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## Mayhem and Murder Star in a Fairy Tale Ballet

By Kelly Crow



“Grimm Tales,” a ballet opening Friday in Austin, Texas, has queens and dwarves and a frog-kissing princess—but doesn’t end happily ever after.

The Ballet Austin production is based on tales from the Brothers Grimm and inspired by the gritty drawings of Natalie Frank, an artist who has spent the past eight years exploring the gruesome scenarios behind “Snow White,” “Cinderella” and other folk stories.

Stephen Mills, Ballet Austin’s artistic director, choreographed the ballet and commissioned a score from composer Graham Reynolds. Ms. Frank shaped the look of the production and created 35 drawings for the sets. Some drawings are animated and will be projected on to scrims onstage; others will be concurrently exhibited in Austin’s Lora Reynolds Gallery until June 8. Ms. Frank worked with Tony-nominated designer Constance Hoffman on costumes for the 22 dancers in the ballet.



Stephen Mills, Ballet Austin’s artistic director, choreographed ‘Grimm Tales,’ and asked artist Natalie Frank, center, to create the look of the production. Ms. Frank worked with Constance Hoffman, right, to design costumes for the ballet. Behind them is a backdrop for the ‘Snow White’ tale in the production. Before Ms. Hoffman is a costume headpiece for another tale, ‘The Juniper Tree.’ They are gathered around a prop that Ms. Frank painted for ‘The Frog King’—a well that the frog jumps into at a key moment in the story.

The idea for a Grimm ballet began four years ago, when Mr. Mills saw an exhibit at the Blanton Museum of Art of Ms. Frank’s lush, kaleidoscopic takes on the Grimms’ universe. Between 1812 and 1857, German scholars Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published at least 200 stories they called “Children and Household Tales.” The accounts are far more sinister than their Disney interpretations. “Sex, beauty, power—some of these stories sound like they could be a great Netflix series,” Mr. Mills said. The plots often hinge on violence instigated or endured by “women not playing nicely,” he said.





Natalie Frank created drawings for the three different stories in the ballet 'Grimm Tales.' Top left, an image for 'The Juniper Tree,' top and bottom right, images from 'The Frog King,' and bottom left, a drawing for 'Snow White.'

PHOTOS: TOM POWEL IMAGING(4)

Mr. Mills realized the tales could be translated into dance and a year ago asked Ms. Frank to work with Ballet Austin. The artist, who is based in New York, is known for drawing carnivalesque scenes with figures tumbling into and around one another. The invitation was a “dream come true,” Ms. Frank said, in part because she had long admired artists like Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse, who designed costumes and sets for ballets. Pablo Picasso did, too, and met his first wife, a ballerina, while creating backdrops for the Ballets Russes.

The invitation from Ballet Austin arrived as Ms. Frank was pivoting from her Grimm series to Madame d’Aulnoy, a French storyteller of the late 17th century who coined the term “fairy tale.” Ms. Frank will debut some of those drawings at Frieze New York in May through her new gallery Salon 94.



In 'Snow White,' Aara Krumpe, who plays the Queen, is held upside down by dwarves during Tuesday's rehearsal of 'Grimm Tales.'



Natalie Frank's drawing for 'The Juniper Tree,' in 'Grimm Tales' is projected at Ballet Austin's rehearsal on Tuesday night. On stage, the son, who has turned into a bird, kills his stepmother. From left, dancers Elise Pekarek and Ian J. Bethany play stepmother and son, Edward Carr, plays the father and Chelsea Marie Renner the daughter.



In a rehearsal of 'The Juniper Tree,' on Tuesday, Chelsea Marie Renner, left, plays the daughter, Ian J. Bethany, center, plays the son who turns into a bird, and Edward Carr, in blue suit, plays his father.

The ballet “Grimm Tales” is about 80 minutes long and recounts three stories. In “The Frog King,” the heroine must sleep with a frog after accepting a favor from him—a warning to “be careful whose help you accept,” Ms. Frank said. In the ballet, the princess has a cartoonish shock of red hair and a yellow dress; her frog-turned-prince wears a pockmarked, warty outfit that he peels off during his transformation.

In “Snow White,” a beautiful queen tries to kill her prettier, younger stepdaughter. The dwarves who befriend the younger woman resemble not garden gnomes but mustachioed cabaret dancers in 1930s Berlin. “They’re miners, but we had fun with that,” Mr. Mills said.



The third tale, “The Juniper Tree,” may be the darkest. A power-hungry woman decapitates her stepson and cooks the rest of the boy into a meal devoured by his unsuspecting father. Ms. Frank painted a 15-foot-wide pie prop where the father appears to reach in and pluck out the bones. The woman pays for her actions when the boy, reincarnated as a golden bird, fatally drops a heavy stone on her head.

Ms. Frank said her initial costume sketches were too busy but Ms. Hoffmann helped simplify them. The dancer playing the boy-turned-bird wears a yellow tunic and a huge, gold headdress covered in oversize eyeballs, which Ms. Frank helped paint along with other props. “It was not,” she said, “like putting a drawing to life.”



At Tuesday's rehearsal of 'Grimm Tales,' costume designer Constance Hoffman, right, adjusted the veil of Aara Krumpel, who plays the wicked queen in 'Snow White.'





Ballet Austin dancers before Tuesday's rehearsal of 'Grimm Tales.' Ashley Lynn Sherman, in red, as Snow White; Jaime Lynn Witts, in orange hair and yellow dress, as the princess with her sisters in 'The Frog King,' and Christopher Swaim, with crown, as the father in 'The Frog King.'

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