

Magic bullets make graves

The Black Rider casts a dark cloud of awesome

by **Jesse Locke**
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Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight? This immortal question might be the strongest line from Tim Burton's *Batman*, but it also serves as a perfect prelude for *The Black Rider*, a chilling, thrilling and popcorn-spilling theatre production.

Throughout a spine-tingling hour and a half, the experimental operetta touches on temptation, the lengths man will go for love and the ultimate consequences of addiction. Written by the late beat-poet William S. Burroughs (best known for his unsettling novel *Naked Lunch*), this story is an adaptation of a German folk-tale from the 1800's called *Der Freischutz* (The Free Shooter). With the play's blackly comedic dialogue and metaphorical segueways between scenes (including a hilarious marionnetage sequence representing addiction's control over man), the Burroughs touch is very clear.

The macabre tale's masthead also includes the legendary king of gravel and smoke Tom Waits, who contributed an original score. Live musical accompaniment from the three-piece Devil's Rubato band (which includes piano, trombone, accordion and the rare Chapman stick) adds an extra layer of Waitsonian eccentricity to the already densely bizarre play.

After a riotous introduction in the form of a freak-show sales-pitch (invoking the Waits classic "Step Right Up") the story begins. Bertram (played by the stony George Szilagyi) is a hunter in a long line of hunters, who wishes for his daughter Katchen (the high-pitched and hyperactive Rachel Johnston) to marry one like him. He handpicks a slobbering suitor named Robert (the scene-stealing Clinton Carew), wise in the ways of hunting but lacking in social skills. However, Katchen is in love with Wilhelm (the sur-



Clinton Carew animates Rachel Johnston in *The Black Rider*.

prisingly graceful Kevin Corey), a city clerk, completely devoid of hunting abilities, but wise and well mannered.

Obviously, Bertram disapproves of his daughter's choice, but Wilhelm is determined to impress him and win Katchen's hand. He enters the forest, and is approached by the devil (played to a creepy T by a foot-shuffling Michael Scholar Jr.). The grinning pusher-man offers the city clerk a magic bullet, which never misses its mark. Wilhelm uses the trick to bag some prey, which he brings home to Bertram and finally gains his approval.

Unfortunately, Wilhelm soon learns that he cannot use magic forever, and that only the first time is free. The play ends with a tragic conclusion, using veiled messages to preach an important lesson of warning. As Burroughs himself has said, "Hustlers of the world, there is one mark you cannot beat: the mark inside."

Every cast-member is terrific, but it is the lively and intense Carew who rises above the rest. Besides playing the lurching Robert, the stocky actor contributes equally entertaining performances as Wilhelm's Old Uncle, a Hunting Boy, the Duke and Georg Schmid. In the play's best scene, Carew executes a schizophrenic monologue with a multitude of voices, sounding like everything from Jack Nicholson to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*'s Oogie Boogie Man to Waits himself. Easily seizing the limelight from every scene he appears in, Carew draws the widest gasps and biggest laughs of the production.

Overall, *The Black Rider* is an entertaining and highly original play, oozing with just the right levels of dark humor, toe-tapping tunes and minimalist imagery. Utilizing only the simplest of lights, red curtains and sparse set pieces, the small cast of six accomplish more than many productions ten-times its size.