

## PERFORMANCE

# Ride-away hit

November Theatre finds an unlikely standard in William S. Burroughs, Tom Waits and Robert Wilson's expressionist opera **BY DAMIAN ROGERS**

November Theatre Company was born a decade ago when Michael Scholar, Jr. successfully campaigned for the rights to mount a scrappy production of *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* — a dark opera created by avant-garde theatre artist Robert Wilson with music by Tom Waits and text by William S. Burroughs — for the 1998 Edmonton International Fringe Festival. The following year, director Ron Jenkins came on board to revamp the show and take it to the New York Fringe Festival, where it snagged a Best Direction award and became the highest-selling show in the festival's history. The company has been touring the show fairly steadily since, winning lots more awards, breaking more records and receiving an approving nod from Mr. Waits along the way.

"It's evolved over the years from that original production," says Jenkins. "We've added things. You come back to it and think, How did I miss that? And we've taken certain moments and [amplified them] a bit."

The story, about a young man who makes a deal with the devil in order to win the woman he loves, is adapted from an old German folktale that inspired the 1821 Carl Maria von Weber opera *Der Freischütz*, which tacked a happy ending onto it. "Wilson remained true to the simple story of it and he told it in a very German way, drawing on German Expressionism from film and painting," says Jenkins of *The Black Rider's* premiere at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg. Working under the constraints of radically different resources, Jenkins replaced the full orchestra with three multi-instrumentalists and kept the cast at six. "We tried to keep the original intent of the Thalia production," says Jenkins. "But we're doing our own chamber version."

The plucky production has been



## The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets.

By William S Burroughs, Tom Waits and Robert Wilson. Directed by Ron Jenkins. Featuring Kevin Corey, Mackenzie Gray. Presented by November Theatre. Previews Oct 8-9 & 14. Runs Oct 15 to Nov 16. Tue-Sat 8pm; Sat-Sun 2:30pm. \$32-\$38 (Previews \$19). Tarragon Theatre Mainspace, 30 Bridgman. [www.tarragontheatre.com](http://www.tarragontheatre.com).

so successful that the company has yet to mount another show, despite having a couple of other projects "in the hopper," as Jenkins puts it. "We've been ready to put it to bed for some time now, but then someone new sees it and says, 'Hey, why don't you bring it here?'" The show has brought in music fans who have burned out the grooves in Waits' 1993 record of the same name as well as Burroughs acolytes. Jenkins says he's humbled by how well the experimental piece has been

received, even in more mainstream theatre spaces across the country.

Still, this may well be this version's last ride. On November Theatre's website, they've posted information about their run at Tarragon this fall, adding, "You have six weeks to catch this production before it disappears into hell for all eternity."

On the phone, however, Jenkins is less strident about the show's future. "Well, you know," he says laughing, "never say never."

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