

Devil's advocate

Reviewer gets blown away by *The Black Rider*

THEATRE REVIEW

THE BLACK RIDER

November Theatre
Presented by Ground Zero
Theatre and Calgary Opera
Runs until December 4
Big Secret Theatre
(Epcor Centre)

THE HOLLOW

Vertigo Mystery Theatre
Runs until December 18
Vertigo Playhouse (Tower Centre)

MARTIN MORROW

The *Black Rider's* opening song promises "we'll have a gay old time," and that's no empty claim. November Theatre's celebrated staging of this outlandish musical-comedy nightmare about guns and hunting, love and the Devil, is shot through (pun intended) with a hellish gaiety.

This is postmodernism at its most playful, with Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs and Robert Wilson gleefully dismembering a German fairy-tale variant on the Faust theme, in which a young clerk who "can't shoot for shit" bargains for magic, unmissable bullets from Beelzebub so he can impress his sweetheart's macho hunter dad and win her hand in marriage.

Burroughs's reference-riddled text alludes to his own infamous sharpshooting incident, riffs on drugs, addiction (his favourite pre-occupations) and the artistic sell-out, and lifts from the likes of Lord Byron ("The Destruction of Sennacherib"), T.S. Eliot ("The Hollow Men") and occult bad boy Aleister Crowley, among others. But it's Waits's songs that hit the mark. Perhaps taking his cue from the Teutonic setting, he switches into his Brecht-Weill mode, crafting ballads with startling, poetic lyrics and lush, woozy music that are half romantic-nostalgic parody and half the real thing.

For November's version, director Ron Jenkins emulates avant-garde Wilson's exaggerated, pictorial style, but also injects a sprightly, slapstick spirit — it's what a 1920s German Expressionist film would look like if made by Mack Sennett. Reinforcing the impression, the company — a half-dozen actor-



Michael Scholar Jr. (top) and Kevin Corey star in *The Black Rider*

singers and a trio of musicians — wear whiteface and cavort like acrobats and clowns. Their characters have the two-dimensional quality of face cards (suggested by the playing-card theme of Marissa Kochanski's red, white and black costumes and décor), but they paint them in bold, lively strokes.

Since we're into referencing here, Michael Scholar Jr.'s fiendishly fun young Devil, alias Peg Leg, comes off like a hell-spawn hybrid of Johnny Depp and One Yellow Rabbit's Michael Green, charming even as he limps about with one lame cloven hoof. And a delightful Kevin Corey as Wilhelm, his naive young Faust, has the curly-topped, baby-faced innocence of silent film comedian Harry Langdon, whether singing an exquisitely sweet duet with his love ("The Briar and the Rose") or doing bumbling comic business with one of the show's white-washed rifles.

An elastic-faced, elastic-voiced Rachael Johnston is his girlfriend Katchen, George Szilagyi and Michele Brown are her parents, and Clinton Carew fills a variety of roles as well as supplying a close

approximation of Waits's gravel-truck baritone. They are accompanied with ghoulish gusto by the

Devils' Rubato Band — Liz Han providing the Waitsian piano, Dale Ladouceur playing bass and stick, and musical director Corrine Kessel multi-tasking on clarinet, accordion, hand drum and a deliciously sinister trombone.

It's a small-scale musical, but in the cozy black confines of OYR's Big Secret Theatre it feels big and brash — this is performance theatre writ large, and where better to see it than in the Rabbits' hole? But we have Ground Zero and Calgary Opera to thank for bringing it here — an alliance as odd and successful as *The Black Rider* itself.