

Winter 2013-2014

# *Ballet Review*





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Cover Photograph by Em Watson, Jacob's Pillow Dance:  
Wendy Whelan in *Restless Creature*.

# Living

## Ian Spencer Bell

The Ted Shawn Theater at Jacob's Pillow is the site of the premiere of *Restless Creature*, Wendy Whelan's evening-length program of duets with dancer-choreographers Kyle Abraham, Joshua Beamish, Brian Brooks, and Alejandro Cerrudo. The portraits of Shawn and Ruth St. Denis that hang on either side of the proscenium glow. As the house lights dim, I think not of these early American modern dancers, but of Balanchine: a man and a woman on-stage is already a story.

The lights come up on *Ego et Tu*, and Cerrudo skates at the center of the stage, his arms

and torso curving, swooping, snaking, occasionally popping. He moves in the current vernacular of contemporary ballet.

Whelan, in a short off-white dress, enters upstage through an opening in the theater drapes. She repeats much of the same language. At one point she covers Cerrudo's eyes. She is like the Elegg Girl in *Serenade*. Lifts and lifts and lifts follow. The choreographer is like this admiring (largely New York) audience: he wants to be as close to this famous ballerina as possible.

As the lights change for the next dance, I realize that the entire evening will follow this format. There are many challenges for these choreographers. Mainly, how best do you use Whelan's exquisite angularity, pristine technique, and serene stage presence?

I first heard of Whelan when I was fourteen and at the School of American Ballet. I was



Wendy Whelan and Alejandro Cerrudo in *Ego et Tu*. (Photo: Christopher Duggan, Jacob's Pillow Dance)



*Waltz Epoca* with Joshua Beamish. (Photo: Christopher Duggan, JPD)

stretching on the floor of my dorm room, listening to the older gay boys talk about her performance earlier that evening: “Ooh, Miss Wendy was *living*.” They covered their teeth with their tongue and stressed the “l” sound. They repeated the word as much as they could: she was *living* when she turned; she was *living* when she kicked; she was *living* standing near the fountain at State Theater. The boys shouted in agreement: “Ooh, yes, she is *fierce*.” And then: “Fierce down.” And then, finally, just: “Down, honey.”

Since then, I have seen her perform dozens of times. Still, it’s hard for me not to think of the first time I saw her. It was the second pas de trois in *Agon*, in the 1993 Balanchine Celebration video. A videotape of the PBS broadcast floated around SAB and North Carolina School of the Arts. It was damaged in places where it had been rewound and played back repeatedly.

A long white line appeared on the screen just before Whelan’s solo, and then she was

there, in a black leotard, music shooting out of her hands, hips, head, and toes. Finally, she leaped from Arch Higgins to Albert Evans and was caught in arabesque. I was in my dorm room when I saw it. It was spring, and it felt like everything beyond those white walls – everything outside that narrow window – blossomed pink and red and gold.

I interviewed Whelan a few years ago and asked her about *Agon*. “That’s it,” she said, sitting up tall, rocking gently back and forth. “I was fourteen when I saw Maria Calegari do the second pas de trois in *Agon*. It made me want to do it. I was at the SAB summer course, and it made me want to join New York City Ballet. It’s like a beautiful piece of architecture. I’d never witnessed abstraction like that. It was the essence of glamour.”

At the start of Beamish’s *Waltz Epoca*, Whelan walks across the stage holding a red garment. We know it’s a gown, and we know she will wear it later. She leaves it in the wings, returns to the stage and begins a solo. Much

of the dance consists of that smooth contemporary ballet movement, but with occasional sharp gestures and head and hand ticks. The choreographer joins her onstage, and they dance in slight counterpoint.

A stage light lowers, and Whelan slides and falls into the floor. The light is raised as she continues, gesturing, gazing, bending, now with the choreographer. She does a kind of waltz step and it occurs to me that she has worlds of information in her body. She makes this look new. She could step out of this duet and into a black leotard and dance every instrument and be every color in the orchestra. (Ooh, honey, *please* can we see you in a black leotard and pointe shoes with a French twist?)

She exits while the choreographer dances to more canned music. There is the sound of a clock now, and when Whelan returns, she is wearing the gown. She whips around as the lights fade. For a moment, it's *Vienna Waltzes* deconstructed.

In *The Serpent and the Smoke*, Kyle Abraham flies and melts and shudders. And then Whelan is there with him, dancing in the darkness. She tries out his movement, and they dance in unison briefly: beautiful long arms and powerful, broad shoulders sweeping and cutting through space. She balances with her legs in high extensions. We see the technical prowess that has made her the envy of generations of women. (*Down, honey.*) At the end, she takes her hair down. (*Down, honey.*) She is preparing for the next dance.

I think then of Whelan in Willy Burmann's technique class one morning: sliding through the French doors, finding a spot at the barre, stepping into the plié combination, all the while tying her hair back, swiftly, elegantly. Seeing her there, from my place at the barre, I understood why we go to the ballet: it's the desire to see ourselves – a similar hand gesture, a nod of the head, a slight fall. We go to see where we fit into grace. We go to remember that we have potential for it and to re-



*The Serpent and the Smoke* with Kyle Abraham. (Photo: Christopher Duggan, JPD)



*First Fall* with Brian Brooks. (Photo: Christopher Duggan, JPD)

member that it's everywhere and to remember that it's living.

When we talked those several years ago, I asked Whelan about beauty. "There are three types of beauty in ballet," she said, "the superficial, outward beauty; the physical beauty, if your body is open; and the spiritual beauty. I feel like if all else fails you have that, the spiritual. I can coax that spirituality out of the music. It's a gift that keeps me able to go on."

The lights come up for the last ballet of the evening, Brooks's *First Fall*, set to Philip Glass's gorgeous String Quartet No. 3 ("Mishima").

Whelan and Brooks tangle and untangle their arms, fit and refit their bodies together. Whelan's long hair flows around her shoulders, and she allows her weight to shift and drop into the floor. She spills onto his side and walks across the stage, as he supports her with his whole body.

This is the ballerina we know, cascading over clouds. She is dreamy, a barefoot *Sonambula*. She plunges backward onto Brooks, and they sink into the floor again and again. They relish in the seductive weight changes and the rich light and the sumptuous music. Who wouldn't? They are living, honey, *living*.