

It's Time for Fairy Tales With the Bite Of Reality

By MARIA TATAR

FEW children have been treated to what the novelist Margaret Atwood calls "the complete Grimm," that unexpurgated collection of "The Nursery and Household Tales" in which "every blood-stained ax, wicked witch and dead horse is right there, where the Brothers Grimm set them down, ready to be discovered by us." Our cultural definition of fairy tales as bedtime reading for children has blinded us to what was at stake when these stories were first told.

Once upon a time, fairy tales — now ubiquitous in a holiday season offering us everything from "The Nutcracker" to "Peter Pan" to the Young Vic in their hard-edged "Grimm Tales" — were adult entertainment. These narratives, with their cruel and ribald touches, enlivened long winter evenings devoted to repairing tools, mending clothes or spinning yarn. To keep everyone awake, folk raconteurs relied on earthy realism, blood-curdling melodrama, comic excesses and bawdy humor. They appealed directly to their listeners' imaginations by indulging in fantasies of romance and revenge to undo some of the oppressive anxieties of everyday life and the tedium that marked the realm of work.

When Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm started collecting folk tales in the early part of the 19th century, they saw their effort as a way to build German national identity by capturing the "pure" poetic voice of the common people, or Volk. Somehow, they neglected to note that scenes charged with sadistic violence might not reflect so well on the character of that Volk. Snow White's stepmother, for example, dances to death in red-hot iron shoes; doves peck out the eyes of Cinderella's stepsisters; Gretel shoves the witch into the oven, bolts the door and listens to the old woman's howls as she "burns miserably to death."

The Grimms took special pride in "The Juniper Tree," a story in which a woman decapitates her stepson, chops up his corpse and cooks the pieces into a stew devoured with gusto by the boy's father. Its "happy" ending culminates in the murder of the stepmother, who is crushed by a millstone.

Leafing through the graphic descriptions of murder, amputation, cannibalism and torture in the Grimms' tales can make a reader hesitate. How could "The Nursery and Household Tales"

The old tales are not just kid stuff.

From folk dreams and fears, they led to great art, great evil and holiday fare.

come to rank, after the Bible and Shakespeare, as one of the Western world's best-selling books? It is not necessary to read far into the collection to understand why these stories have so powerful a hold on the imagination. As homespun versions of myths, they display the passionate intensity of Homer, without the epic grandeur and narrative play.

What is Thumbling's slaying of the ogre but a repetition in miniature of David's killing of Goliath, Odysseus' blinding of the Cyclops or Siegfried's conquest of Fafner? What are Cinderella and Cap o' Rushes if not sisters under the skin with Shakespeare's Cordelia? Bringing myths down to earth — inflecting them in human rather than heroic terms — fairy tales are up close and personal, telling us about the quest for romance and riches, for power and privilege and, most importantly, for a way home.

The Brothers Grimm give us myth and cultural history in a single, compact package. Putting a familiar spin on conflicts that inspire the stories in the archive of our collective imagination, the tales are also culturally symptomatic, at times even eerily

Continued on Page 10

Maria Tatar, a professor of Germanic languages and literature at Harvard University, is the editor of the recent "Classic Fairy Tales" (Norton) and the author of "The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales" (Princeton University Press).



An illustration of "Little Red Riding Hood" by Arthur Rackham (1867-1939): Theatre of the Book

prescient. Stories in "The Nursery and Household Tales" may reflect fears that beset all of us, but they also show how certain anxieties can take a sinister, local turn.

The Grimms' virulently anti-Semitic story, "The Jew in the Thornbush," glorifies a stalwart, guileless Teutonic lad and demonizes Jews as grasping, depraved monsters, deserving prolonged, cruel punishments. It is no accident that some historians trace the roots of Nazi ideologies to the generation of Romantic writers to which the Grimms belonged — writers who, in a curious cultural twist, also produced and inspired the most celebrated artistic works of the 19th and 20th centuries.

If our fairy-tale anthologies are heavily edited and censored, giving us cooked rather than raw versions of the Grimms' tales, it is not only because of Disney's hold on them. Most of us want to tell children bedtime stories filled with hypnotic beauty, whimsical humor, exotic enchantments and romantic mystery. We rightly worry that children will not be able to manage the violent conflicts enacted in the earlier versions and that high body counts will translate into even higher anxiety.

