

PLAY GUIDES THE BLACK RIDER

The Black Rider

The Casting of the Magic Bullets

By Tom Waits, Robert Wilson

& William S. Burroughs

Directed by Ron Jenkins

The Devil's Bargain is always a fool's bargain. . . a bargain for rubes, dummies and chumps. And there's one born every minute. So step right up, Suckers and Suckees!

The huntsman Bertram is in quite a fix: his daughter Katchen has fallen in love with a humble clerk named Wilhelm. Unable to stomach the thought of having a *chair-farter* as his son-in-law, Bertram consults the portrait of a famous hunter for advice, complaining:

*With a son-in-law who clerks, I lose all my perks –
I must have a man who hunts not some lily-handed pen grunt . . .*

His soft-hearted wife, Anne, pleads with him on their daughter's behalf, but Bertram will not be swayed: The man who marries his daughter Katchen must be an accomplished hunter.

The gentle Wilhelm is desperate. If he cannot prove himself to be an accomplished hunter, he knows he will lose Katchen forever. The deck is stacked against him; and now, to make matters worse, Bertram introduces Katchen to Robert, a consummate hunter and (in Bertram's mind) an ideal husband. Wilhelm laments:

*The quill pen drops, and the rifle take...
Easy said... that's my mistake.
Put down a pen, pick up a gun
Easy said – and hardly done!
Oh, I'll never be her man...*

At this point, the play takes an unusual turn. Throughout, it shifts back and forth between telling Wilhelm and Katchen's story, and offering commentary on their story by telling other stories. The first of these commentaries appears at this point in the play. Long ago, a poacher was caught and bound to a stag's antlers for a slow and gory death. Old Kuno – a hunter and the best shot in the forest – was issued a challenge: shoot the deer and save the man. Kuno made the shot, but *he left a debt behind him – a debt that must be paid again and again, and ever again...*

As we are left to contemplate this ominous sentence, the play moves swiftly to a playful scene between Wilhelm and Katchen, capped with a tender duet, *The Briar and The Rose*. More determined than ever to win his lover's hand, Wilhelm swallows his pride, and treks into the forest to see if he can indeed put down a pen, pick up a gun. He doesn't know where to begin, and all of his shots go horribly awry. As he struggles with his rifle, a mysterious stranger, Peg

Leg, emerges from the forest to mock Wilhelm's marksmanship:

*You think you took straight aim? It went wrong anyhow.
Someone like you, couldn't even hit a tethered cow!
But don't worry – you're lucky you came to me,
and not to one of those quacks upstairs.
Here are some bullets, very sure –
You got the trouble? I got the cure.*

Wilhelm loads his rifle with the stranger's bullets and then – as if by magic – he hits whatever he sets his sights on. Elated, he returns home to Katchen who awakens to find dead game heaped up all over the house! Success!

Upon witnessing Wilhelm's accomplishments as a hunter, the astonished Bertram offers the young couple his blessing. Suddenly Katchen is troubled: a deep sense of foreboding colours her joy. Nevertheless, the wedding day is set. The only condition is that Wilhelm must hit a target – a small wooden dove – in full view of all the guests to prove himself once and for all.

Frantic, Wilhelm searches for Peg Leg. He has used all of the magic bullets, and without them, he cannot hope to hit the dove and win his bride. In the meantime, Bertram, suspicious of Wilhelm's newfound prowess, recalls the story of Georg Schmid – a young man who becomes addicted to the Devil's bullets.

Now a man figures it's his bullet, so it will hit what he wants to hit. But it don't always work out that way. You see, some bullets is special for a certain target. . . And no matter where you aim, that's where the bullet will end up.

And it seems Bertram is on to something. For when Wilhelm finally manages to corner the mysterious Peg Leg, begging him for one last gift for his love, *the forester's little dove*, Peg Leg agrees with one small proviso:

*Six are yours, and hit the mark –
One is mine, and hits the dark.*

Even in the hands of the most skilled hunter, a bullet might choose to take its own path.