

THE BLACK RIDER
ACT GEARY THEATRE

9-24-04



"IT MUST BE ALL MAGIC -- OR NO MAGIC AT ALL"

Went to catch ACT's Black Rider in Babylon Saturday. The performance was riveting, extraordinary and well-deserving of the standing ovation from the very discriminating Babylon audience.

German Expressionism began in 1905 with a group of painters who called themselves Die Brücke. Together with the French Fauvists, who preceded them,

and the Cubists who followed, these artists would form the core of what would become Modernism. The painters wanted to present the essence of things through radically personal viewpoints that evoked roiling internal states of mind and emotions. They wanted to avoid glossy presentation of mere surfaces and banal landscapes, preferring to draw images from their immediate worlds. In the twentieth century, the artist no longer moved among the royalty in courts and pastoral gardens, but in dingy cafes, sooty streets increasingly rendered angular and mechanical as the Industrial Revolution advanced a gross middle class which appeared to lack the refinements of a previous age as it promoted with new wealth and power hideous ugliness to replace a world in which man once had had a secure place in harmony with nature, himself and God. In addition, with the publication of Sigmund Freud's Interpretation of Dreams in 1904, it became clear that what the artist had known as the "psyche" was now formalized, as the Expressionists saw it, as a roiling, violent and impulsive thing called the Unconscious.

Max Ernst presented the condition of this new man in his famous painting "The Cry", which depicts a ghostly figure howling with hands raised while standing in an agitated landscape of clashing color and wavy lines.

Flipping the bird at "polite society" with their tense, energetic images, smashing up sentimentality with joyful abandon, focusing upon the lowest of the low, Expressionism was the early 20th Century version of Punk.

The Expressionist movement acquired dramatic proponents quickly, most notable of whom was the tormented figure of August Strindberg, who invented

the stage footlight and a number of other technical innovations that we all take for granted today, so as to present his technically demanding plays. The final instructions for his *Dream Play*, for example, have the main character enter a castle, which sprouts an immense chrysanthemum from its roof just as the castle bursts into flames. And just so you know this is not to be done with drops conveying the images, the actual background is described as a drop illuminated by the burning castle and which "reveals a wall of human faces."

Strindberg, himself, was a difficult man, known for wildly irrational diatribes against feminism -- although he favored relationships with extraordinarily powerful and capable women and the proto-feminists of Sweden took care of his family during one of his severe breakdowns. His mental illness was described vividly in his painfully autobiographical *The Inferno*, itself a masterwork of literary Expressionism in its juxtaposition of grotesquely surreal images with quotidian actions and places that would crop up a hundred years later in the works of W.S. Burroughs, while Strindberg's stylized theatre, in which characters are not so much individuals as iconized representations of states of mind, would surface in rarified form in that of Brecht, where the iconized character becomes some form of universal archetype borrowed from Jung. Or Marx. Or both.

Expressionism lasted pretty much up to 1914, when the majority of its proponents were drafted into the Kaiser's war machine and when all of them would die among the millions in the trenches and in the mud. Among its other bad achievements, World War I may be said to have slaughtered an entire artistic movement. Egon Schiele, an Austrian painter, persisted well up until the

40's, working in furious aloneness, when the Nazis killed him too. The power of the images and of the theatre, however, proved so powerful -- and so apt for the times -- that one still runs across its effects today in painting, in drama, in sculpture and in music.

Brecht picked up on Expressionism's rarification of situation to essences in creating his own Theatre of Alienation, in which the spectator is supposed to sit back and reflect objectively on the events taking place on stage. Expressionistic theatre was never so much about plot and character as presentation of evocative tableaux and Brecht took from this to make a dramaturgy that de-emphasized naturalism in favor of stylistic gesture and frozen motion. In this theatre, the stage manager and the set designer attain equal status -- and sometimes superior status -- to that of the actors. One does not go to an Expressionist play for catharsis or to get lost in the action -- which usually is sordid in some fashion - - but to regard the play as one would regard a painting or series of paintings.



Turning to the Black Rider, subtitled "The Casting of the 12 Magic Bullets", we have three contemporary artists collaborating on a work that is clearly expressionistic in effect and intent. Tom Waits, who wrote the music, stands alone as a very unusual lyricist and occasional movie actor. We have a personal reminiscence of and with Tom, which we will keep under wraps for now, for we knew him -- personally and briefly -- during his flophouse days. Tom arose from the late 1960's when he worked as a doorman for a San diego nightclub to become a sort of chronicler of the lowlife for Asylum records for whom he cut four records that stood out from the crowd by their insistence upon describing the lives of the down, out, never was, and never will -- much like the Beats of Babylon. He has appeared in *Rumble Fish*, *Cotton Club*, *Down by Law*, and the adaptation of William Kennedy's *Ironweed*. In 1999, he won a Grammy for his

impressive *Mule Variations*, a complex CD that includes brilliant poetic lyrics, sophisticated melodies well above the usual pop fluff, and an invisible theme that binds the entire work together similar to a Kennedy novel. In performance he is known as a brilliant and quirky presenter, sometimes barking into a megaphone like a carnival sharpie, sometimes reciting poems, sometimes settling in to tell a ribald joke or a good story like a comfortable lounge act.

