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## THE BROTHERS GRIMM MEET BALLET AUSTIN IN 'GRIMM TALES'

### BALLET AUSTIN EXPLORES FEMINISM AND THE DARK SIDE OF FAIRY TALES IN THE WORLD PREMIERE OF A NEW BALLET.

BY SARAH THURMOND



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In early 19th century Germany, brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm started collecting oral stories passed down in families by the women. These tales

Drawing of the forest in 'The Frog King.'

ARTWORK BY NATALIE FRANK

described what life was like at that time, when dangers lurked around every corner and dying in childbirth was common. The Brothers Grimm, as they became known, refined the tales they collected and eventually published them. *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella*, and *Rapunzel* were just a few of the hundreds of stories. Eventually, seven editions would be published, each one illustrated with beautifully intricate drawings by Philip Grot Johann. As the tales were translated into more languages, their popularity grew internationally. Then Walt Disney Pictures came along and turned many of the stories into classic films, albeit with sugar-coated depictions better suited for children.

This weekend, the tales take on another life as a ballet in Ballet Austin's *Grimm's Tales*. Choreographed by artistic director Stephen Mills, the ballet is based on three of the fairy tales, *Snow White*, *The Juniper Tree*, and *The Frog King*. Just don't expect "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo," because this ballet takes its inspiration from the original fairy tales and their dark themes. They also come with a feminist perspective, represented through the artwork of Natalie Frank. In fact, it was Frank's drawings that sparked the idea for the ballet.

In 2015, Mills became captivated by Frank's artwork when he saw her exhibition *The Brothers Grimm* at the Blanton Museum. Inspired, he delved into the fairy tales, which he hadn't read since he was a child, and he discovered that they were more sinister than he remembered. "*The Juniper Tree* is probably the most horrifying of all," he says. "A boy has his head jumped off. That's pretty frightening stuff."

Despite the grimness of the tales, Mills was enchanted and decided to develop a ballet based on them. (A \$3 million endowment from philanthropists Sarah and Ernest Butler allows Ballet Austin to create original full-length



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ballets every few years.) He reached out to Frank, who relished such an opportunity to have her artwork featured in a dance. "Any time I can fully realize the world in more than two dimensions, it's a dream," she says.

Raised in Austin until she was 10, Frank grew up in Dallas and now lives in New York. She, too, was familiar with the fairy tales from childhood, but when her mentor, Portuguese painter and illustrator Paula Rego, suggested she look into fairy tales for her painting, a whole new world opened up to her.

She found a book on Amazon by Jack Zipes, a foremost scholar of fairy tales. As she began reading the book, drawings came to mind. "I started to draw, and I fell in love with the stories," she says. "They're deceptively simple, but they resonate, obviously through centuries. They're so powerful, the ways they use metaphor and imagery."

After showing her collection of fairy tale-inspired drawings to a curator at the Drawing Center in New York City, the space ended up holding Frank's first museum show. She also made a book featuring the work. "Now I primarily draw instead of oil painting. It's fundamentally changed my life," she says.

Taking inspiration from the original "unsanitized" tales, Frank brings a feminist perspective to her drawings, meaning she focuses on the female characters who are, say, more complicated than the standard Disney princess. As examples, she mentions the evil stepmother in *The Juniper Tree* who chops off the boy's head, and the spoiled princess in *The Frog King* who gets her comeuppance. "She literally has to let the frog into her bed and sleep with him to honor her word. And I think that's hilarious," Frank says.

Three years ago, Mills and Frank began collaborating on the ballet. He started looking for tales that related in some way to each other and decided *Snow White*, *The Juniper Tree*, and *The Frog King* worked well together because they exhibited a common dark theme: hunger.

"The stories of the Grimm brothers revolve around a time when hunger was always present," Mills say. "So within the stories, there was a lot of poverty. *The Frog King*, it's a sexual hunger. In *Snow White*, it's a hunger for beauty and vanity. *The Juniper Tree* is a hunger for power."

Writer and dramaturg Edward Carey was brought on board to help create a central story for the ballet. Other crew members include costumer Constance Hoffman, scenic designer George Tsybin, and Austin's go-to composer, Graham Reynolds. And, Mills says, "everybody used Natalie's work as a jumping off point."

Along with keeping some of Frank's original pieces, the set design features around 30 new drawings that will be projected above the stage. Some are animated and some are simply to illustrate a part in the story. For instance, the scene in *The Juniper Tree* when the little boy is decapitated, Frank created a drawing of his head under the weight of a chest, so the audience will be able to see his face, something that they wouldn't necessarily have been able to see sitting a distance from the stage.

"Natalie's drawings certainly create a very challenging, and scary in some ways, context for these stories to sit with it. Dance is more than just steps. What is the environment for which it is created? When the audience is sitting in the theater, where are they? What world are they living in? And Natalie's world is a pretty scary one," Mills says, laughing. "It fits these tales really well."

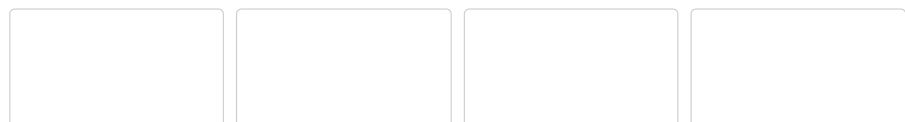
As for Frank, she's looking forward to her feminist take on the Grimm brothers' fairy tales being front and center in the performance. "I'm especially excited by the roles of women: evil, nasty, beautiful, cunning, that are able to be shown in this ballet because most fairy tale ballets are very saccharine. Our ballet will not be that way," she says. "*Grimm Tales* will be very appropriate for a contemporary audience going through what we're going through in the time that we're in."

*Grimm Tales* runs March 29-31 at the Long Center. For tickets, go [here](#).

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