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Ballet Austin converts “Grimm Tales” into a tour de force

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Put together three masterful artists — Stephen Mills, Natalie Frank and Graham Reynolds — at the peak of their inventiveness and skill and you end up with a tour de force like Ballet Austin’s “Grimm Tales.”

It is almost impossible to register in mere words the force and originality of this reimagining of three Grimm fairytales.

For much of the 80-minute show, the eye attempts take in Frank’s enormous, shifting images, originally drawn in gouache and pastels, now projected in intensely saturated colors on a scrim behind action. No mere backdrops, these projections designed by Howard Werner create a deep, immersive universe of often disturbing pictures related to “The Frog King,” “Snow White” and “The Juniper Tree.”

If anything, Tony Tucci’s lighting intensifies the lasting impression of magical, extreme color as one has rarely sees on the stage.

Yet even before we glimpse these images, however, Constance Hoffman’s distinctive costumes, also based on Frank’s drawings, pass by in silhouette, inhabited by dancers who also preview their highly individualized character movements. These moves are exaggerated even by fairytale standards, because Mills’ choreography stretches out the human core of each character for maximum effect.

Reynolds’ score is everything we’ve come to expect from Austin’s most eclectic composer, one who grasps the art of arranging sounds for movements.

Edward Carey collaborated with Mills and his team on the stories and they do not shy away from the themes of sex, beauty and power. In “The Frog King,” for instance, the transition from idealized romance — and its companion, revulsion — into the realities of physical sex, this time between a princess and a frog, fits into the nearly universal human experiences previously explored by Mills and Reynolds in “Bell Redux: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast.” Jaime Lynn Witts plays the princess with all the willfulness of a beautifully spoiled child, while Oliver Greene-Cramer goes beyond mere mime as the frog king, vehemently charismatic before he transforms into a compliant prince.

Ashley Lynn Sherman is impeccable lovely as Snow White, but Ara Krumpe roused the crowd with her hilariously disorderly Stepmother/Queen. Unrecognizable in makeup but unforgettable in action were four tall dwarves, made even more humorous by Hoffman’s distorted costumes.

As often is the case in old tales, the villainesses get the best parts, and such was in “The Juniper Tree.” In this darkest tale, Elise Pekarek seemed to be competing with Krumpe in the previous scenes for the title of most fabulously evil stepmother. Ian J. Bethany channeled the purest of spirits and movements as the doomed son and the bird who takes his place. Chelsea Marie Renner took a part that could have been one dimensional as the sweet, loyal daughter and instead made it every bit as essential as Pekarek’s and Bethany’s central roles.

What more to say about Mills and Ballet Austin, as well as the Butler New Choreography Endowment that made this supreme achievement possible? All I can say is that we are extremely lucky to see it first. I’m betting that other ballet companies around the country will be do everything possible to make sure they can restage Austin’s unforgettable “Grimm Tales.”