

Black Rider a rare treat

REVIEW

By Cam Fuller
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There's no need to read the fine print here: The Black Rider is sure to entertain theatre fans looking for something a little different.

Actually, a lot different. With the exception of the Fringe and the U of S drama department, it's rare to see a play this adventurous on a stage in Saskatoon.

Persephone is the host but the theatre company behind it is November Theatre of Edmonton, the troupe that staged the English language premiere of this dark musical (music and lyrics by Tom Waits, text by William S. Burroughs) six years ago before taking it to New York. Those preliminaries out of the way, it's finally ready for Saskatoon.

The story is based on a German folk tale in which a young man obtains magic bullets from the devil in order to win a shooting contest and be worthy of marrying the huntsman's daughter.

A large cast backed by three very busy musicians puts this touring show into motion. From the start, it's easy to tell how familiar the company is with the play and how much they like it. The timing at Saturday's opening was perfect, and the characters vividly drawn.

The style is over the top — highly dramatic lighting, actors (and even the band) in heavy make-up, their movements coming directly from the Department of Grand Gestures.

The full cast comes out for the opening number, led by the devil Peg Leg (Michael Scholar Jr.), who invites us to "take off your skin and dance around in your bones." Ah, that's better.

The story is simple and familiar enough to benefit from all the jazzing up. Katchen (Rachael Johnston) loves the city clerk Wilhelm (Kevin Corey), but she's been promised to the marksman Robert (Clinton Carew). If only Wilhelm could learn to hunt. Despite the dire warnings ("the bullet spins away and away, whoever stops it has to pay") Wilhelm takes the bait.

The scene of the deal with the devil is brilliantly rendered, with expertly timed sound effects from the band, including the amazing noise of stretched strings created by a Chapman Stick. It's reminiscent of a Road Runner and Coyote cartoon.

Indeed, a cartoon spirit inhabits this production; despite its dark leanings, it's often quite funny. Director Ron Jenkins uses an anything-goes approach to create some amazing moments of motion and visual interest. In one, Johnston ends up on Corey's

shoulders — but since she's wearing a dress it looks like she's grown four feet taller and sprouted man's legs.

Only a multi-talented cast could pull this off, and there's certainly one here. Corey is a natural gymnast who surprises you constantly with his fluidity and strength. Johnston is one of those performers who almost magically draws your attention.

Whether she's bawling or elated, whether she's singing in velvety tones or speaking in shrill ones, you can't take your eyes off her.

The songs are often as lyrically bizarre as they are melodically pleasing. Imagine a love song with the line "I want to build a nest in your hair/I want to kiss you and never be there." It's a shame, though, that the band overpowered the singers so often. One song, tied to a puppet-on-strings theme, came and went with hardly an audible lyric.

The story itself isn't an unqualified success, either. The plot has no interest in telling us where it plans to go and as a result has a meandering feel to it which slows things down at the mid-point. It helps that the play is condensed into a single 90-minute act because you know that regardless of the destination, it's going to get there pretty quickly.

The Black Rider runs to Nov. 17 at Persephone Theatre.