



KEVIN Corey and Rachael Johnston in November Theatre's brilliant production of *The Black Rider* at Waterfront Theatre, Granville Island, for four more performances.

photo Ian Jackson

The Black Rider

Edmonton's November Theatre opens 2005 PuSh Festival with mind-blowing presentation of expressionist operetta

■ *The Black Rider* by Tom Waits, Robert Wilson and William S. Burroughs. At Waterfront Theatre, Granville Island, tonight at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m., Jan. 15 at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.



Martin Millerchip

curtain call

THE subtitle to *The Black Rider* is *The Casting of the Magic Bullets*.

I was blown away. The double meaning is intended; an embarrassingly simplistic example of the layers of meaning contained in the words of William S. Burroughs and Tom Waits that kept surprising me as I watched the opening performance of this year's PuSh International Performing Arts Festival Tuesday.

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And when I think about the musical, visual and choreographic jokes and stylings of this November Theatre production, I am still overwhelmed. Vancouver may not have seen anything this original and so fully realized since Robert Lepage brought *The Far Side of the Moon* here in 2002.

Tom Waits fans may know *The Black Rider* from a 1993 release. Certainly *The Sports Reporter* who has the CD and knew something of the history of the project — and who I dragged along for a spot of culture — was singing along to *Crossroads*. But he was happy to admit afterwards how much the staging informs the music, rather than the other way around.

John Rockwell in the *New York Times* described *The Black Rider* "as a kind of cross of *Cabaret*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*." That's as good a description as anything of a modern operetta that draws on the German tradition of expressionism but is — overused word warning — unique unto itself.

While the names of Waits and beat guru William S. Burroughs may be more familiar to some, it's probably fair to say that the genesis of *The Black Rider* rests with director/designer Robert Wilson. Wilson has been a

major figure in experimental theatre for four decades as well as an acclaimed visual artist. Best known for his stage works such as *Einstein On The Beach* and *Hamlet-machine*, he has collaborated with many legends in his career from Philip Glass to Bernice Johnson Reagon, leader of the a cappella African-American quintet, *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, for the original Sadler's Wells production of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*.

It was Wilson who sought out Waits and Burroughs to collaborate on the original production of *The Black Rider* at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, Germany, in 1990.

Burroughs' libretto was inspired by the original German/Bohemian folktale called *Der Freischütz* which had been altered (happy ending!) to provide the plot for Carl Maria von Weber's 1821 opera of the same name.

But *The Black Rider* is no artsy-fartsy European opera — in fact at one point the score seems to parody that concept as four voices blend in blissful harmony to sing absolutely nothing except oohs and aahs.

Burroughs and — in turn — Waits have informed the period story with North American connections that range from drug metaphors to Hemmingway.

The basic folk tale has the Royal Huntsman, who has to be a sure shot, on the point

of marrying off his daughter, Katchen. But Katchen has her own ideas about who she wants to marry, choosing city clerk Wilhelm who is the very antithesis of a huntin', shootin' and fishin' hunk of testosterone.

But Wilhelm, in grand

Faustian tradition, is offered a deal he can't refuse by the old devil, Peg Leg. Ignoring the implicit warning he is given — "You must have just the right bullets, And the first one's always free" — Wilhelm takes the magic bullets that don't even have to be aimed

and transforms himself from city bumpkin to multi-shot wonder in the eyes of his future bride and stag-hunting in-laws.

But, of course, there is a fearful price to be paid. The song *Crossroads* spells it out: "You see, some bullets is

special for a single aim. A certain stag, or a certain person. And no matter where you aim, that's where the bullet will end up. And in the moment of aiming, the gun turns into a dowser's wand

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Clowning is part of Rider's unique style

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and points where the bullet wants to go."

The words have a second level of resonance when you consider that Burroughs shot his own wife to death in an alcohol-fuelled accident. And, of course, all blues buffs will know that the title to this song, *Crossroads*, tips its hat to Robert Johnson and another story of dealing with the devil.

The Black Rider expresses the balance of the devil-dealing equation better than any other Faust-like fable I can recall. It achieves this by clearly setting up the yin and yang of life — the rose and briar are intertwined, summer is balanced by winter.

Kevin Corey as Wilhelm is fascinating. He has athletic grace, but it's all soft and round, not coiled and springy. He also has the great clown's gift (and clowning is

important to this show) of accessibility and vulnerability.

Michael Scholar Jr. as Peg Leg is the perfect counterpoint — lean, predatory and projecting a sexuality that is both genderless and subtly threatening.

Vocally, Clinton Carew in a variety of roles and Michele Brown as Katchen's mother are stunning, with Carew on occasion every bit the equal of Waits.

Rachael Johnston as

Katchen occasionally lacked necessary vocal power (a problem magnified by early sound system problems) but she inhabited every moment on stage so completely I was generally watching her more than listening to her.

Musically, November Theatre achieves miracles with Corinne Kessel's three-piece band. When have so few achieved so much?

The production team of director Ron Jenkins, musical

director Kessel, choreographer Marie Nychka, designer Marissa Kochanski and lighting designer Michael Kruse all deserve praise. But they don't need to hear it from me, they have already been accorded the singular honour of being the only non-Wilson production currently allowed to produce the show.

PuSh's co-curators/producers Norman Armour and Katrina Dunn are to be congratulated on getting *The*

Black Rider here after four years of trying. If even some of the rest of their festival is as good, PuSh is poised on the edge of greatness.

I really hope Vancouver will embrace all of what they are trying to achieve. Early signs that this year might be the breakthrough they deserve is that all festival passes have already been sold. However, tickets are still available at Festival Box

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