

the DRAGONSOUP

review of Travis Edward Pike's

GRUMPUSS

by Petra Davidson, 5 March 1999

Editor's note: *Dragonsoup.com* is gone, but Travis Pike allowed us to borrow this image of his dragon, *Long-Grin*, for the header to this recreated (and edited) 1999 review.



Once more, I was asked to do a review for *Dragonsoup*, and more or less eagerly, I accepted. (More because *Dragonsoup* is my boss and I'm eager to agree with everything they want, less, because the last time I was asked to do a review I wasn't too impressed with what I was sent.) This time, the job went further than just looking at a website. I was asked to review an audio and video version of *Grumpuss*, a story written entirely in verse.

"In verse???" was my first thought. "Dragons and kings and dwarfs? Oh my!!!" But I agreed, and what I got was a handful, but if you'll bear with me, you'll find your way to an interesting, fun, and underappreciated world of fantasy and good, old-fashioned tale-telling in the tradition of some of the forgotten greats of literary history.

Why I Like This Story:

I like *Grumpuss* because it is good. But so are plenty of other stories. *Grumpuss* is different in its unique style, and that the author, Travis Edward Pike, put a lot of effort and conviction into his story. Pike refuses to adjust *Grumpuss* to any norm or standards producers and publishers expect him to follow. Instead he holds on and has decided to either do or die with this story that's only flaw is that it was conceived decades after the art of storytelling was limited to content rather than style.

Story Quality:

Grumpuss is much more than just a fun story. It's not a simple "Hero goes to kill beast but makes friends" story, but a tale about understanding the difference between diverse kinds of beings, without ever getting preachy about the morals it teaches. The Grumpuss appears like the last of a minority, hunted down by those who feel they have the right to rid themselves of anything they fear or to capture and contain it to serve their own glory.

Grumpuss is also unique in that it is entirely written in rhyme. Wilhelm Busch, one of the greatest writers in Germany, wrote all of his stories in verse, and they are some of the best tales ever told. But Wilhelm Busch, granted the title of unofficial forefather of the comic strip, wrote harsh criticism packed into fun-filled rhymes. Travis Edward Pike, on the other hand, writes with more detail and more of a tongue-in-cheek tone about the story's hero, whose dreams of fame make him overconfident and almost cost his life and the life of the Grumpuss. As great as Busch's stories, but with characters that show the quirky qualities of Michael Ende's *Neverending Story*, and with any luck, the author might just take his place in the hall of fame of authors who write to entertain an audience, rather than talk down to them.

For a younger audience, Sir Ellery will be a hero. For the more mature audience, he will be the prime example of foolishness that often overcomes people when their dreams make them lose sight of reality and its many options, but who, in the end, come to realize that doing the right thing and preserving a dying species is more important than blindly following orders.

Story:

Grumpuss is the story of the knight, Sir Ellery, who is sent off by his king to find the Grumpuss that is roaming the land. The Grumpuss, thanks to his bad reputation, is feared by the king and his subjects, so Sir Ellery is sent on a week-long quest to either capture or slay the Grumpuss, and "return with the beast or its head in hand."

