



- Supplied photo

Cast members of *The Black Rider* offer a ghoulishly entertaining play, which runs at the Roxy Theatre through Oct. 24.

The Black Rider is spooktacular



Colin MacLean

The Black Rider is out there somewhere on the edges of modern theatre.

This terrific, if somewhat erratic, piece of avant-garde entertainment from Theatre Network is a witch's brew of songs from the gravel-voiced bard of the barroom ballad, Tom Waits, with the book by the fractured poet of the beat, booze and drug world of the '60s (and '70s, '80s and '90s) William S. Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*) - and with the artistic collaboration of experimental theatre guru Robert Wilson.

Although the work was presented some 15 years ago in Germany, *The Black Rider* saw its first production in English in Edmonton and this is the same show (more or less) that played

the Fringe both here and in New York.

Ron Jenkins directs a Faustian tale of a meek clerk (Kevin Corey) who sells his soul to the devil (Michael Scholar Jr.) so he can wed his true love (Rachel Johnson) whose father (George Szilagyi) demands she marry a mighty hunter. The devil gives the clerk magic bullets that will hit anything, but, as in all satanic deals, he saves the last bullet for his own evil purpose.

The characters all play in ghastly white face - their features often outlined in black. Jenkins effectively uses elements of a circus freak show, German Weimar Cabaret and expressionist theatre pushing his performers to the limits - both vocally and physically. Most often it works. Sometimes its off-putting.

But this is theatre to the extreme, with lots of street cred, and you expect to be challenged.

Burroughs's book meanders a bit and is not always easy to follow. It is easy to see why a tale of an unerring shooter would attract the man who once played a drugged-out game of William Tell with his wife and shot her between the eyes. The most lyrical aspect of the evening comes from Waits, who has penned some beautiful country/folk/bluesy/cabaret ballads, many delivered in a lovely soaring tenor by Corey - who also exhibits an amazing physical dexterity.

Clinton Carew also has impressive moments in a series of oversized characters. Scholar's devil is an unsettling, gleefully amoral presence hovering over the characters like some malevolent puppet master.

The backup, provided by the Devil's Rubato Band (Liz Han/Corinne Kessel/Dale Ladouceur), ranges from trombone to accordion and fits well into Jenkins's otherworldly feel.

Engaging, visually creative and delivered with great conviction, *The Black Rider* is extraordinary, cool and bizarre.

The Black Rider is a production of Theatre Network and runs at the Roxy Theatre through Oct. 24.

THE BLACK RIDER - 4 SUNS (out of 5)