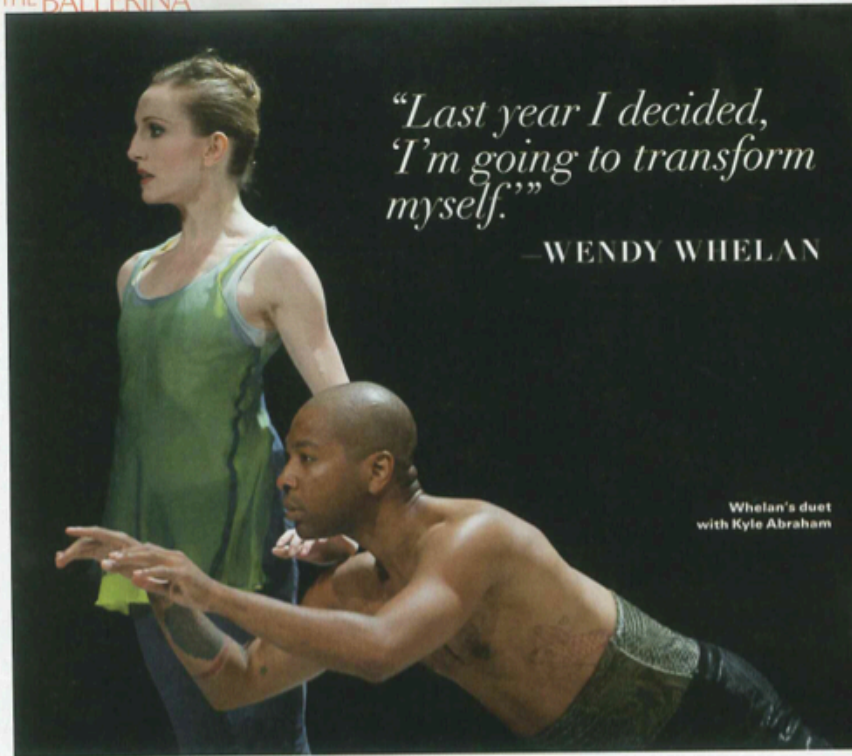
Whelan's creative partnership with Christopher Wheeldon, who's made 13 ballets on her, helped lay the foundation. "Because

I was older than him and a little bit more experienced, he gave me a little more collaborative freedom," she says. "I could tell Chris what felt right out of a movement, or he would respond to a choice I made. In a ballet company, the creative part is very often dictated to you: 'This is what you do; this is the step.' But to me, being part of making something is exciting."

Another spur was the Shen Wei solo she danced with Peter Boal and Company, the chamber troupe begun in 2003 by her former NYCB colleague. Boal told her he'd commission a piece from anyone she selected, and she was thrilled. "I'd never been able to choose who I wanted to work with," she says.

Then her husband, photographer and filmmaker David Michalek, made *Slow Dancing*, the mesmerizing outdoor video installation that was part of the 2007 Lincoln Center Festival. "I got to be a part of the process of watching how he chose who he chose," she says. "And when I saw the finished product—the three screens—every night, it became this conversation. I was really inspired seeing Allegra Kent dancing next to Lil' C and Shantala Shivalingappa. I became aware of how open this art form could be."

Her enthusiasm energizes choreographers. You can see it at a rehearsal of Abraham's *The Serpent and the Smoke*. Whelan concentrates her attention on every word Abraham says and every move he makes. You sense her fierce dedication to getting it right, her hunger to challenge her body, her joy in being his instrument. As



*“Last year I decided,  
I’m going to transform  
myself.”*

—WENDY WHELAN

Whelan’s duet  
with Kyle Abraham

Cerrudo says, “She listens; she’s there; she trusts. That’s priceless.”

Of course for Whelan, *Restless Creature* isn’t just about the studio. She’s had to dive into the administrative end of the dance world, raising money and putting together the design team. “It’s exactly what I need in my life right now,” she says, “learning all that stuff that’s very challenging and time-consuming and absolutely essential to keep the art form alive for yourself, and in general.”

It was a quirk of fate that gave her the time: a labral tear curtailed her ability to dance the full NYCB repertoire. She counts herself lucky—her injuries have been few and far between, despite the girlhood scoliosis that required four years in a back brace. “Last year at this time, I wasn’t injured, and I thought, ‘Next year I’m going to transform myself.’ But I honestly don’t know if I could have done it without this injury. It’s a sort of a weird blessing, because I had the time to rethink my body.”

But for all her talk of art and transformation, Whelan gives off a remarkably down-to-earth vibe. “She’s not even a diva trying not to be a diva,” Cerrudo likes to say. So it’s no surprise when she lets slip a totally down-to-earth motivation for the whole enterprise. “I’ve had such a great rapport with Christopher Wheeldon and Alexei Ratmanský,” she says. “And I’ve always secretly wanted to dance with them. I just love being in the studio with them and moving next to them and trying to understand their ideas—I needed more of that. So I’m getting it for myself.”

## Restless Creature Tour Schedule

DATES	VENUE
Mar 18, 2014	McCarter Theatre Center (Princeton, NJ)
Mar 20, 2014	Harris Theater (Chicago, IL)
Mar 22, 2014	Byham Theater (Pittsburgh, PA)
Mar 25, 2014	Power Center (Ann Arbor, MI)
Mar 28–29, 2014	Citi Shubert Theatre (Boston, MA)
Apr 1–6, 2014	The Joyce Theater (New York, NY)
Apr 9, 2014	The Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts (Louisville, KY)
Apr 11, 2014	Carolina Performing Arts (Chapel Hill, NC)
Jul 22–26, 2014	Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House (London, UK)