



The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets, written by Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs and Robert Wilson and produced by Edmonton's November Theatre, returns to the PuSh International Arts Festival.

PuSh festival favourite rides again

By Fiona Hughes

WHAT DO YOU GET when you combine the distinctive talents of musician Tom Waits, beat writer William S. Burroughs and theatre maverick Robert Wilson? Something dark and Faustian perhaps? Of course.

If *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* doesn't sound like the antidote to these punishing grey days, put your faith in Norman Armour, executive director of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival. He first brought the stylized musical fable to Vancouver for PuSh in 2005. Critics gushed but lamented its brief one-week run. Then the Arts Club Theatre saw an opportunity. It joined forces with Armour to bring back the acclaimed production for this year's installment of PuSh, which begins tonight and runs until Feb. 3. *The Black Rider* takes over the Arts Club Granville Island stage for an extended run until Feb. 9.

The play's director Ron Jenkins couldn't be happier. Jenkins' November Theatre company has had the exclusive Canadian rights to the English-language show since 1998, eight years after it premiered in Germany. November Theatre premiered the show at the Edmon-

ton Fringe Festival and followed it up with a run a year later at the New York Fringe. It has since travelled across the country and become November Theatre's signature show. But each time the company finishes a run, Jenkins is convinced it's the final curtain on *The Black Rider*.

"Then we get a phone call and we get to do it all over again," said Jenkins, from his Edmonton home where the cast was in rehearsals last week. "This show is the most memorable time I've ever had in the theatre. I was knocked out when I first read the script. I know [Waits, Burroughs and Wilson's] work individually so I really wanted to see what they could do together and what we could do with the show."

Described as a dark tale of doom and bliss that explores addiction and loss, *The Black Rider* is based on the German folktale *Der Freischütz* (*The Freeshot*). It centres on file clerk Wilhelm who falls in love with a huntsman's daughter. In order to marry, Wilhelm must prove his worth as a hunter and gain her father's approval, but he's a lousy shot. That is until he's offered magic bullets by the devil Pegleg, who promises that his bullets will always have a sure shot. But there's a catch as there always is when dealing with the devil. One of the bullets

is under Pegleg's control. Foolish and desperate, Wilhelm accepts the Faustian pact.

Although *The Black Rider* is based on folklore, the story contains strong autobiographical elements from Burroughs' own life. Burroughs' fame grew when he accidentally shot his own wife in a drunken attempt at recreating the William Tell legend. His experience made him the ideal scribe for the show.

"Burroughs is the perfect guy to write this story, which is indeed about addiction, selling your soul and killing someone you love," Jenkins said. "The show on some level must have been a cathartic experience for him."

Burroughs died in 1997, so he'll never know what Jenkins did with his writing, but November Theatre has received feedback from Waits. The company sent him a DVD of one of their productions a few years ago and waited on tenterhooks to hear back from the multidisciplinary artist.

"We knew we had a fine production so it was kind of like being on pins and needles waiting for his reaction," recalled Jenkins, who thought the long delay might mean a loss of the show's rights. "He sent us a nice letter back."

Continued on page 27

Production gets Tom Waits' seal of approval

Continued from page 25

Waits exact words were: "I have seen November Theatre's production of *The Black Rider* and was very impressed with their ability to capture the spirit and dark irony of the piece with minimal resources. So many with so much have done so much less. I wish them the best."

After the PuSh/Arts Club run, Jenkins doesn't know if he'll get a call to do it again. But if the phone rings, the answer will always be yes—even if he has been doing the show for 10 years.

"There is a need and a want for this show and because we love to do it we'll keep doing it," he said. "It's a show that

uses everything the theatre can bring as an art form and it stretches your creativity and theatrical imagination. It's high octane magic."

The critics apparently agree.

Visit www.pushfestival.ca for festival information. For tickets, call 604-687-1644.