

# Hold on tight for a devil of a ride!

Sharp-edged production  
a five-star delight,  
a decadent cabaret and  
fairy tale of thwarted love



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Fringe Fest

*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.*

It's a proposition that no *Cirque du Fringe* audience should resist. "So come on in/ it ain't no sin/ take off your skin/ and dance around in your bones." And those who venture into "Harry's Harbour Bizarre," and do the *danse macabre* with the devil in the forest, aren't biting the bullet.

The production of *The Black Rider* ★★★★★ (Stage 1, Arts Barns) running at the Fringe this week is the most compelling, sharp-edged piece of theatre I've seen at the festival so far.

I didn't see the 1998 English-language premiere of the strange dark 1990 folk opera that married the talents of theatre wizard Robert Wilson, beat guru William S. Burroughs and the whisky-voiced musical poet Tom Waits. But I'm here to tell you that this radically new version directed by Ron Jenkins and first aired at the New York Fringe last summer to great effect, is a knockout in conception and execution.

It's a fairy tale of the Grimm persuasion (actually based on Thomas de Quincey's *The Fatal Marksman*) that's at the heart of the thing, and it starts with thwarted love. *Katchen and Wilhelm are in love*. But Katchen's father, a forester with a gruesome past, insists she marry a hunter; Wilhelm's nice but he couldn't hit the broad side of a barn door. Luckily, the devil agrees to take up the slack, and provides Wilhelm with magic silver bullets. Wilhelm's marksmanship is suddenly unerring. But, as we discover, bargains with the devil are invariably "left-hand deals with a stacked deck," and magic bullets are

like drugs. You need more and more. It'll end spectacularly — but in tears.

*The Black Rider* is conceived as a sort of underground expressionist cabaret crossed with a freak show; gruesome, comic and decadent. And Jenkins' production embraces, and brilliantly, the spirit of the sharp, gruesome, bizarre images served up by Burroughs and Waits. We see white-faced, black-lipped figures explode onto the stage direct from the asylum, chattering and laughing. They attack with glee the tale of death and madness at their disposal, accompanied by the Devil's Rubato Band led by Jeff Unger (and including Corinne Kessel and Dale Ladouceur).

The performances all-round are stylish, led by Michael Scholar Jr. as Peg Leg, the title character, the suave but unwholesome Black Rider, purveyor of silver bullets. Clinton Carew is hugely enjoyable as the ringmaster of the piece, inviting us to "step right up, suckers and suckees." Rachel V. Johnston, Marie Nychka, Kevin Corey and Jon Baggaley: all are excellent. They're not all singers per se, but they know how to land a song — and ballads like *The Rose and the Briar* are unexpectedly lovely.

In scene after stylized scene, Jenkins' ingenuity and pizzazz pay off — the shooting gallery of stags in the forest, the devil as a hellish marionettiste, the dance of the young lovers.

It's a highly impressive piece of work from all concerned. "The human mould is broken, and all hell bursts out." Right on.



Michael Scholar Jr., above, does a devilish turn as he calls the dance tune for a cast member of *The Black Rider*.