

Arts & Leisure



A Muse Steps Away

BEATRICE DE GEA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The principal ballerina Wendy Whelan will bid farewell to New York City Ballet on Oct. 18, but she is not ready to hang up her pointe shoes.

By ROSLYN SULCAS

"In ballet, if you're over 40, you're a dinosaur," Wendy Whelan said, looking distinctly un-dinosaur-like as she sat at her kitchen table in her Upper West Side apartment in Manhattan last month. Her workday had begun at 10 with a two-hour morning ballet class and ended at 7 after a full day of back-to-back rehearsals. She is

47 ("and a half," she pointed out) and will leave New York City Ballet, for which she has danced for 30 years, with a farewell performance on Oct. 18.

But Ms. Whelan is ready for more. Talking, dancing, seizing her chances. "I still have so much dancing in me, so much to say," she said. "It's not an end."

For the fans who have watched her carve out an extraordinary career at City

Ballet, however, it is most definitely an end and a major milestone in the company's history. Her farewell performance — which will include a new work created for her by Alexei Ratmansky and Christopher Wheeldon, two of ballet's biggest choreographic names — sold out within minutes after sales opened to the public.

That's because Ms. Whelan is among that rare breed of artists who have touched

the public in a way that transcends the fashions that can make ballerinas (or artists or actors) sensations for a season. Her sinewy physicality, with its tensile, thoroughbred articulation of muscle and tendon, her kinetic clarity and her dramatic, otherworldly intensity have created a quite distinct and unusual identity. She is not made in the ballerina mold of the past, CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

The New York City Ballet principal Wendy Whelan in her dressing room at Lincoln Center.

Dance

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all delicate curves and hyper-feminine prettiness. She is a far more unusual creature: a modern ballerina and a determined player in a world still dominated by male creators and directors.

Ms. Whelan has performed a broader and more varied repertory than almost any other female principal in City Ballet's history, spanning romantic, classical and contemporary roles with extraordinary versatility and range. But although she excelled in, and often seemed definitively to embody, many of the ballets by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins that form the backbone of the repertory, she has perhaps been most closely identified with the creation of new ballets, as a kind of muse who enables the best work from choreographers.

William Forsythe, Wayne McGregor, Jorma Elo, Benjamin Millepied, Twyla Tharp, Lynn Taylor-Corbett and Peter Martins, the company's ballet master in chief, have, among many others, chosen her for their pieces. (By her count, she has originated 40 principal roles in the repertory.) But her strongest choreographic affiliations over the last 15 years have been with Mr. Wheeldon and Mr. Ratmansky, who have arguably created their finest works with Ms. Whelan.

"I think I first fell in love with the shape of her legs," said Mr. Ratmansky, who had been rehearsing with Ms. Whelan earlier in the day on his newest piece for City Ballet, which had its premiere on Thursday. "The length from ankle to knee and knee to hip is perfectly proportioned, very graceful and strong. The quality of movement really depends on these kinds of structures, and this explained to me a lot about her unusual quality and sensuality. She is a major ballerina, exceptional and different."



REATRICE DE CEA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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That Ms. Whelan is still dancing at a high level, and plans to continue collaborating with choreographers after leaving City Ballet, is itself notable. By dinosaur age, around 40, most female ballet dancers are feeling the severe physical toll taken by the relentless demands of classical technique: turning out from the hips, the constant wear and tear on joints and muscles. Ms. Whelan has been one of the fortunate few who have managed the intersection of technical prowess and mature artistry; until she began to have hip problems in 2012, she was relatively injury free, and after a hip reconstruction last year, she has rebounded with remarkable facility.

"She is creating a whole new work with Alexei with people 20 years younger, and she is doing everything, usually better than everyone else," said Tyler Angle, who has been one of Ms. Whelan's regular stage partners for the last several years. "Even in the last rehearsal of the day, when everyone is tired, and we have shows at night, she never lets the energy get bad. She is always open, always willing to work at a problem and try it until you get it right."

In person, Ms. Whelan is smaller than she appears onstage, and has a softer beauty. The apartment that she shares with her husband of nine years, the photographer David Michalek, features a large nude portrait of her that shows the beautiful musculature and lines of her body, shaped by a lifetime of dancing. In conversation, she is warm and generous, laughing easily, but also displaying the will, intelligence and tenacity that have characterized her career.

Ms. Whelan grew up in Louisville, Ky., a middle child of an accountant father and a mother who taught women's college basketball. At 3, she was sent to ballet as an outlet for her excessive energy. At 8, she asked to audition for the Louisville Ballet's "Nutcracker." Her mother tried to dissuade her. "What if you don't make it?" she asked.

"I'm going to make it," Ms. Whelan told her.

A diagnosis of idiopathic scoliosis, a severe curvature of the spine, at 12, didn't stop her. Wearing a hip-to-shoulder body cast, she continued to attend ballet class at the Louisville Ballet Academy every day.