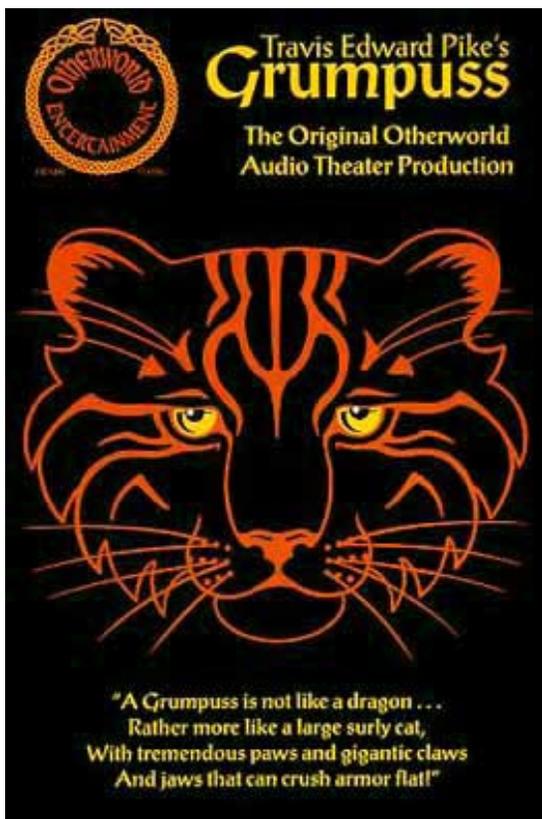
Dreaming of fame and glory, Sir Ellery misses every piece of advice given to him about the "large, surly cat," and rides off to find the beast. Along the way, he meets Rashpur, the dwarf, who speaks highly of his friend, the Grumpuss. Dreaming of glory and ladies swooning over him, Sir Ellery considers taming the Grumpuss, rather than killing it.

Sir Ellery finally meets the Grumpuss, and after some training in courtly manners, sets out to return to the king with his prize. Alas, in a small village along the way, the two get into a terrible fight, and by the time the fearful villagers dare come out to see the outcome, both are gone.

Sir Ellery awakens in Rashpur's cave, and knowing that the Grumpuss is recovering elsewhere in the depths of the cave also, concludes it is best to slay the Grumpuss after all. But as he raises his sword to kill the weakened Grumpuss, he realizes it's plight is partly his fault, and decides instead to plead leniency when the king and his search party arrive.

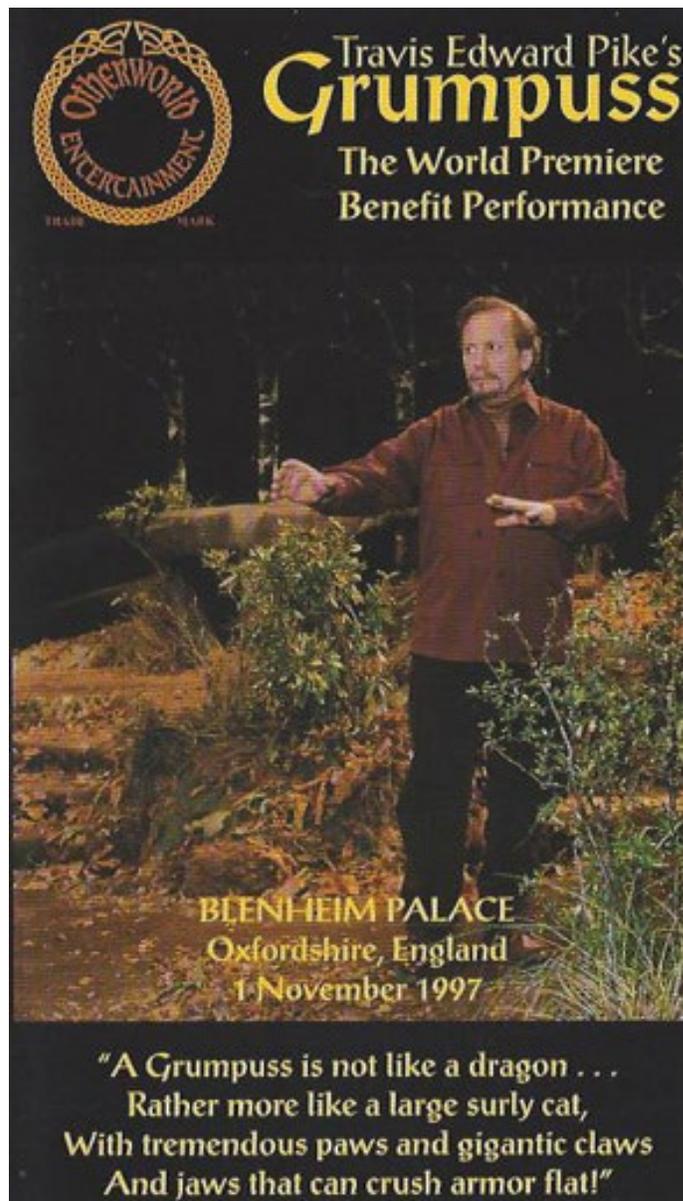
Quality:

