A Restless Creature on New Terrain

Wendy Whelan embraces contemporary choreographers.

After 20 years with one of the most influential modern ballet companies, some dancers might start to feel burned out. Wendy Whelan, the New York City Ballet principal, has the opposite problem: “I have so much energy, I want to keep going,” she said. “But I don’t want it to seem like I’m not working.”

In her first major new assignment, she is leading a contemporary dance company. “I want to feel what it is to move my body in new ways,” she said. “It’s a way to challenge my mind and my body.”

Whelan, 46, is understated, soft-spoken and elegant, a dancer with a strong, classical technique and a delicate, ethereal presence. She rose through the ranks at New York City Ballet, starting as a corps member and eventually becoming one of its leading stars. She left the company in 2012, after 24 seasons, to pursue a new career as a choreographer.

Whelan has been working on a new project for the past year, the goal of which is to create a new kind of ballet company. She has been collaborating with a group of contemporary choreographers, including Kyle Abraham, Jojo Werner, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo, to create a new kind of ballet that is more contemporary and less traditional.

Whelan’s goal is to create a company that is more collaborative and less hierarchical than New York City Ballet. “I want to create a space where dancers can have input,” she said. “I want to create a company that is more democratic.”

Whelan’s new company will be called Danspace Project, and it will debut this fall. The company will consist of a group of dancers who are not necessarily trained in ballet. Whelan is working with a group of contemporary choreographers, including Kyle Abraham, Jojo Werner, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo, to create a new kind of ballet that is more contemporary and less traditional.

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