

The Black Rider By Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs and Robert Wilson

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Reviewer: Bill Robertson .

Colin: (following song) That of course is Tom Waits. Imagine if you will if Tom Waits and alternative writer William S. Burroughs teamed up and wrote a musical, pretty far out right? Well, turns out Waits and Burroughs did write a musical together and you can see it this month at Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon. It's titled The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets, our Bill Robertson saw a preview performance last night, joins me now from our Saskatoon studio. Hi Bill.

Bill: Hey there Colin.

Colin: Waits and Burroughs, this sounds like it could be quite the ride. How did you like it?

Bill: Well just to add in, it also includes a fellow by the name of Robert Wilson who helped them write it and he's responsible for Einstein on the Beach for any of you who know that work. But your original question, how did I like it? Well..... It's pretty far out, I'm not sure it's quite my cup of tea, but I certainly appreciated what they were trying to do up there Colin. It's kind of a dark circus, a dark carnival if you will, some 20's Berlin dance hall, some Bertolt Brecht, some of that kind of music that he does, and then think your way through to what The Doors did , Jim Morrison and The Doors with their album Strange Days, including the people on the cover, and then sift that all through Tom Waits working with William S. Burroughs and land it all down on an old German folk tale and you've got yourself my friend The Black Rider.

Colin: Now the actual story is a take on the old Faustian tale is it?

Bill: Yes.

Colin: The devil buying another sorry soul.

Bill: Yeah, yeah, here's a person that's desperate. We start with the German folk tale. There is a forester by the name of Kuno who is attending the Duke's hunting party and they witness a sight of a man tied to the back of a great stag, he's running through the forest and of course this man is being ripped to pieces and the Duke says that anyone who can bring down that stag without harming the man will be the huntsman for life. Kuno does the job and then he has to shoot something else to prove that his bullets weren't enchanted. So he hands down this royal huntsman title on down through the generations and now it's gotten to the present royal huntsman and he wants his daughter, this fellow wants his daughter, to marry a good hunter by the name of Robert. But Katchen, his daughter, doesn't love Robert she wants to marry, get this, a guy by the name of Wilhelm,

a name of which I highly approve of course, who is a city clerk. Right, a clerk. Of course. Well, the city clerk can't hope to be much of a hunter so he does what anybody in this kind of position would do Colin; he goes promptly to the devil. In this play he is called Peg Leg, he's got a bit of a walking impediment, and he sells his soul for magic bullets with which to shoot whatever is asked of him. But you know always Colin, the problem with magic bullets is that they tend to run out. You know Colin, bullets run out. And then the devil gets kind of ornery, right. You know, he goes back and wants more bullets and the devil gets cranky about this, well what's in it for me kind of thing. So, there you go. Somebody's going to have to pay Old Nick eventually right? When he's made a deal for your soul you got to pay sometime Colin.

Colin: Yeah, so there's that. Reading up a little bit on it it's also a tale of addiction isn't it Bill? That reflects William S. Burroughs addiction probably.

Bill: Yeah, for those people who know about William S. Burroughs and Naked Lunch they've read all about his addictions. And the thing about addiction of course is that you keep wanting more. There's a little sidelong joke made in here we all know marijuana leads to heroin they say in here and of course that's exactly it. You want more. This bunch of bullets weren't enough, now I need more bullets, right.

Colin: So how is this all told onstage?

Bill: Well my goodness, it's quite a *mélange* Colin. You've got a three piece orchestra, a three piece band called the devil's Rubato band off to the side. They do a marvelous job these three women, a marvelous job. A mixture of the trombone and the bass and the piano or various other combinations. You've got this 100 minutes told straight through. No break and it's just songs from this album, all from the Black Rider album, you've got talking, you've got mime, you've got wild make-up like this white face make-up, zany antics, people dancing around like they're marionettes. You've got slapstick comedy, people doing cartwheels, being pulled through one another's legs, offstage voices coming on. It's a wild, wild ride there Colin.

Colin: Now this is a theatre company from Edmonton that is bringing this to Persephone. November Theatre has had a lot of success with this show in the Fringe circuit over the years. How's the production?

Bill: Well, the production is pretty darn good. I just heard that this play landed in town about 2 nights ago and so what I saw really was the preview and it is a very slick production. I mean some people, it's obviously well rehearsed, it's obviously been played many times before despite the fact that they just parachuted into town it's very, very well done. The thing that is going to take long time Persephone goes off guard is the very 'fringiness' of this play. I mean it was played at the Edmonton Fringe taken down to New York, a Fringe play, some of the subscribers might wonder if they took a wrong turn somewhere and drove onto Broadway into a time warp because it feels all the way through. Feels very 'fringy' but you've got all of the resources of the Persephone Theatre stage so it's very, very well done.

Colin: And how are the performances?

Bill: Uniformly good Colin. These people have worked together, and it's obvious they like this play, they really have a ball up there I think. I mean swinging through one another's legs and roaring around and all the rest of it. It's like, I say, it's like a dark circus. And so there's all this kind of fun. The performances are good they work very well together these people particularly Kevin Corey I like him as Wilhelm he's onstage a lot and Michael Scholar Jr., now you've heard of his father I think.

Colin: Michael Scholar used to review theatre for us I think. I remember his son Michael Scholar Jr. was a very, very fine actor.

Bill: Do you know that Michael Scholar Sr. produced, he was the director of this original one in Edmonton when they first did it yeah, so Michael Scholar Jr. plays Peg Leg, the devil, and he's got a great voice, and a great presence. You know, great presence. Very attractive, you know sin is attractive Colin. Rachel Johnston as the young woman who doesn't want to marry the fellow that her father wants her to marry. Right, this is Katchen. She is quite good there. And the musicians, as I say, Liz Han, Corinne Kessel, and Dale Ladouceur, they're terrific. Terrific group of musicians up there Colin.

Colin: And what about the music Bill? We just heard a Tom Waits song for instance. How would you describe his music for this show?

Bill: Yeah, I mean that song. You're innocent when you dream. For all those people who think wow is that going to be the way it is sort of an oompah band with an old harmonium playing. No, the songs aren't all like that folks. Relax. Tom Waits, for those of you who know his very early album Closing Time know that Tom Waits can write a beautiful ballad, a very romantic song. He has a real way with the melody when he wants to and some of the songs in this play for instance, The Briar and the Rose or I'll Shoot the Moon or perhaps The Last Rose of Summer. Lovely, lovely songs that people will enjoy a great deal I'm sure.

Colin: Well Bill, it certainly sounds like kind of a departure, something different for Persephone but good to shake things up a bit now and again.

Bill: Yeah, yeah. As I said before it's pretty wild this thing and this sort of marriage of oompah band and the Berlin stuff and all the rest of it but theatre, you know I think that people do need to be shaken up a bit here Colin. And you know theatre is a living thing, it's not static, it's not the same thing every year. I'm sure that some patrons wish it was but darn it, it keeps growing - it's alive and changing and to bring in a whole different production and give them a go I think that it is a wonderful idea and it's a bit of a shake up and that's just fine.

Colin: Bill, thanks a lot.

Bill: Okay Colin.

Colin: Bill Robertson, he reviews theatre for us in Saskatoon. The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets runs through November 17 at Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon.

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