A ‘RESTLESS CREATURE’ AT THE PILLOW

Wendy Whelan’s latest is four duets with four different dance partners

By Tresca Weinstein

Wendy Whelan has always been restless. When she was just two and a half, her mother enrolled her in dance classes in their hometown of Louisville, Ky. — mostly to keep Wendy from jumping on her baby sister all day.

If she’d put her in soccer camp, Wendy might have turned out to be Mia Hamm, but instead she went on to study at the School of American Ballet, and became an apprentice with New York City Ballet in 1984. By 1991, Whelan had risen to principal dancer and begun a career that has made her one of the ballet world’s most lauded and versatile stars.

“I was born with a tremendous amount of energy, and to be able to hone and shape that (through dance) has been amazing,” Whelan said in a recent interview.

That energy takes new form with “Restless Creature,” a contemporary dance work that has its world premiere at Jacob’s Pillow on Wednesday. The piece features Whelan — sans pointe shoes — in four duets with four different dancers and choreographers: Brian Brooks, Alejandro Cerrudo, Kyle Abraham and Brian Beames.

“Restless Creature” is inspired in part by “Slow Dancing,” an installation by Whelan’s husband, artist and photographer David Michalek. The 2007 work juxtaposed slow-motion films of dance legends and was shown on three 50-foot-high screens at Lincoln Center. (In nice symmetrical fashion, Whelan was Michalek’s inspiration for the project.)

“You could see Trisha Brown next to Bill T. Jones next to Al Lezina Kent, and I liked seeing the conversation coming out of that randomness,” Whelan said. “Their differences were such an interesting conversation and inspired the idea to make that conversation live for myself.”

For “Restless Creature,” she chose to work with four men with very different styles and approaches. She’d admired Abraham’s and Brooks’ work for their respective companies (Abraham In Motion and Brian Brooks Moving Company) for years. She got to know Beamish, now director of Vancouver’s MOVE: the company, when they took ballet class together. And she’d never met Cerrudo, the resident choreographer for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, of which she’s “a huge fan,” she said.

Her selection was a bit of a gamble, since dancing a duet, Whelan said, is first and foremost about chemistry.

“It’s about how we relate to each other physically and energetically,” she said. “I had no idea how that was going to turn out, but I knew each one would be unique. I wanted to expose a different connection in each dance.”

Brooks was her first collaborator; they made their dance in a total of 24 inspired hours. She describes her duet with Beamish as darker, almost surreal. With Abraham, “we don’t touch each other a lot, but there’s a lot of intense movement and eye contact,” she said. “Our differences are very strong, and that makes the piece very interesting.”

Cerrudo’s ballet-based terminology was more familiar to Whelan, but his choreography challenged her. “With Alejandro, it’s always lower, deeper, longer, farther — everything has an ‘er’ in it. To try to follow these guys and try on their shoes and feel how they move has been extremely humbling and inspiring.”

The project has been like “a huge glass of water” after feeling “a bit parched” at City Ballet, she said. “I was thirsty. Being an older dancer, there’s not a whole lot of work coming your way, because you’ve already done it all.”

At 46, Whelan has been exploring not only contemporary dance, but also other forms of art. She’s delved into photography and also dipped a toe into acting (albeit wordlessly, through her expressive movement) in Pontus Lidberg’s 2010 film “Labyrinth Within,” which was shown at the Pillow last year.

To each endeavor, Whelan brings a laser focus of both body and mind, a dedication she learned the summer she was 13 and was treated for scoliosis. She came to ballet class every day wearing a 15-pound plaster cast that covered her from shoulders to hips.

“I did little plies and little tendus with this 15-pound weight on me,” she recalled. “When I got the cast off, I could literally fly. It felt like a miracle. I had been percolating all this information, and I had so much power and strength and understanding.”

That determination, and her restless spirit, will likely serve her well as she charts new ground in — and after — a career that has already been eons long by ballet standards.

“When I was a kid and I did my first production of ‘Nutcracker,’ I couldn’t wait to get to the studio and watch and rehearse, and I didn’t want to leave,” she said. “That’s what I seek. I used to think it was only dance, but now I know there’s more range for me to make something interesting and beautiful. To still be able to find that kind of inspiration at 46.”

If you go

Wendy Whelan
“Restless Creature”

■ When: 8 p.m. Wednesday through Aug. 17;
2 p.m. Aug. 16 and 17
■ Where: Jacob’s Pillow, 358 George Carter Road, Becket, Mass.
■ Tickets: $39-$69
■ Info: 413-243-0745 or http://www.jacobspillow.org

— the fountain of youth.”

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