Yet the child psychologists all tell us not to fret, for those older, uncensored fairy tales open up the imagination rather than shut it down. Like the Grimms' "Golden Key" (the title of the last tale in the collection), or like Jung's "hidden door," Bruno Bettelheim's "magic mirror" and Joseph Campbell's "secret opening" to the subconscious, fairy tales engage us in a double quest: the hero's and our own. The smallest nursery fairy tale, Campbell reminds us, has the power "to touch and inspire deep creative centers."

Is it any wonder that we have tried to salvage some of the force of fairy tales by, among other things, establishing that annual holiday ritual of attending performances of "The Nutcracker" with our children? The E. T. A. Hoffmann story on which the ballet is based may not be an authentic fairy tale, but it has a powerful imaginative charge, capturing the high drama and passionate conflicts of the folk genre. This is Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art, translated into theater for children.

**The Brothers Grimm give
us myth and cultural
history in a single
compact package that is
sometimes eerily
prescient.**



Es war einmal ein allerbüßtes Kind, das bekam von seiner Großmutter ein rothes Sammetmädchen, deshalb nannte sie Jedermann Rothläppchen.



Sie sah laute Stimmen und sah die Füße in den Wald und grüßte sie.



Da sagt er zu Rothläppchen: Willst du deiner Großmutter nicht einen Blumenstrauch mitbringen? Da ging sie Blumen zu suchen und verirrete sich dabei.



Der Wolf kam zu der Großmutter und frug: Die Kleine, die schwach und...



Nun kam auch Rothläppchen an und wunderte sich über Großmutters große Ohren und über ihr langes Maul.



Der Wolf umstände, schlang das Bett und...



us myth and cultural
history in a single
compact package that is
sometimes eerily
prescient.

The New York City Ballet is presenting George Balanchine's version, through Jan. 3 at Lincoln Center.

"Grimm Tales," at the New Victory Theater on West 42d Street, also through Jan. 3, offers a riskier alternative. Just as children were around when peasants told tales in earlier centuries, children are welcome at these performances by the Young Vic Theater Company of London, which provides entertainment with an edge. (The two-hour program of six tales, including "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Golden Goose," is recommended for children ages 6 and up.)

Replicating and enriching the storyteller's craft, theater turns out to be the perfect latter-day medium for traditional tales, because the players tell the stories as they enact them, striving to move seamlessly from narration to dramatization. Embracing minimalism with spare sets and homely peasant costumes, the Young Vic players resist the temptation to estheticize these stories, to weave a spell that will dull our critical capacities and deaden us to what Auden saw as the fairy tale's power to produce "symbolic projections of our own psyche."

