

Slick staging, satanic songs turn critics' heads

There are more shows than ever in this fourth edition of the annual PuSh International Performing Arts Festival—23 in all, to be exact, spread out at 15 venues and blending theatre, music, and dance. And every one of the productions heads straight for the edge of its genre. So it may take a minute to figure out how you'd like to navigate this wildly engaging event. Here, our critics map out some of the essential stops.

COLIN THOMAS

BEST CHANCE TO BLOW YOUR MIND When I first saw November Theatre's production of *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* at PuSh in 2005, it was so intense that it fried my emotional and sensory circuits. It's one of the best shows I've ever seen, and it has an unbeatable pedigree. Brechtian songsmith Tom Waits, hallucinatory writer William S. Burroughs, and theatrical wild man Robert Wilson created this rock opera, which uses a German folktale to create a metaphor for heroin addiction. The acting in this mounting is so refined that it would please Satan himself, and just wait till you hear the Devil's Rubato Band. The Arts Club is taking a big and admirable risk by releasing this stylish mayhem on its Granville Island Stage from January 16 to February 9.

Stage-struck: a season's best

THEATRE

CRITICS' PICKS

◆ Success in theatre can be hard to predict, and nobody wants to waste money. Out of consideration for your wallet—and to rack up some good karma—I'm going to share my insider best bets for the upcoming season.

Over at the Arts Club, tickets are pricier: five-show subscriptions at the Stanley Theatre run between \$149 and \$209 for regular rates; a four-ticket pass at the Granville Island Stage costs \$109. Some of the offerings are solidly mainstream, but artistic director Bill Millerd's programming is the most exciting in town (see *His Greatness* and *The Black Rider* below).

THE BLACK RIDER: THE CASTING OF THE MAGIC BULLETS

(January 16 to February 9 at the Arts Club's Granville Island Stage) This musical by rocker Tom Waits, novelist William S. Burroughs, and experimental-theatre director Robert Wilson reinvents the German folktale "The Free-Shooter" as a metaphor for heroin addiction. Insane creativity, actors in whiteface, and the cabaret-style Devil's Rubato Band help to make this November Theatre production so wildly intense that when I saw the show at the PuSh festival in 2005, I almost couldn't stand it. **The Draw:** Michael Scholar Jr. as Peg Leg (aka Satan) is so hot that virgins could probably get pregnant just by looking at him. **Target Audience:** Anybody who's up for the theatrical equivalent of an evening of tequila shooters.

> COLIN THOMAS