

Black Rider a Punishing Beauty

THEATRE

The Black Rider

By Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs, and Robert Wilson. Directed by Ron Jenkins. A November Theatre production. A PuSh International Performing Arts Festival presentation.

At the Waterfront Theatre on Thursday, January 13. No remaining performances

• By COLIN THOMAS

It was so bloody intense that I could barely take notes. November Theatre's production of *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* is so extreme, so macabre, so fucking vivid that for about the first 20 minutes I felt in danger of sensory and emotional overload. But there's a kind of compensating orderliness, a deep beauty in the completeness of the artistic vision.

And why wouldn't you expect intensity from the gravel-voiced, poetically depressed blues-rocker Tom Waits and the hallucinatory writer and famous junkie William S. Burroughs, two of the script's three creators? The third is experimental theatre director Robert Wilson. Together, they offer an adaptation of Thomas de Quincy's story "The Fatal Marksman", which is, in turn, a retelling of the German folktale "Der Freischütz", or "The Free-Shooter".

It's all a metaphor for addiction, especially to heroin. Wilhelm, a young clerk, is in love with Katchen, the daughter of a famous hunter named Bertram. But Wilhelm can't marry Katchen unless he proves his skill as a marksman, which he can only do with the help of magic bullets provided by Peg Leg, aka Satan. "The first one's always free," Mr. Leg sings in one of the show's many songs. "I have blessed each one of these bullets and they gleam just like a spoon."

The script's imagery is soaked in blood and reeks of carrion—the slaughtering of animals, the almost cannibalistic selfishness of Katchen's father—just as addiction is a miasma of pain. That said, it's all ghoulishly stylish, layered over with irony. Wilhelm and Katchen sing a duet about a briar and a rose; on its surface, it's a love song, but underneath it's a parody of suffocating dependency.

The six actors, who appear in grotesque whiteface, are all strong, but Kevin Corey (Wilhelm) is particularly dazzling—both a wonderfully innocent, inventive clown and a startling acrobat. The guy can sing, too, in a lovely tenor.

Michael Scholar, Jr.'s Peg Leg is the other unforgettable creation. Athletic and dangerously sexy, but hobbled by an ancient wound, the character moves about the stage with the idiosyncratic power of a panther with a limp. Scholar also has a sure, velvety voice, and he gets to deliver some of the evening's hottest songs, backed up by a very able ensemble, the three-piece Devil's Rubato Band. German cabaret music must have sounded like this when it was fresh.

My one criticism is the shrillness of Rachael Johnston's singing as Katchen; I would like to believe this quality is more deliberate than I think it is. But she makes up for it with her *bouffon*-like physical performance.

Still, it's director Ron Jenkins's no-holds-barred, relentlessly thorough realization of the text that puts *The Black Rider* among the most memorable shows I've seen. Jenkins is the one who brought together the almost unbearably saturated reds and blues of Marissa Kochanski's set and choreographer Marie Nychka's bruisingly affecting movement vocabulary. He's the one who at the very least edited the many fabulous bits of business, including the staging of a song in which Wilhelm hides beneath Katchen's wedding dress, moving his hands as if they were long-toed feet.

Many thanks to Edmonton's November Theatre and to Norman Armour and Katrina Dunn, co-curators and producers of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, for launching the series with such a punishing, exhilarating bang.