Risky behavior from an icon of dance

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By Elaine Stuart

New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan is used to the scene that took place at Manhattan Movement & Arts Center a few weeks ago: a throng of girls in pink tights and buns crowding outside a studio trying to catch a glimpse of her. But two days earlier, while rehearsing with up-and-coming choreographer Kyle Abraham, Whelan was the one who was star-struck.

The two were practicing Abraham’s duet, one of four pairing the ballerina with a contemporary choreographer that will premiere at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival on Aug. 14 in a show titled “Restless Creature.” The dance begins with a solo by Abraham, and Whelan watched wide-eyed as he oozed through the movements. “I have to stop thinking about trying to be you,” she said a little later.

“Restless Creature” is a daring depar- ture for the iconic Balanchine ballerina, who joined City Ballet in 1984 and was promoted to principal in 1991. Since then, she’s served as muse to master choreogra- phers and performed as a guest artist on the world’s greatest stages. But this project, which is co-commissioned by Jacob’s Pil- low, marks the first time she’s running the show.

Whelan handpicked her collabora- tors because their individual dance styles differed from her own. “I’m seeing what I can learn from each of them and how I can translate what they do in my own way,” Whelan said recently at Gibney Dance Center in New York City. “I’m taking their ideas and trying to expand on them for myself. There’s a lot of more, more, more, deeper, lower, higher, farther, faster.”

In addition to Abraham’s piece, the program includes duets created and danced by Joshua Beamish, artistic director of MOVE: The Company; Brian Brooks, ar- tistic director of Brian Brooks Moving Company; and Alejandro Cerrudo, resident choreographer of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. “Restless Creature” will tour after its debut at Jacob’s Pillow.

All of these artists were deeply hon- ored — and somewhat befuddled — to be approached by such a giant of classical dance. When asked if it was intimidating to work with Whelan, Brooks answered, “It still is.”

“We all know her so well because of her extraordinary talent, but in the studio she’s so humble and curious,” he said. “But my heart does go into my throat at times.”

“She’s not afraid to fail,” said Brooks. “At her age and what she’s achieved, for her to want to know more about the art form is pretty wild and so brave. It feels like a new beginning for somebody we wouldn’t expect needs a new beginning.” This, he believes, is what makes “Restless Creature” so exhilarating. “It’s not just seeing a great dancer perform, it’s seeing it with the knowledge that it is a huge risk.”

Abraham’s style, which he describes as “a postmodern gumbo” of influences from Trisha Brown to Merce Cunningham to the clubs where he started dancing, is perhaps the biggest stretch for Whelan. (He was also the first choreographer she knew she wanted to work with, after seeing him perform.) “The first two rehearsals were really play dates,” said Abraham, who also has his own company. He added that he was impressed by Whelan’s willingness to explore foreign movements.

Toward the end of her duet with him, she lets down her hair, contracts her torso, and begins making slow waves with her upper body. Her supple back arches and rounds, ribs and abs rippling through her leotard. It’s an arresting image — the prima ballerina turned inward in a quiet moment of vulnerability.

“It’s been fun to feel myself literally opening up as an artist and a person,” Whelan said, leaning forward and parting the air with her hands. “I never used to know how to do a body roll. That’s a new thing for me. And it’s like a new favorite food to try that movement.”

Her eyes brighten at the metaphor. “It’s kind of like when you find out you really like gelato, you want to eat gelato every day!” “Restless Creature” will also be presented by Celebrity Series of Boston at the Citi Shubert Theatre March 28-29.