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What's not to like about this dark fable?

# Easy Rider

## THE BLACK RIDER - Stage 1

By KEVIN WILLIAMSON

Give the Devil his due - this blast to hell and back blazes brilliantly, like a Charles Addams cartoon scribbled in a chemical haze by Beat demon William S. Burroughs and black-to-the-soul musician Tom Waits.

Vividly realized by the November Theatre Company, *The Black Rider* is a dark fable of doom and bliss set among a family of forest dwellers, and it is much more. Staged as a play-within-a-play, it's like Hades spat up a comic opera from the Vaudeville Players of Darkness. Blood-red moons, satanic bullets, pacts with Lucifer - it swells with nightmare imagery yet is really a sweet romance about two kids, Kathchen and Wilhelm, who learn even love comes at a price.

Kathchen's father - a grizzled hunter named Bertram who doesn't think he needs to learn to read as long as he can decipher the clouds - has forbidden his daughter to marry Wilhelm, a bookish clerk whose aim is as straight as a Slinkee. Bertram, who descends from a long line of hunters, insists she must marry a strong, bloodthirsty hunter.

Determined to win Bertram's approval and marry Kathchen, Wilhelm sets out to hunt - only to find he's truly hopeless at killing, until a demonic stranger offers him "magic bullets" that will strike down a target no matter how inept a hunter's aim.

Given Burroughs' involvement, it's no surprise that magic bullets are to foresters what heroin is to city dwellers. Take one on a bad day, Bertram warns us, and suddenly you're having a lot of bad days until you're having a bullet every day.

And as we all know, pacts with Satan seldom work out for those who sign them.

Throughout, Waits' music - performed by the Devil's Rubato Band - has the low, grim rumble of a belly ache - echoing Burroughs' startling, staggering text, which speaks of loss and insanity shuffling about like cards in a deck.

Yet, it's anything but morose. Burroughs may have sorrowful matters in mind - the price of love, the crutch of addiction and the madness that follows - but *The Black Rider* is shot through with moments of fiendish hilarity and invention. It's wildly entertaining - steeped in rich language and a visual wonderland of colour and shadow that looks like something David Lynch might dream.

Tackling the dense script, the cast - Rachael V. Johnston, Kevin Corey, Michael Scholar Jr., Jon Baggaley, Marie Nychka and Clinton Carew - excels under Ron Jenkins' dead-on direction.

Most surprisingly, while *The Black Rider* could have ended up an empty exercise in avant-garde theatrics - it has style to spare - the play, like any folklore that endures, gives these fanciful ghouls souls in a way most plays do not. Breathtaking and bold, at turns funny and sad, this is a must-see.

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CIRQUE  
5 SUNS out of 5



*The Black Rider*, starring Rachael V. Johnston, is must-see theatre.