

GO! ARTS

It's black, beautiful

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Recast in a modern setting, ancient tales sometimes glean fascinating new connotations. Such is the case with *The Black Rider*, a strange expressionist romp playing a gymnasium near you.

The Black Rider is an adaptation of an old German folktale, *Der Freischütz* (The Free Shooter) with music and lyrics by boho icon Tom Waits, and libretto by beat writer William S. Burroughs. The operetta — not to be confused with the von Weber opera *Der Freischütz* — is being performed at the Victoria Conservatory of Music by Vancouver's November Theatre.

This beautifully directed production, mounted on a stage in the conservatory's gym, is undoubtedly much more modest than Robert Wilson's lavish version now at Australia's Sydney Festival. There's little in the way of set, and the lighting is basic. Yet it's a first-rate incarnation; a triumph of making much with little. Think of a bizarro-world cross between *Cabaret* and *The Threepenny Opera* that sears the memory like a brand.

Sadly, if you've yet to buy a ticket, you're out of luck — the three-day run has sold out.

Reminiscent of the Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weill masterpiece, *The Black Rider* seems populated by denizens from some seedy underworld. Greed, treachery, killings, devilry and eventual madness abound. In this show, movement counts as much as song and speech. The cast, their faces daubed in spooky black-and-white designs, gracefully navigate the stage with geometric precision, as though compelled to squeeze around invisible squares and rectangles. There are occasional acrobatics, such as somersaults and flips. The performers declaim with theatrical bravado. Arias are sung with out-of-tune glee, occasionally yowled and, at times, dispatched with Waits-like growls.

A sample lyric: "Come on along with the Black Rider/ We'll have a gay old time/Lay down in the web of the black spider/ I'll drink your blood like wine."

The Black Rider is the tale of a young man, Wilhelm, who hopes to marry the daughter of a woodsman. Dad wants her to marry a hunter, so Willy



Michael Scholar, Jr., is Peg Leg and Kevin Corey is Wilhelm in *Black Rider*.
Ian Jackson

REVIEW

What: *Black Rider*

When: Final show tonight (sold out)

(who's a terrible shot) asks the Devil to lend him a few magic bullets that never miss their mark. No problem, says Lucifer, a.k.a. Peg Leg. But as is so often the case, deals with the Devil have a way of misfiring. And so does Wilhelm's, literally, with disastrous results.

Such a story-line has added resonance given Burroughs' background. As any card-carrying hipster knows (and Tuesday's audience was peppered with intense looking scenesters in black) the late writer was not only fascinated with guns, he accidentally shot his wife to death. While this is not mentioned, the Burroughs legend casts an intriguing shadow on *The Black Rider*. A long-time heroin addict, the writer's addiction is indirectly alluded to when Burroughs' libretto draws comparisons between drug abuse and Wilhelm's dependence on those magic bullets.

Meanwhile, the use of make-up and heightened theatricality connects *The Black Rider* with *Cabaret* and that musical's depiction of a depraved, about-to-collapse Germany during the Weimar years. It all adds up to create a wonderfully decadent atmosphere. There's a distinctly European sensibility at work; a devilish merriment rarely seen in North American theatre and film as the world goes to hell in a hand-basket.

The cast is uniformly strong. Obvious stand-outs are the athletic and cherubic Kevin Corey as Wilhelm, Michael Scholar, Jr. (who, as a bemused Peg Leg, locomotes with a limp and odd hand gestures) and Rachael Johnston in a variety of roles. And Clinton Carew effectively taps into the belligerent American con-man/artiste persona perfected by Charles Bukowski and Waits.

A terrific musical trio adds immeasurably to the proceedings. Corinne Kessel is a particularly skilled and sensitive trombonist. It's a shame that the pianist wasn't miked better — most of the time you couldn't hear her.