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Dancing In The Dark

THIS WEEKEND, BALLET AUSTIN'S "GRIMM TALES" HAS ITS WORLD PREMIERE. USING NATALIE FRANK'S VISUAL ART AS INSPIRATION, THE WORK EXPLORES THE ROOTS OF AGE OLD FAIRY TALES AND THEIR NOT-SO-SIMPLE MESSAGES.

by Anne Bruno
Photographs courtesy of Ballet Austin



VIEW GALLERY

GOOD ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS entail multiple paths of individual talents merging into one, reaching a generally agreed upon destination or vision. A mash-up of sorts, where the sum is always greater than the parts.

But what differentiates the good from the compelling? Those are the collaborations that completely immerse you in a new world and leave you wanting to discover more. They are born of a curiosity taken to its limits and gratefully follow the road that serendipity lays out in creating connections for all involved. In short, the very best collaborations are the ones that bring each artist to a new place, just as they do the audience.

Such is the case with Ballet Austin's latest original work "Grimm Tales" which takes center stage at the Long Center this weekend for its world premiere. The piece, choreographed by Stephen Mills, Ballet Austin's artistic director, features visuals



inspired and created by New York-based artist Natalie Frank, who happens to hail from Austin. With just three performances starting on Friday, "Grimm Tales," the inaugural work commissioned by the Butler New Choreography Endowment, promises to be one of the year's highlights in performing arts.

According to Mills, a regular patron of the Blanton Museum of Art and friend of Veronica Roberts, the Blanton's curator for modern and contemporary art, his initial idea for the new ballet grew from a seed planted by Roberts.



"Veronica often puts artists in front of me whom I may not know," Mills explains "Several years ago she showed me some of Natalie's drawings and told me that an exhibit of her work would be coming to the Blanton. The thing I was first drawn to was the color – in a small area, there's so much color, narrative and vibrancy coming off the page, I was immediately excited by it. The other thing was that these very old stories had treated women as the bad characters yet in Natalie's drawings, the women were fully empowered." After meeting Frank in person, a conversation began about using her drawings for the Grimms tales as the basis for Mills' new work.





For roughly the past five years, Frank, who earned a bachelor of arts from Yale, a master of fine arts from Columbia and is a Fulbright Scholar, has immersed herself in the 19th century fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. The stories, which have been translated into more than 160 languages, were written between 1812 and 1857. While many people believe they know the beloved folktales such as Snow White well, they originated from an oral tradition of cautionary tales shared by women, for women, and were never intended for children. It wasn't until much later that "sanitized" versions of the tales became popular, expunged of common elements of sexuality and violence, both of which shined a light on the roles of women and the power structures of the day.

Frank, known for work that explores similar themes as it relates to feminism, reaches back to the true origins of the tales in order to explore and bring forward the powerful physical, emotional and psychological transformations that take place among the stories' female characters.



While Frank has used literature as a jumping off point for her artwork in the past and Mills cites a long, historic relationship between art and dance, neither had ever collaborated on anything quite like "Grimm Tales" before. The ballet encompasses three individual stories but functions as one vehicle that takes audiences on an eye-opening journey over the course of 80 minutes without intermission.



“For me,” Frank says, “going from something two-dimensional in the standard 22-by-30-inch format I work in to something as big as a stage was a real unknown. And I had never worked with animation before. It was all an unknown but very exciting.” At Mills’ request, Frank also recruited other artists to work on the project, including Tony-award-nominated costume designer Constance Hoffman. The two traded drawings back and forth with Hoffman completing and executing the final costume designs.



Mills describes one of his challenges this way: “You can stand in front of one of Natalie’s drawings for a very long time – and still miss things because there’s so much there. In dance, we don’t have a lot of time to get the point across.”

The drawings Frank has worked on for the Grimms tales and the new ones created specifically for this production, “have significantly changed all of my work” in terms of simplification, she says; collaborating on this ballet has pushed that even further. All of the backdrops consist of Frank’s drawings projected and animated from behind. She says she had to think of ways for the art to enhance the narrative without distracting from the dancers. “Seeing all these ideas on a larger scale ... [on a stage] it’s not a drawing, it’s a 20-by-30-foot screen. There’s a lot going on and I’m used to having my drawing being the only thing someone’s looking at when they’re in front of it, and that’s not the case here.”





“As someone who loves and follows visual art and as a director, one of my great privileges is that I get to support artists in all their manifestations,” Mills says. “From visual artists to choreographers to dancers to scenic artists. That is very interesting and gratifying to me. Do they need me to do it? No, everyone has their own practice but ... it’s gratifying to know from our discussions that this collaboration has pushed the way Natalie thinks about her practice and it’s pushed the way I think about my own – this dance is unlike any I’ve ever done and that’s going to inform all the work going forward. It’s a real privilege.”

Do age-old tales still have something to tell us today? Frank believes the answer to that question is a resounding yes. “I think the tales feel very contemporary because they’re such a part of our lives today ... in the narratives we tell ourselves about gender and sexuality and power.”



Says Mills: “These stories are still here because they are relevant ... if art is going to have any importance in our lives, then it has to speak to the contemporary nature and the very turbulent and violent world in which we live right now. The stories weren’t written to be entertaining, but were written as warnings. My hope is that when people leave the theater, they have something to reflect back on. I think the greatest value of art is the conversation that happens after it’s been experienced.”



The worst situation for Mills, he says, is that someone would come to a performance and actually forget on their way out of the theater what they saw. Given all the elements that make up this rich collaboration, it's highly unlikely that's going to happen.



Ballet Austin's "Grimm Tales"



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