A Muse Steps Away

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 ROBERT SUGGS

"In ballet, if you're over 18, you're a dean," Wendy Whelan said, looking distinctly un-dean-like as she sat at her kitchen table in her Upper West Side apartment in Manhattan last month. Her week had begun at 10 with a two-hour morning ballet class and ended at 1 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 26 years, with a farewell performance on Oct. 18.

But Ms. Whelan is ready for more. "Talk to me about retiring," she said, "I will have so much dancing to do, so much to say." She added, "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 Jaques d'Amboise and Christopher Wheeldon, two of ballet's biggest choreographic names - will not be without moments after she 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 frostiness that can make ballet (or art) inaccessible to many. Her sinewy physique, with its teachable, unadorned articulation of music and story, her kinetic clarity and her dramatic, earthbound intensity have created a quite distinct and internal identity. She is not made in the ballerina mold of the past.
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all decide curves and hyper-dominance 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. Wheelan has performed a broader and more varied repertoire 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 defined by, the roles of George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins that form the backbone of the repertoire, 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, Teryl Thorpe, 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 46 principal roles in the repertoire.) 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. Wheelan.

“I think I first fell in love with the shape of her legs” said Mr. Ratmansky, who had been rehearsing with Ms. Wheelan earlier in the day on his newest piece for City Ballet, which had its premiere on Thursday. “The length from ankle to 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 sensibility. She is a major ballerina, exceptional and different.”
Above, Wendy Whelan wants to see her hair dressed before a performance at City Center; left, rehearsing "Polyphony" with the choreographer Christopher Wheeldon in 2007; near left, with Jack heart in Mr. Wheeldon's "After the Rain" in 2008.

A determined player in a world dominated by male directors.

That Ms. Whelan is still dancing at a New York ballet company after leaving City Ballet is in itself notable: By dancer age, around 40, most female ballet dancers are facing the severe physical toll taken by the relentless demands of classical technique: turning out from the hips, the constant wear and tear on knees and ankles. 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 big 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 Alcott and people 20 years younger, and she is doing something, you know, better than everyone else," said Tyler Angle, who has been one of Ms. Whelan's regular stage partners for the last seven years. "Even in the last rehearsal of the day, when everyone is tired, and we have shown a show at night, she never lets the energy get bad. She's 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 Michaelbis, features a large-scale portrait of her that shows the beautiful rectangular shape of her body, shaped by a lifetime of dancing. In conversation, she is warm and generous, listening easily, but also displaying the will, intelligence and tenacity that have characterized her career.

Ms. Whelan grew up in Lexington, Ky., a middle child as an accountant father and a mother who taught English and guidance. At 13, she was sent to ballet at an outreach program for a free class that was asked to audition for the Louisville Ballet's "Nutcracker," a role that she tried and missed. "What if you don't make it?" she asked.

"A dance is like a work of art, you try to make it," Ms. Whelan told her.

A diagnosis of idiopathic scoliosis, a severe curvature of the spine, at 11, didn't stop her. "Wearing a brace does not keep you in. Once a girl is old enough to walk, you can't keep her in," she told her. After ballet school at the Louisville Ballet academy every day, in 1984, a year after her surgery, a 10-year-old Ms. Whelan was accepted at the Boston Ballet on a scholarship. In 1986, she became a ballerina of the company, then run by Mr. Martin and Balliwick. 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 held it together."

Ms. Whelan didn't know either. She worried that her body profile was too strong, 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. "In the end, that was a good thing. It drove me more, but always I had to climb to where I wanted to be. I wanted to be with someone else, and that paid off for me."

In the end, I never took my place in the company for greatness." But, she said, Ms. Whelan told her, until she started to work with Mr. Whelan, on his breakout ballet, the 2003 "Polyphony," that she had finally felt like a dancer. "I had been trying to be authentic in a world where the choreographic style was Balanchine, which was the story," she said. "Then I entered, 2008, started dancing with Jack heart, started touring with me, and my world opened up." All the coincidences, she added, with a tough breath, with her longtime boyfriend, the dancer Nicolas Aveling.

"I could feel my heart in dancing for the first time," she said. "All those years of being that strong girl, in control. It took all those forces to go beyond that and find what I was as a dancer — not some idea of what I should be, but me."

Mr. Whelan said that their encounter during the making of "Polyphony" set to light-rooted music, "I had proposed to him. She launched me as a choreographer." Each day in a two-hour interview, the choreographer and dancer were met and, "We were a first. We were connected so much in the other," later, he wrote in an email. "What makes Wendy unique is that she has the incredible ability to make abstract movement seem in a certain poetry deeply specific. She's a breath, a sculpted shape, always swerving in the air around her."

Ms. Whelan went on to create 13 more ballets with Mr. Whelan, notably a transcontinental pas de deux, with Mr. Jones, in "After the Rain" (2008), in which, whispering this in a pale blue bench, she appeared to float from her partner's arms, rise to her head, and reach. Mr. Whelan joined her for the "Russian Seasons," giving her a role, underwritten by outside dangers and transformation, that brought her dramatic gifts and a kind of spiritual transcendence.

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 Bolshoi and Rednitsky repertoire at City Ballet have decreased over the years, and Ms. Whelan said that she began to feel increasingly dislocated from the title of the company. "I always thought the 10-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 immense. It's time for me to take good care of it."

Mr. Martin, who said he was sad to see Ms. Whelan leave, added that she had probably worked more with more writers than any other dancer in the company's history. She had an unrelenting career," he said. "It's not over. Last year, Ms. Whelan put together "White Sonatina," a program featuring four duets — by the contemporary choreographers Kyle Abraham, Jounan Seabrook, Brian Brooks and Alejandro Cerrudo — that she performed at the Jarka's Foller Festival in Boston, Mass., with each man. Above, Macnachan, the chief dancer of The New York Times, has frequently been critical of Ms. Whelan's dancing, describing market in her shoulders and a lack of upper and lower body coordination. But reviewing "White Sonatina," she wrote, "She's uncompromising, generous, bold, enchanting, of the same time, directive and investigative. Few dancers in any genre seem 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 two partners will take "White Sonatina" around the country from January to May next year, and she will perform program of new work with the Royal Ballet principal Edward Watson in London in July 2014.

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

"More than anyone, I think about Mikhail Baryshnikov as doing the thing 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, smiled and, her eyes flashing, "It doesn't have to be all dance," she said. "I'm up for anything."