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## Once upon a 'Grimm' fairytale: Ballet Austin debuts art-inspired dance

By [Michael Barnes](#)

Posted at 11:00 AM

Art, not stories, inspired the ballet.

The three dances in Ballet Austin's "Grimm Tales," which plays March 29-31 at the Long Center for the Performing Arts, do in fact borrow their storylines from the more than 200 fairy tales collected by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm in the early 19th century.

Nevertheless, director [Stephen Mills](#) initially came to the material, not by rereading them, but through the fluid, fantastical art of [Natalie Frank](#), the Austin-born artist who now lives and works in New York City.

Blanton Museum of Art curator Veronica Roberts, who set up "Natalie Frank: The Brothers Grimm" at the Austin museum in 2015, shared some of the artist's dreamily symbolic images with Mills in advance of the exhibition.

"I loved them so much," Mills says. "I visited her show at the Drawing Center in New York to see them in person — I think there were 30 of them, I don't remember how many precisely — but I was struck by how much narrative content she could fit into one frame. And her unabashed use of color."

Frank's figurative artwork, full of potential and kinetic energy, haunted the memory of the dance maker.

"They caused me to think more deeply about these stories that we have been surrounded by since childhood," Mills says. "The stories are really dark. I wanted to tell the real stories, not the versions that children get today."

Not just an inspiration, Frank became a true partner in the creation of "Grimm Tales."

"Her hand has been in every bit of the process," Mills says. "She was integral in choosing the scenic and costume collaborators and bringing in novelist, visual artist and playwright Edward Carey from the University of Texas faculty as a dramaturg (artistic advisor). Together, we had to decide which stories to tell, how they were to relate to each other, and then put them into a cohesive shape."

Along with "The Frog King," the team chose "Snow White" and "The Juniper Tree" for this show that runs 80 minutes without intermission and is recommended for ages 10 and older.

The sequence is episodic; the tales are not interwoven as they are in the Stephen Sondheim musical, "Into the Woods."

"We thought about it, but then why not just do 'Into The Woods?'" Mills says and laughs. "The sequence of the tales go from the lightest to the darkest."

In fact the last, "The Juniper Tree," contains themes of cannibalism, child abuse and murder, hence the age recommendation.

Mills and his creative team ran into some unusual problems putting together this premiere, the first commissioned by the Butler New Choreography Endowment.

"Yes, it's been interesting animating some of these animals," Mills says. "Interesting, too, baking a little boy in a pie, challenges I had not expected to encounter."

Designers and their crews produced more than 20 costumes and projections to invent the animated environments.

At least Mills had the previous experience of the 2008 ballet, "Cult of Color: Call to Color," another fantastical dance. It was based on artist Trenton Doyle Hancock's comic book-style characters and, like "Grimm Tales," was fueled by a quirky score by Austin composer Graham Reynolds.

"Cult of Color' taught me what not to do," Mills says. "There's a line to draw in order to facilitate the dancing. Beautiful as I thought that whole world was, it was problematic in terms of movement. 'Grimm Tales' is less about being an art performance piece, and more like a dance. Ultimately, if it's a costume parade, just do a costume parade."

"Grimm Tales" was originally scheduled for spring 2018, but Mills wanted more time to work with Reynolds on the score. And the whole team wanted to get everything just right for the debut of the Butler Endowment, created with a \$3 million donation from Ernest and Sarah Butler. It produces \$300,000 every three years for a completely new ballet and ensures that unpredictable ticket sales are not required to break even.

Like other Mills creations, Ballet Austin hopes that "Grimm Tales" will eventually hit the road.

"I hope that other ballet companies will be interested in it," Mills says. "I don't start with that in mind, but rather with what I am interested in making. I didn't want to cop out and do that children's ballet thing. Nothing wrong with that genre; it's just not my thing right now. The Butlers' gift allows me not to have to worry about that. In the end, we always package our shows up and go to market like everybody else. See what comes of it."

In "The Frog King," the frog promises to fetch a favorite ball from a well if the princess takes him home and lets him eat at her table and sleep in her bed. In the traditional "Snow White," the dwarves are miners whom she lives with then ends up leaving. In "The Juniper Tree," a stepmother kills a boy, chops him up and feeds him to his father, in part so her daughter can claim an inheritance.

"The overarching theme of work is hunger," Mills says. "We all hunger for something. 'The Frog King' is sexual. 'Snow White' is about beauty, and 'The Juniper Tree' is about power."