Not quite sure what to expect, I tore into my package, and was pleasantly surprised to see two professionally made box-covers. The audio tape box features a *Grumpuss* graphic, and contains two tapes. The video tape box shows the narrator of the piece, Travis Edward Pike, in a scene of the play.

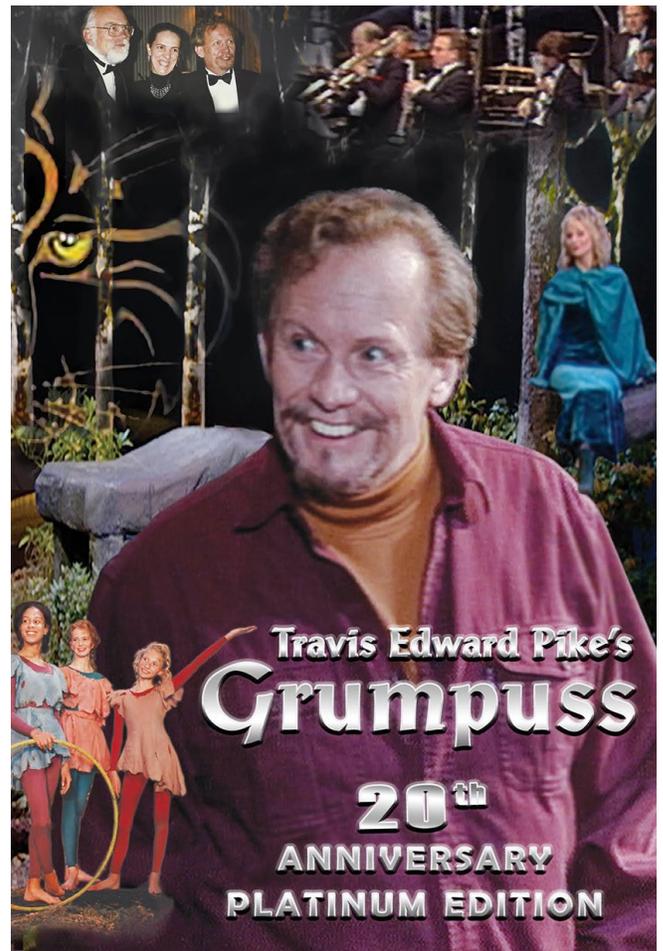
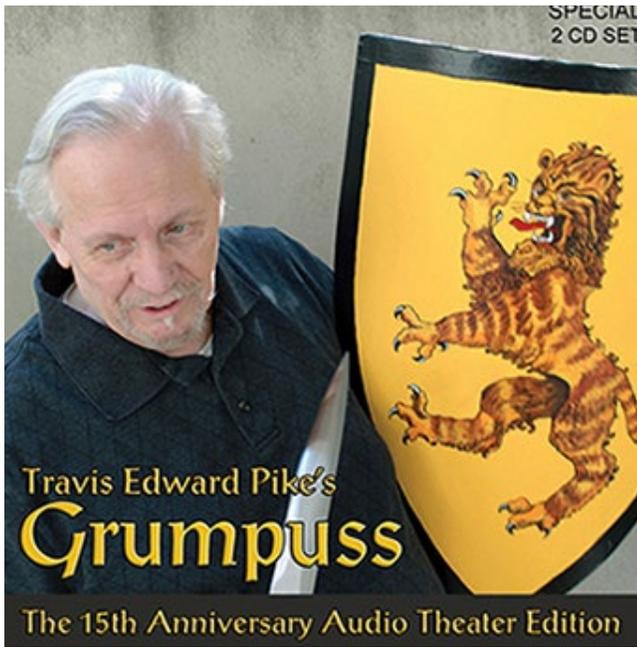


Both the audio and the video were of good quality. As a matter of fact, used to cranking up my Walkman to full volume, I had to tone it down to half-strength. (Maybe one or the other pop-artist I honored with my royalties should call up Otherworld and ask them about borrowing their equipment.) You don't have to activate your hearing aid to be able to hear Grumpuss, and that's good news for all of us who don't have one.

