



THE BLACK RIDER: THE CASTING OF THE MAGIC BULLETS

January 11-15
November Theatre (Edmonton)
Waterfront Theatre, Granville Island

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review

THE BLACK RIDER: THE CASTING OF THE MAGIC BULLETS

by William S. Burroughs, Tom Waits, and Robert Wilson
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Waterfront Theatre, Granville Island
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www.festivalboxoffice.com
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The PuSh Festival kicks off with this devilishly grotesque pocket musical from the unlikely trio of Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs, and avant garde theatre director Robert Wilson. The producing company, November Theatre out of Edmonton, has been touring the show since 1998. Very simply, it is

fabulous—one of the most innovative, exciting, and entertaining shows to visit here in many a full moon.

The story adapts an old German folk tale, and there's just enough of it on which to hang the script and production's relentlessly brilliant theatricality. Katchen, daughter of the Forester Bertram and his wife Anne, wants to marry Wilhelm, a city clerk, but Bertram wants her to marry an accomplished hunter. Wilhelm tries to learn to shoot, and succeeds, but only with the help of the devil and his magic bullets. When the time comes for his test, and he fires at a dove in a tree, the satanic bullet hits his beloved instead and the devil drags off her corpse.

This hardly sounds like a cheery premise for two hours in the theatre, but as the show's first song promises: "Come on along with the black rider! We'll have a gay old time." *The Black Rider* is presented as a clown side-show ("So step right up, suckers and suckees"), its macabre elements embodied in whiteface make-up, exaggeratedly stylized movement and choreography, rhymed verse dialogue, mock-operatic song, and the Kurt Weillish music of a 3-piece band whose dominant instrument is a trombone. On a bare stage backed with three vertical sheets of red material on which are projected crude outlines of trees and a gun, the six actors glide through a series of theatrical scenarios that are simultaneously goofy and technically precise. Ron Jenkins's direction is endlessly inventive and his design team—set, costumes, lighting, sound—constantly fills the stage with visual and aural spectacle. Marie Nychka's choreography is terrific. My senses were just buzzing throughout this show, and the grin never left my face.

The performances range from wonderful to superb. At the top of my list is Rachael Johnston as Katchen, beautiful, hilarious and heartbreaking in a red dress, lithe and open-faced, a dancer in a dream. Kevin Corey as her suitor Wilhelm gives the most spectacular performance with his gymnastic dance moves and lovely voice. Two moments stand out. First is a remarkable routine Wilhelm does beneath Katchen's wedding dress, climaxing in a dance in which the two of them literally become one. The second is just after Katchen's death, when he manages somehow, without the use of his hands, to blow up a black balloon while lying prostrate, then releases it to fizzle out around the stage—a strangely perfect emblem of grief and mortality. Close behind these two is Michael Scholar Jr.'s elegant, limping devil. His song warning Wilhelm of the price to be paid is a bluesy rocker that promises, "This train don't carry no smokers." Gravely voiced Clinton Carew practically channels Tom Waits in the show's best song, a cautionary ballad about getting hooked. George Szigalyi and Michele Brown round out a remarkable accomplished cast.

The Black Rider sets the bar very high for the rest of PuSh. It reminds us just how dynamic, original, even mind-blowing live theatre can be. Rumour is that the show is already sold out for its short run. But even if you have to scalp a ticket, try to see this amazing piece of theatre.

Jerry Wasserman