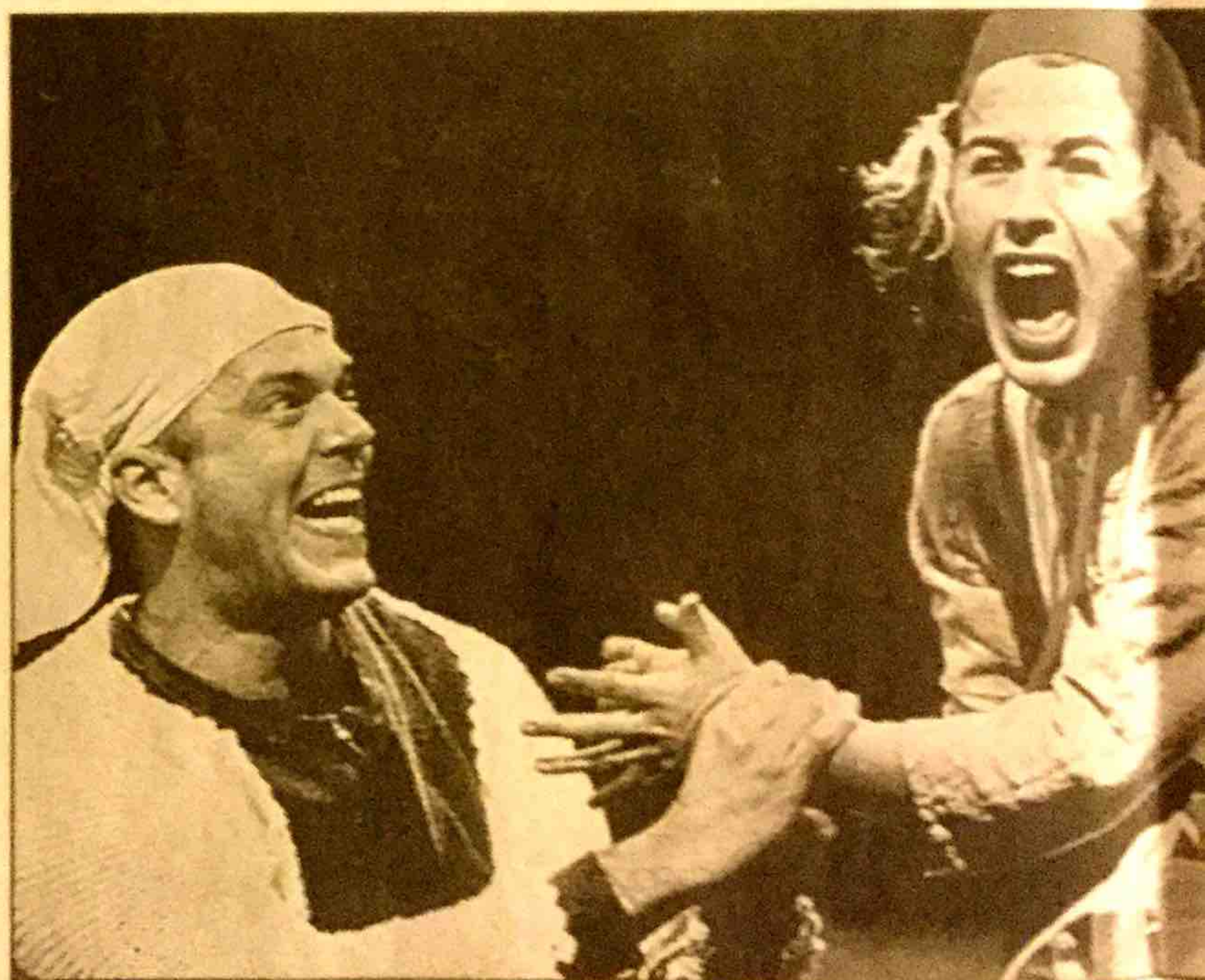
In "Little Red-Cap" (the Grimms' title for "Little Red Riding Hood") the wolf, a Hannibal Lecter look-alike, engulfs the heroine and her grandmother in yards of black fur. Performances in London reportedly produced shrieks as well as giggles, a strange mix of emotions that reminds us of how powerfully these stories tap into primal anxieties and desires. As we watch the woodsman open up the wolf's belly, fill it with a boulder and sew it back up, we feel in the presence of something bloody, savage and primitive, yet also eerily familiar.

Whether we side with feminists and read this story as a parable of rape, align ourselves with psychoanalysts and their theories about the pleasure-seeking Oedipal child, or imagine the cutting open of the belly (as does the poet Anne Sexton) as a kind of Caesarean section, we can still experience the raw power of the folk tale.

If there is any mystery to fairy tales, it is that virtually everyone is able to engage with them. Late in life, Charles Dickens confessed that Little Red Riding Hood was his "first love": "I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should



A traditional German illustrated text for the Grimms' fairy



Andy Williams, left, as the wolf, and Sarah C. Cameron as the grandmother in the Young Vic company's version of "Little Red Riding Hood" in

savage turns of plot that endow fairy tales with powerful affective energy, the Young Vic players keep the morals added by the Grimms to successive editions of their "Nursery and Household Tales." Once the two brothers recognized that their volume

takes an automatic outshoots the wolf dead. "It's easy to fool little girls now be."

Object lessons and pitiful appeal to parents, but child

produce "symbolic projections of our own psyche."

