

THEATRE

Cast enlivens Black Rider

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Possibly never before has the fatal Faustian bargain struck over a magic bullet found its mark in quite the way it does at the Big Secret Theatre in the current revival of November Theatre's monster 1998 Fringe hit, *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*.

Representing 100 minutes of calculated yet inspired madness — the music and lyrics are by Tom Waits, who took his cue from beat guru William S. Burroughs' bent, mock-serious text — *The Black Rider* is based on Thomas De Quincey's 1823 adaptation of the cautionary German fable about a marksman (Wilhelm) who risks everything in trying to get something for nothing. In the words of one of the show's characters, "The Devil's bargain is always a fool's bargain."

Part grotesque operetta, part stylized circus-cabaret — and all of it remarkably lucid and entertaining black comedy, directed by Ron Jenkins — this shortened and revamped (2000) version of theatre visionary Robert Wilson's original production created in Germany in 1990 is enlivened by a cast

that brings plenty of finely tuned energy, timing and winning pizzazz to their multiple singing roles.

Clinton Carew, for example, who uncannily resembles the gravelly voiced Waits in the part of Robert, Wilhelm's rival for the affections of the forester's daughter Katchen (richly portrayed and sung by Rachael Johnston), surpasses himself later in the show with a demonic performance as the Devil's former victim going mad at the Crossroads.



As Wilhelm, the poor clerk amenable to making the ultimate deal for a chance to shoot his way to Katchen's hand in marriage, Kevin Corey also displays vocal prowess, as well as considerable acrobatic ability and a sensitivity reminiscent of skilled mime.

But it's Michael Scholar Jr. who masterfully anchors this fascinating show. As the diabolical Pegleg, Scholar insinuates himself in and out of the action with a hesitant, dragging step and an air of bemused superiority that can suddenly transform into fiendish glee — "Six are yours, and hit the mark; one is mine, and hits the dark," he warns Wilhelm as he gives him the bullets — or the creepy mantra, "Do what you will, that is the whole of the law, or the mock-sentimentality of his long goodbye to the audience in *The Last Rose of Summer*.

The 20 or so songs in *The Black Rider* encompass a wide emotional range within the exaggerated context of Wilson's scenario and Burroughs's text — everything from the melancholy (*November*) and the tender (*I'll Shoot the Moon*), to the up-tempo (*Gospel Train*, and *T'Aint No Sin*) and the blatant (*The Black Rider*).

It's no exaggeration to say this production makes the most of all of them.

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Rachael Johnston as Katchen and Kevin Corey as Wilhelm in a scene from *The Black Rider*. Corey displays considerable vocal prowess (he can sing expressively even while lying on his back), as well as considerable acrobatic ability and a sensitivity reminiscent of a skilled mime. Cast members bring plenty of finely tuned energy, timing and winning pizzazz to their multiple singing roles in a production that is part grotesque operetta and part stylized circus-cabaret.