



The Black Rider tells the tale of a man making a deal with the devil. It's a simple story packed with enough action to entertain the masses, but also carries significant subtext to satiate scholarly types.

Black Rider devilishly deep

A-TEAM: Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs fashion a riveting folk tale

On stage

The Black Rider

Where: Arts Club, Granville Island

When: Mon.-Sat. until Feb. 9, 8 p.m.; Sat. matinee, 2 p.m.; Tues. only, 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$31-\$41 at 604 687-1644 or artsclub.com

BY STUART DERDEYN
ARTS REPORTER

Any play pooling the talents of neocabaret crooner Tom Waits, the late beat writer William S. Burroughs and theatre provocateur Robert Wilson is certain to stand out. *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* does that to excess.

A Faustian "expressionist operetta" based upon a Teutonic folk tale, it first played in German.

In 1998, November Theatre staged the English-language world premiere at the Edmonton Fringe Festival. The company has since toured the show across North America to rave reviews, including a sold-out run at the 2005 PuSh Fest, which reprises it again.

A hundred turns as the devil in the play haven't bored actor Michael Scholar Jr.

"The truth in theatre is that you take all this time and effort to put up a show that runs maybe 10 days and then it's over," says Scholar Jr. "To get to fully realize a work and troll its depths, you need to be able to keep coming back. So we've been very lucky. Every time there are new things discovered in it."

Scholar Jr. cites Burroughs' complex and multi-tiered text as something of an eternal onion with layers that you can keep peeling away forever. Then, there is the immediately appealing score and songs by Waits, which serve as the entry point for most of the audience.

"It's a really simple folk tale about a man making a deal with the devil, which has been told so many times. But the way the text and music unite carries it into new, unexpected realms."

Case in point: A part of the closing monologue where Ernest Hemingway is invoked as selling his soul to the evil one. This has what to do with Black Forest bedtime stories exactly?

"It doesn't, but Hemingway did, in a way, sell his soul to the devil when he sold Hollywood the rights to *The Old Man and the Sea*. One of the greatest, saddest stories about death in English got hung with a happy ending, which

destroyed it."

So *The Black Rider* rolls into town with enough subtext to load a wagon train behind the main protagonist's horse. However, one needn't delve so deeply to get excellently entertained.

It's cool to saddle up, appreciate the action taking place and soak in the sights. For example, many reviewers fixate on how fine Scholar Jr.'s legs look in his fishnets and slingback pumps.

"In '99, when I was all of 22, *The New York Times* said that I was 'heroin chic at its finest.' Now I'm more 30-year-old beer belly at its worst.

"The fun in playing Wilson's devil is that he's not the evil trickster as much as the good salesman who gives you enough rope to hang yourself. In the end, it's fun watching people do that."

While Satan's Blahniks may be filled by familiar feet and most of the cast and crew are the ones who first mounted the show a decade back, there is someone new.

"We've a new face, actor Mackenzie Gray. He's never really appeared here on stage but he's been everywhere on TV and film and stage in the East."

"Anytime you have new blood, you get new approaches."

Still, you end up being led down a dark and stormy path.

sderdeyn@png.canwest.com