In "Little Red-Cap" (the Grimms' title for "Little Red Riding Hood") the wolf, a Hannibal Lecter look-alike, engulfs the heroine and her grandmother in yards of black fur. Performances in London reportedly produced shrieks as well as giggles, a strange mix of emotions that reminds us of how powerfully these stories tap into primal anxieties and desires. As we watch the woodsman open up the wolf's belly, fill it with a boulder and sew it back up, we feel in the presence of something bloody, savage and primitive, yet also eerily familiar.

Whether we side with feminists and read this story as a parable of rape, align ourselves with psychoanalysts and their theories about the pleasure-seeking Oedipal child, or imagine the cutting open of the belly (as does the poet Anne Sexton) as a kind of Caesarean section, we can still experience the raw power of the folk tale.

If there is any mystery to fairy tales, it is that virtually everyone is able to engage with them. Late in life, Charles Dickens confessed that Little Red Riding Hood was his "first love": "I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss."

The novelist Angela Carter recalled how her grandmother used to impersonate the wolf, making her granddaughter, who played the victim, "squeak and gibber with excited pleasure."

Like Dickens, Luciano Pavarotti was completely enamored of Little Red Riding Hood. But rather than wanting to marry her, he identified with the hooded girl and was fascinated by her ability to emerge whole from the belly of the wolf, even in the face of death's finality. "I dreaded her death," he notes in the introduction to an illustrated version of the story, "or what we think death is. I waited anxiously for the hunter."

Accommodating virtually every reader and listener, fairy tales have a remarkable cultural elasticity that allows them to be twisted and pulled in all directions without losing their basic critical mass.

Despite a determination to respect the



Trimstan Kenton/"Grimm Tales"

Andy Williams, left, as the wolf, and Sarah C. Cameron as the title character in the Young Vic company's version of "Little Red Riding Hood" in "Grimm Tales."

savage turns of plot that endow fairy tales with powerful affective energy, the Young Vic players keep the morals added by the Grimms to successive editions of their "Nursery and Household Tales." Once the two brothers recognized that their volume had captured the imagination of a broad audience, they decided to turn it into a child-rearing manual and worked hard to add lessons and morals to stories that often veered off into the surreal and preposterous.

The brutal events in the Grimms' "Little Red-Cap" end with Red-Cap solemnly vowing that she will never "wander off the path into the woods" when "mother has warned me not to." Will that really make a difference the next time she encounters a wolf in the forest?

Excessive fidelity to the letter of the Grimms' version means some missed opportunities to take advantage of folk versions that position the heroine as a feisty young girl who escapes falling victim to the wolf and instead joins the ranks of trickster figures. The humorist James Thurber inserted himself into that tradition when the heroine of his "Little Girl and the Wolf"

takes an automatic out of her basket and shoots the wolf dead. "Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be."

Object lessons and pithy morals may appeal to parents, but children seem to prefer bodily torture. When Snow White's wicked stepmother dances to death wearing red-hot iron clogs in the Young Vic production, we should not be surprised that her frenzied gyrations and chilling screams are punctuated by the sounds of children laughing, delighting in fantasies of revenge.

In most performances of Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" — in the New York City Opera version presented this fall, Manhattan was the setting, with Central Park as the forest — there is spontaneous applause when Hansel and Gretel shove the witch into the oven. In the Grimms' tale, the two children take off after stuffing their pockets with pearls and jewels. The opera version involves the liberation of other captive children, who sing and dance in delight once the witch, transformed into a gingerbread snack, is taken out of the oven and distributed among them.