In 1984, a year after Balanchine's death, Ms. Whelan joined City Ballet as an apprentice; in 1986, she became a full member of the company, then run by Mr. Martins and Robbins. "It was a complicated time," she said. "There was a lot of heartbreak after Balanchine's death, and a lot of insecurity. People didn't know how Peter felt about them."

Ms. Whelan didn't know either. She worried that her aquiline profile was too sharp, her body too angular, that she wasn't pretty enough to be a ballerina. "I never felt I was a favorite, or marked out for success," she said. "And in the end, that was a good thing. It drove me nuts, but I always had to climb to where I wanted to be behind someone else, and that paid off for me. I put in the work, and I never took my place in the company for granted."

Her ascent was nonetheless steady; in 1989, she was promoted to soloist, in 1991, to principal dancer. Over the next decade, she danced an extraordinary number of ballets, including several new works created for the Diamond Project festivals.

But, it wasn't, Ms. Whelan said, until she started to work with Mr. Wheeldon on his breakthrough ballet, the 2001 "Polyphonia," that she began to find herself as a dancer. "I had been striving to be authentic in a world where the choreographic deity, Balanchine, was dead," she said. "Then I turned 30, started dancing with Jock Soto, Chris started making stuff for me, and my world opened up." All this coincided, she added, with a tough breakup with her longtime boyfriend, the dancer Nilas Martins, Peter Martins's son.

"I could feel my heart in dancing for the first time," she said. "All those years of be-



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ing that strong girl, in control. It took all those factors to go beyond that and find who I was as a dancer — not some idea of what I should be, but me."

Mr. Wheeldon said that their encounter during the making of "Polyphonia," set to Ligeti extracts, had been pivotal to his career. "She launched me as a choreographer," he said in a telephone interview. "She challenged me not to settle, and that was a first. Somehow we unlocked something in each other." Later, he wrote in an email: "What makes Wendy unique is that she has the inexplicable ability to make abstract movement take on a certain poetry through simplicity. A look, a breath, a sculpted shape. Story always hovering in the air around her."

Mr. Wheeldon went on to create 12 more ballets with Ms. Whelan, notably a transcendent pas de deux, with Mr. Soto, in "After the Rain" (2005), in which, whisper-

thin in a pale pink leotard, she appeared to float from her partner's arms, air to his earth. In 2006, Mr. Ratmansky picked her for "Russian Seasons," giving her a role, underpinned by notions of death and transformation, that brought out her dramatic gifts and a kind of spiritual incandescence.

The ability to transform an extreme muscular control and technical precision into an unearthly, floating beauty hasn't lessened as Ms. Whelan has grown older. But her roles in the Balanchine and Robbins repertoire at City Ballet had decreased over the years, and Ms. Whelan said that she began to feel increasingly dislocated from the life of the company.

"I always thought the 30-year mark would be a good time to retire," she said. "My body at the 30-year mark was ready, too. My body has been so good to me and my surgery, saving my hip, was so miracu-



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lous. It's time for me to be good to it back."

Mr. Martins, who said he was sad to see Ms. Whelan leave, added that she had probably worked with more invited choreographers than any other dancer in the company's history. "She has had an unbelievable career," he said.

It's not over. Last year, Ms. Whelan put together "Restless Creature," a program featuring four duets — by the contemporary choreographers Kyle Abraham, Joshua Beamish, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo — that she performed at the Jacob's Pillow festival in Becket, Mass., with each man.

Alastair Macaulay, the chief dance critic of The New York Times, has frequently been critical of Ms. Whelan's dancing, describing tension in her shoulders and a lack of upper and lower body coordination. But reviewing "Restless Creature," he wrote: "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."

Her hip surgery forced a postponement of an American tour, but Ms. Whelan and her four partners will take "Restless Creature" around the country from January to May next year, and she will perform a program of new work with the Royal Ballet principal Edward Watson in London in July 2015.

She has other projects up her sleeve, including a collaboration with Mr. Michalek, and the puppet-maker extraordinaire Basil Twist, and an appointment at City Center as an artistic associate. For the moment, she said, she isn't interested in running a ballet company.

"More than anyone, I think most about Misha Baryshnikov as paving the direction I hope to follow," she said. "He is the consummate artist, always trying new things with the widest range of people across so many different disciplines."

Later, she leaned back in her chair, and smiled, her eyes flashing. "It doesn't have to be all dance," she said. "I'm up for anything."

Above, Wendy Whelan waits to get her hair done before a performance at City Ballet; far left, rehearsing "Polyphonia" with the choreographer Christopher Wheeldon in 2012; near left, with Jock Soto in Mr. Wheeldon's "After the Rain" in 2005.

Above, Tyler Angle with, front row from left, Jennifer Ringer, Ms. Whelan and Sara Mearns in Alexei Ratmansky's "Namouna, a Grand Divertissement" in 2010; Left, Mr. Angle and Ms. Whelan in "Polyphonia" at the David H. Koch Theater.

A determined player in a world dominated by male directors.