The narration itself is very clear, and makes it easy to catch every word of the story, and coming from me, whose native language is not English, that is quite a compliment! Considering that an audio production requires some fantasy on the part of the listener, that really helps a lot. Who wants to work up a good image and then have it busted like a bubble, going: "Huh? What was that?" Rewind . . .



The Grumpuss video production was very well done. I sort of expected some blurry picture of a dark theater and a couple of blobs moving around in the shadows, like those Department of Defense School play videos on the military's cable channels overseas. (Don't ask. I watched them for 3 years living in Japan.) Instead, a simple, yet beautiful theater set was explored with several cameras by a team of obvious professionals. Good lighting, changes in camera angles, and perfectly clear sound make this production fun to watch.



Video:

The video production of *Grumpuss* varies from the audio in that it has some added scenes, depicting the Queen of the Sidh (pronounced shee), upon her Fairy Mound, with the three children she “holds in thrall, planning to take them into her otherworldly realm.” These additions were written for the world premiere of *Grumpuss*, which took place at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, England, and benefited the Save the Children Foundation. These scenes, framing the four acts of the play, are short pieces that were flawlessly added for the premiere benefit and provide the setting for the telling of the epic narrative rhyme.

As mentioned before, the set was a simple, but quite good depiction of the Fairy Mound. Some trees, a rock for the poet to climbing out from beneath, and some different levels to allow the storyteller to hold the audiences focus. Travis Edward Pike keeps the still set moving along with his story by utilizing almost every corner of it. How he manages not to rustle the leaves strewn about the set is a mystery to me.

There was not much offered in the way of costumes, but seeing that Pike depicts a poet who accidentally happens upon the Fairy Mound, that is probably more appropriate than any lavish outfits would have been.

I wondered, before putting the tape into the VCR, how I would be able to sit through an hour and a half staring at mostly one man on a set, reciting what in essence would be an extremely long poem. And how many obvious cuts would I sit through where the narrator lost his sentence . . . After a while though, I stopped worrying. Especially when I had to mute the tape for a phone call, and found myself staring at Travis Edward Pike talking, trying to follow the story just by watching his expressions. While he mostly directs his tale at his audience, Pike does act along as much as the story allows, without ever going off on overdramatic rampages.

EDITOR’S NOTES: In the nearly 20 years since this review was written, technological advances allowed replacement of the audio and video cassette versions with much improved CD and DVD versions of these original performances.

The remastered *Grumpuss 15th Anniversary Audio Theater Edition* (above left), is superb, and clips from it are posted on Youtube and may be accessed through <http://www.grumpuss.com/AUDSAMPLES.html>.

The live, benefit performance for the Save the Children Fund, re-titled as the *Grumpuss 20th Anniversary Platinum Edition*, originally captured digitally, is now on DVD. Audition clips from it at <http://www.grumpuss.com/VIDSAMPLES.html>. Both versions are sold on Amazon.com and by select retailers worldwide.

This review has been recreated and edited from a printout captured 3/5/1999. Since then, Pike published 1964-1974: *A Decade of Odd Tales and Wonders*, an illustrated memoir of his early career as a storyteller, singer, and songwriter when pop music ushered in a social revolution that helped define an entire American generation. He has recorded the best of his original songs from that turbulent decade, and visitors are invited to audition them in their entirety through links provided on <http://www.oddtalesandwonders.com>.