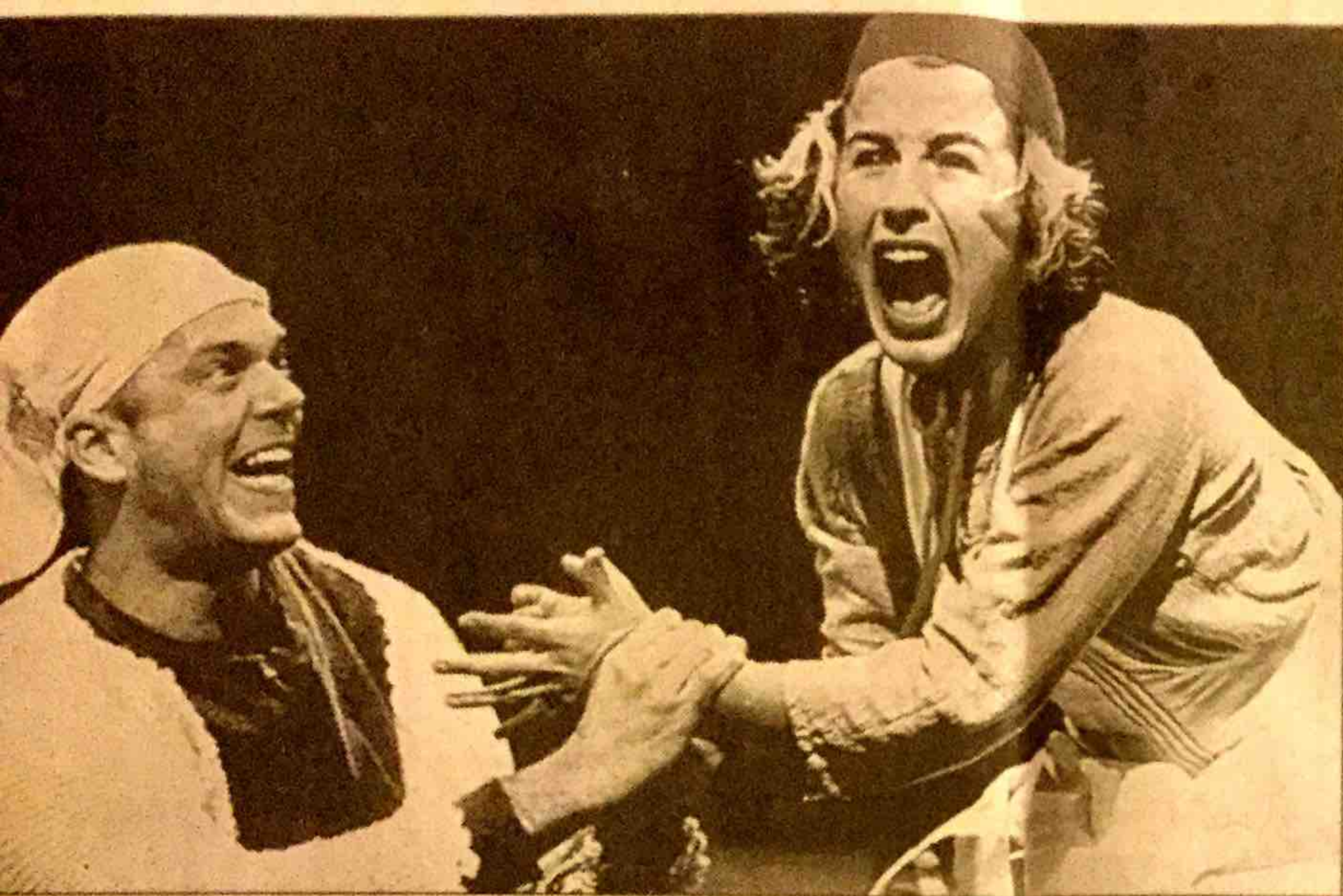
imate reader of the child, she would quietly made for herself in fairy tales and savor triumph over the adults and sounds of her mother's daughter later selected Grimms that the mother for a heady volume of formations."

"Of all the comforts one of the loveliest and the unrestrained laughter wrote one critic about tion of J. M. Barrie's vival of a musical ve Cathy Rigby in the Marquis Theater on Jan. 3.) The reviewer templating something the effect produced by Grimms' tales.

What fascinated him was its ability to cast a drawing the child into of Neverland with its politically incorrect "Carroll's Wonderland, in for the child's rich a It may have room for constructed by an adult the province of children ally defend themselves sive interventions of the known as adults.

For adults, the performance of "Pete observing the spellbound as well as the boy up, on the stage. Even reminds us of the gulf author called "gay and less" children from a and adult to suspend night, to clap hands and escape to Neverland magic of childhood. For pretend that they can into the extravagant imagination.

