

entertainment

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November Theatre's dark and poetic *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* hits its mark, kicking off this year's PuSh International Performing Arts Festival with a blood-curdling bang.

Hell hath no fury like a Tom Waits musical

The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets

At Waterfront Theatre until Jan. 15

Tickets: 604-257-0366

Reviewed by Jo Ledingham

LOOK UP, WAY UP. Edmonton's November Theatre has raised the bar so high with this, the first show in the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, that every company in town is going to be scrambling to keep up.

A collaboration between singer/songwriter/actor Tom Waits, legendary Beat writer William S. Burroughs and American director Robert Wilson, *The Black Rider* premiered in Germany in 1990. November Theatre artistic director Michael Scholar Jr. acquired the rights and presented the first English-language production at the Edmonton Fringe before taking the show to New York in 1999, where it sold out every performance and got rave reviews. So impressed was Waits with the production, he has given exclusive English-language rights to the Edmonton company.

Based on a 200-year-old German folktale, *The Black Rider* is a Faustian tale, a reminder that making a bargain with the devil is "a fool's bargain." Part cabaret, circus and allegory, this show is a grab bag of

goodies: scratchy Waits songs and lyrics, and darkly poetic and nihilistic Burroughs text.

Like some characters who pull puppet strings for other characters in the show, director Ron Jenkins pulls the show's strings—and, oh, what lovely strings. Surprise follows surprise: the bride suddenly is raised three feet off the ground by her soft-shoe dancing groom, hidden underneath the frothy skirts of her wedding gown. Or the hero's death visualized as a black balloon, inflated with each dying breath before sailing off in its willy-nilly flight before dropping, flaccid, to the ground.

Designer Marissa Kochanski makes it startlingly simple: three red velvet, floor-to-ceiling panels made even more blood-red by Michael Kruse's startling lighting. Add a couple of stark white props now and again and it's all magic.

The Devil's Rubato Band (Liz Han, Corinne Kessel and Dale Ladouceur on piano, trombone, clarinet, accordion, percussion, train whistle and maybe kazoo) provides onstage accompaniment for more than a dozen songs that are dark, darkly funny or ironically sentimental and sung by the six performers. There's not a weak voice in the bunch. Notables include Clinton Carew, who captures Waits' booze and cigarette-fueled singing style so well, and Rachael Johnston, who delights with a voice that ranges from pretty and pastoral to caterwauling cat.

The Black Rider is a familiar story but

dressed up here in *lederhosen*. Bertram, an old forester, holds the hereditary title of master marksman, his father having slain a stag to which an unfortunate, half-dead hunter had been tied and dragged through the forest. Now that Katchen, Bertram's daughter, is of marriageable age, he wants to marry her off to slathering idiot but good marksman Robert. Alas, Katchen has already given her heart to Wilhelm, a city clerk who can't shoot for beans. "Learn to hunt," she implores. When Peg Leg (a thinly disguised Satan) offers Wilhelm magic bullets so he can hit anything he wants, thereby winning the girl, Wilhelm makes the deal. There is, however, one of the Devil's silver bullets with a mind of its own.

Scholar Jr. is charmingly sinister as the gimpy-legged tempter; in white face, mask-like black eye makeup and black lipstick, he's handsome in a devilish and dangerous way. The kind of character that sends you locking up your daughters.

Rachael Johnston, barefoot and wearing a stunningly red velvet dress, is grotesquely sweet, while curly haired Kevin Corey offers a hapless, hopeful but doomed Wilhelm.

Not easy to describe, *The Black Rider* is much more than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, owing something to cabaret, Faust, Kurt Weill and German Expressionism. It's completely fascinating, stylish and Mephistophelean: "Don't sell your 'you' 'cause then you ain't got no 'you,'" it warns.

See it if you can; tickets are going like a bat outta hell.