

Fringe Festival

Buzz Box

Day 8

"The Black Rider."--FringeNYC welcomes the quintessential postmodern musical. The buzz on this show is so loud, my ears are still ringing. The Harry De Jur Playhouse holds 350 people, more than any other Fringe theatre. Still, tickets are going quickly. The pre-show energy at the show was comparable to being in the theatre during the first weekend of "The Phantom Menace," only this lives up to the hype.

To be sure, this musical by Tom Waits, Robert Wilson, and William S Burroughs is not for everyone. By the final curtain call, half the audience had left, and the other half was on its feet. Suffice to say you will either love it or hate it, but you owe it to yourself to see it for yourself. It is at once dark and hysterical, grand and personal. This musical looks to the future while drawing heavily from postmodern theatrical innovators.

It's equal parts Beckett, Brecht, and Chaikin. Throw in a touch of macabre mime theatre, and you have a musical that makes its own rules. Everyone on stage wears pasty white Gothic makeup, even the versatile three-member orchestra, referred to as The Devil's Rubato Band.

The Canadian troupe of actors is six members strong, and I do mean strong. Throughout the play, each gets a chance to strut his/her stuff in an individual showcase scene, and none of them fail to impress us. As an ensemble, they electrify the stage, thanks to keen direction by R.M. Jenkins. His defining characteristic is the use of simple, evocative gestures to express actions and emotions. This technique never tires, and the repetition of the movements perfectly compliments the songs and text.

The story is an adapted German folktale, laced with obvious symbols for heroin addiction. In short, the content is what you might expect from Waits and Burroughs. In the words, you hear Burroughs' voice coming through strongly at points. The same goes for the music by Waits. And there are other aspects that could come from nowhere else but collaboration between the two gravel-voiced artists.

It is no wonder that "The Black Rider" has thus far been the top draw at FringeNYC. When it's gone, it will be far too soon.

--Peter Shaughnessy