Is anyone surprised Spielberg, with his se



Andy Williams, left, as the wolf, and Sarah C. Cameron as the title character in the Young Vic company's version of "Little Red Riding Hood" in "Grimm Tales."

age turns of plot that endow fairy tales with powerful affective energy, the Young Vic players keep the morals added by the Grimms to successive editions of their *Nursery and Household Tales*. Once the two brothers recognized that their volume had captured the imagination of a broad audience, they decided to turn it into a child-bearing manual and worked hard to add lessons and morals to stories that often veered off into the surreal and preposterous. The brutal events in the Grimms' "Little Red-Cap" end with Red-Cap solemnly vowing that she will never "wander off the path into the woods" when "mother has warned me not to." Will that really make a difference the next time she encounters a wolf in the forest?

Excessive fidelity to the letter of the Grimms' version means some missed opportunities to take advantage of folk versions that position the heroine as a feisty young girl who escapes falling victim to the wolf and instead joins the ranks of trickster figures. The humorist James Thurber inserted himself into that tradition when the heroine of his "Little Girl and the Wolf"

takes an automatic out of her basket and shoots the wolf dead. "Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be."

Object lessons and pithy morals may appeal to parents, but children seem to prefer bodily torture. When Snow White's wicked stepmother dances to death wearing red-hot iron clogs in the Young Vic production, we should not be surprised that her frenzied gyrations and chilling screams are punctuated by the sounds of children laughing, delighting in fantasies of revenge.

In most performances of Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" — in the New York City Opera version presented this fall, Manhattan was the setting, with Central Park as the forest — there is spontaneous applause when Hansel and Gretel shove the witch into the oven. In the Grimms' tale, the two children take off after stuffing their pockets with pearls and jewels. The opera version involves the liberation of other captive children, who sing and dance in delight once the witch, transformed into a gingerbread snack, is taken out of the oven and distributed among them.

Linda Gray Sexton, the daughter of Anne Sexton, has written a heart-rending account of childhood with an abusive mother and persuasively endorses the therapeutic value of learning about those punishments. A passionate reader of the Grimms' tales as a child, she would quietly sip the soup she had made for herself in the kitchen, reading fairy tales and savoring the "child's triumph over the adults around him," all to the sounds of her mother's typewriter. The daughter later selected the tales from the Grimms that the mother rewrote in verse for a heady volume of poetry called "Transformations."

"Of all the comforts that nature can offer, one of the loveliest and most comforting is the unrestrained laughter of children," wrote one critic about a 1956 British production of J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan." (A revival of a musical version of the play, with Cathy Rigby in the title role, is now at the Marquis Theater on Broadway, through Jan. 3.) The reviewer was, of course, contemplating something quite different from the effect produced by performances of the Grimms' tales.

What fascinated him about "Peter Pan" was its ability to cast a soothing magic spell, drawing the child into the enchanted region of Neverland with its fairies, pirates and politically incorrect "redskins." Like Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, Neverland is a stand-in for the child's rich and vivid imagination. It may have room for adults and it may be constructed by an adult author, but it is still the province of children, who must perpetually defend themselves against the aggressive interventions of those unruly creatures known as adults.

For adults, the pleasure afforded by a performance of "Peter Pan" is doubled in observing the spellbound child in the audience as well as the boy who will never grow up, on the stage. Even as "Peter Pan" reminds us of the gulf separating what its author called "gay and innocent and heartless" children from adults, it invites child and adult to suspend disbelief for just one night, to clap hands and save Tinkerbell, to escape to Neverland and re-experience the magic of childhood. Former children get to pretend that they can be transported back into the extravagant world of the child's imagination.

Is anyone surprised then that Steven Spielberg, with his sense of wonder about

the child's sense of wonder, would seize on "Peter Pan" and use it as a source of inspiration for his sequel to it — "Hook"?

Written to be performed as a Christmas pantomime in 1904, "Peter Pan," like "The Nutcracker," stands as a rite of passage in our culture. We watch performances of both with our children, in part with the hope that they will lose themselves in the beauty of the performance, but in part also to repair our own damaged sense of wonder as we contemplate the children on stage and off.

