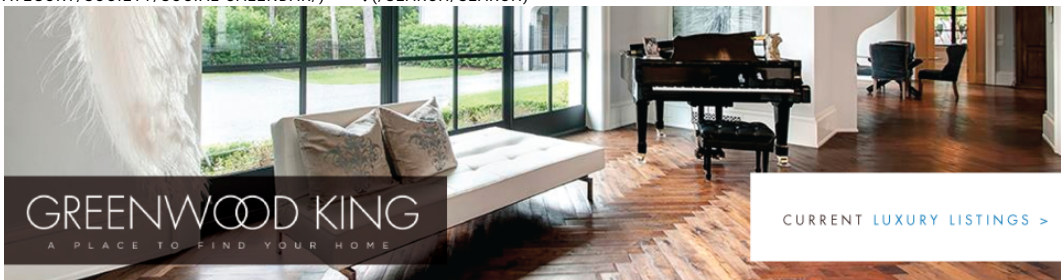


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# A Dark Fairy Tales Take Ballet Austin to a Fantastical New World — Viewer Discretion Advised

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## When The Brothers Grimm Get the Dance Treatment

BY LISA COLLINS SHADDOCK ([HTTPS://WWW.PAPERCITYMAG.COM/AUTHOR/LISA-SHADDOCK/](https://www.papercitymag.com/author/lisa-shaddock/)) // 03.19.19

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1/7 Natalie Frank, Drawing for Grimm Tales - The Frog King, 2018

Once upon a time, **Stephen Mills**, artistic director of **Ballet Austin** (<https://balletaustin.org/>), was presented with a special gift: a grant that would fully endow the creation of a new full-length contemporary dance. However, there was one condition. Everything must be entirely new, from the music and choreography to the costumes and design, even the narrative itself.

Mills set off on an extensive search for the elusive fruit of inspiration — a spark that would ignite his vision. It was one fateful day at the **Blanton Museum of Art** (<https://blantonmuseum.org/>) that he happened upon an exhibition of drawings entitled *Natalie Frank: The Brothers Grimm*. Enchanted by the works — depictions of the age-old fairy tales that were at once gruesome, aggressive, vibrant, and fantastic — he knew he had to find the artist.



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Born in Austin, but based in New York City, **Natalie Frank**, an internationally acclaimed painter and published author with degrees from Yale and Columbia, had accomplished much in her career — but she dreamed of seeing her work brought to life in a new way. When she and Mills met, the immediately clicked and embarked on a collaboration in which their artistic worlds would collide.



The resulting work, titled *Grimm Tales*, makes its world premiere on March 29th at the [Long Center for Performing Arts \(https://thelongcenter.org/\)](https://thelongcenter.org/) in a multi-sensory performance that Ballet Austin has labeled “viewer discretion advised.”

No, this is not your typical fairy tale, but even the 200-year-old stories that inspired Frank and Mills have many unexpected sides to them. The two consulted with fairy-tale expert **Edward Carey** to develop the narrative, peeling back the layers of hundreds of stories penned by the Brothers Grimm before selecting three to interpret in the performance: *The Frog King*, *Snow White*, and *The Juniper Tree* — the latter a lighthearted tale about a young boy who is decapitated by his stepmother and then cooked into a stew.

Many are surprised by the horrific nature of the original tales, but what initially drew Frank to explore them in her work is an even lesser known fact: They were all originally told by women.

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“These were oral tales passed by women from generation to generation and used as a space to talk about their daily life, anxieties, and fears, all capped by the conventions of their time,” she says. “I loved imagining how these tales would reverberate if they were reclaimed by women.”

Along with select works from her exhibition that will be incorporated into the show, Frank has created more than 30 new drawings to be used as backdrops, as well as animated and projected at different points of the performance. She’s also worked closely with the show’s

costume designer, Tony Award-nominated **Constance Hoffman**, to replicate her hand in pastel and gouache on custom textiles, creating a hand-drawn feel throughout the entire production.

In addition to Frank, Hoffman, and Carey, Mills has assembled a remarkable team of collaborators for the project including composer **Graham Reynolds**, set designer **George Tsypin**, and, of course, the dancers. As for the choreography, Mills' approach is to keep refining up until the curtain draws. When we spoke, he was still determining what style would best express the narrative.


“It will not be classical in nature. There may or may not be pointe shoes — we'll play it by ear,” he says, finally declaring, “You can't really tell a story about decapitation en pointe.”

*Grimm Tales, March 29-31, The Long Center for Performing Arts, 701 W Riverside Drive, Austin, [balletaustin.org](https://balletaustin.org/) (<https://balletaustin.org/>)*

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