That the Victorian cult of childhood innocence, along with the Edwardian cult of the boy child, has a sinister side to it has been supremely evident ever since Morton Cohen drew our attention to Lewis Carroll's photographs of half-naked little girls and challenged us to think hard about the investment of adult authors in writing stories for children.

A LOOK at the splendid exhibit "Victorian Fairy Painting" now at the Frick Collection, confirms exactly what was on the minds of most painters of the time who embraced the simple pleasures of fairy kingdoms in an effort to escape the pathologies of urban life. With the typical Victorian flair for excess that belies the era's reputation for repression, the painters in this exhibit eroticize and estheticize the "innocent" antics of fairy life. These sexually charged paintings (Lewis Carroll went to the trouble of counting the 165 naked creatures in Joseph Noël Paton's magnificent "Quarrel of Oberon and Titania") are symptomatic of the volatile mix in the Victorian era of innocence, beauty and sensuality, a combination that has found its way into what children, as well as adults, see and read.

The Grimms' tales and even "Peter Pan" originally may have been meant for adult audiences, but they have made the transition from the parlor to the nursery almost effortlessly. The Young Vic's "Grimm Tales," like the collection on which it is based, shares many grown-up secrets, but in a way appropriate to the child. After engaging with the dramatic conflicts in "Peter Pan" and "The Nutcracker," children will return with a renewed sense of wonder about their own world and perhaps with a touch of trepidation about what it will be like to turn into a former child.

Or Fairy Tales With the Bite of Reality



Es war einmal ein allerliebster Knab, das bekam von seiner Großmutter ein rothes Sonnenmädchen, deshalb nannte sie Jedermann Rothläppchen.



Einmal sagte die Mutter zu ihr: Nimm diesen Kuchen und Wein, trag es hinaus in den Wald zur kranken Großmutter und grüße sie von mir.



„Ich will alles gut ausrichten“, sagte Rothläppchen, und wanderte wohlgenuth zum Dörfchen hinaus in den Wald; da begegnete ihr ein großer Wolf.



Der gefiel sich zu ihr und fragte, wo sie hin wolle. Als er hörte, daß sie zur Großmutter will, denkt er: das ist ein guter Dissen, wie fängt Du den.



Da sagt er zu Rothläppchen: Willst du deiner Großmutter nicht einen Blumenstrauß mitbringen? Da ging sie Blumen zu suchen und verirrte sich dabei.



Der Wolf aber lief nun zur Großmutter und klopfte an. „Drück nur auf die Klinge“, rief sie, ich bin krank und schwach und kann nicht aufstehen.



Der Wolf drückte auf die Klinge, trat hinein, ging an das Bett der Großmutter und verschluckte sie, ohne ein Wort zu sprechen.



Dann nahm er ihre Kleider, that sie an, setzte sich ihre Haube auf, legte sich dann in ihr Bett und zog die Vorhänge zu.



Nun kam auch Rothläppchen an und wunderte sich über Großmutter's große Ohren und über ihr langes Maul.



Der Wolf aber machte keine langen Umstände, sprang aus dem Bette, verschlang das Rothläppchen, legte sich zu Bette und schnarchte bald.



Das Schnarchen aber hörte der Jäger, welcher vorbeiging, der kam herein und sah den schlafenden Wolf im Bette liegen.



Nun wollte er seine Büchse anlegen, da dachte er aber, vielleicht hat er die Großmutter getroffen, nahm sein Messer und schnitt ihm den Bauch auf.



Und siehe da, Rothläppchen und Großmutter sprangen gesund und munter wieder heraus. Rothläppchen aber holte große Steine herbei.



Dann stießen sie den Wolf den Berg und wie er aufwachte und fortlaufen wollte, waren die Steine so schwer, daß er niederfiel und sich tödtete.



Da waren alle drei vergnügt, der Jäger nahm den Pelz, die Großmutter aß den Kuchen und trank den Wein, den Rothläppchen gebracht hatte.



Rothläppchen aber ging wohlgenuth wieder nach Haus und dachte: Du willst nie wieder vom Wege ab in den Wald laufen, wenn's die Mutter verboten hat.