About W.S.Burroughs, who provided the text of the story, little can be said that has not been said before. He was with the Beats from the very beginning, although he did not write anything himself until his highly publicized accident with his second wife, Joan Vollmer Adams, in 1951. He had searched long and hard for resolution to an already restless soul, having passed through one nasty divorce already, when in Ms. Adams he finally had found the ideal mate to his burgeoning soul. But in 1951, during a drunken attempt to reenact the story of William Tell, Burroughs shot Adams through the temple and killed her. Like Strindberg before him, he flew across the face of Europe in a fury of desperation and self-hatred and self-destruction, not pausing at the borders of Europe to plunge like a comet into Tangier where in a howling inferno of wretchedness, he poured out the hundreds of pages that would become the notorious *Naked Lunch*. The book is a searing and very uncomfortable journey through a junkie delirium in which the images of Adams' death and various sexual acts surface with horrifying effect in a long series of dreams or hallucinations. That book, a "blue print", made by David Cronenberg into a film, became an art house favorite and acquired significant notoriety by virtue of its surreal and violent, as well as

extraordinarily beautiful, imagery. We can remember coming out of the theatre to find ourselves in a bar with several other artists, staring at the walls and desperately in need of a drink. The Significant Other has said, "It was too disturbing. I couldn't watch it to the end."

Now, this is from a woman who works in hard time Oaktown among the junkies and madmen of the savage Fruitvale district where pushers have shot out the street lights so they cannot be observed making deals.

Burroughs worked infrequently in his latter days, most notably with Laurie Anderson, with whom he did a number of recordings, and with Kurt Cobain, who played guitar over his voice. He died on August 2, 1997 at the age of 83 after having lived a life that would have shortened that of lesser men by half.

Robert Wilson, the third genius in this triumvirate, came out of Waco, Texas, to provide Direction, Set and Lighting to this project is known mostly for being a collaborator with virtually every name of importance in the cultural world today. But before he collaborated with these unusual men on Black Rider, he made a name for himself as the pre-eminent avant garde man of the day in his own right. He began with an opera for the deaf, called *Deafman Glance*, then went on to create *KAMOUNTain and GUARDenia Terrace* in Iran in 1972. That project extended a full seven-days. Per performance.

He wrote another silent opera, titled *Life and Times of Josef Stalin*, which lasts 12 hours in performance. In 1976, he joined with Philip Glass to write *Einstein on the Beach*, now regarded by many as the culmination of the twentieth century in theatre.

It was at the Thalia Theate in Hamburg that he collaborated with Waits and Burroughs on *The Black Rider* in 1990. He continued to work with Waits on *Alice*, a work that focussed on Lewis Carrol and his relationship with the girl who became the impetus for *Alice in Wonderland*, then again with *Woyzeck*, an adaptation of Buchner's Expressionist play. He has worked with David Byrne, Allen Ginsberg, Laurie Anderson, Susan Sontag, Lou Reed, and many others. Incidentally, he has produced and directed Strindberg's *Dream Play*.

Clearly, from all of this, you understand one does not go to *The Black Rider* for light and lively entertainment. The story is culled from an old German folktale called *Der Freischütz*. It is a simple Faustian story in which an office clerk makes a pact with the devil for "magic bullets" so that he may win a shooting competition and win thereby the hand of the Beautiful Girl. The day of the contest arrives and the last magic bullet, instead of striking the target, circles around and hits the chest of the intended bride. The clerk expires in a madhouse with the rest of the devil's lunatics.



Wilson opted for a severe set of jet black and cross-bars of bone-white shot with blood red interspersed with changes of living green to represent the forest. Immense schematic chair frames suggest the interior of the huntsman's house, while a cubist coffin frame surrounds the figure of a chorus-like figure who represents the cost of trades for momentary success with one's soul. The place of the casting of the magic bullets is a brilliant illuminated cross surrounded by bone-white hands and backdropped by chiaroscuro dry mountains of boulders. In costume and makeup, all actors are painted bloodless white. The huntsman has a frightwig sort of vertical rise, while the Suitor, Georg, has an exaggerated sweep of hair descending on one side from a Hitler-style soup bowl cut. The makeup artist configured his face so as to turn every expression into a wild

exaggeration of tragicomedy. Georg cannot make the slightest move without a goosestep forward and enters his personal madness with megalomaniac intensity. The advising uncle wears an ascetic monk's cowl and habit with shaven head and deep voice.



Periodically, a monolithic black box that could be a coffin, could be The Void, could be just a vehicle for disappearing, would glide across the stage. Characters would appear in and out of it with impish frequency.

The score, by Tom Waits, was a curious mixture of oompah Brechtian carnivalia, old tin pan alley showtune stuff and vintage Waits -- which itself is a mixture of slogans, phrases and saws from childhood mixed with salt-tack and whiskey. The most memorable piece was a dweeziled version of "The Red Rose and the Briar" which had the performers flying on wires a good twenty feet above the stage at one point.

Maryanne Faithful, for whom many made this pilgrimage to see for perhaps the last time, appeared as The Devil, dressed in tasteful tails of black or vivid red. Her long hair was tied back in a severe ponytail rope and her husky voice reminiscent of Marlene Dietrich, met every demand and more placed upon it. In fact, her voice was so powerful, she could have blasted the old Geary Theatre without benefit of amplified mike. It is perhaps ironic that this particular performer, who began her career with the sweet ballade "As the Tears Go By" only to descend a sharp decline by sleeping with Mick Jagger, has certainly made her fortune by playing the bad girl to the hilt in reality. She had the audience in the palm of her hand simply by virtue of who she was and she could have stripped naked singing "I'm a little teapot" and still got them all on their feet that night.

At the end, she sort of peeked out from the wings, coy and pretending shyness and the audience loved it. Then she strode out and someone threw a rose onto the stage. Which she graciously accepted.

She is a trooper in the best sense of the show-business world and at this point no one can deny she has paid her dues many times over.



Such was the *Black Rider* at the Geary Street theatre this September 2004. This was the only North American engagement, as the international show flies from here to Australia's Sydney Opera House.

Marianne Faithfull stars in the *The Black Rider* as Pegleg, the devil incarnate opposite *Cabaret* vet Matt McGrath (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*) as clerk Wilhelm. Canadian singer Mary Margaret O'Hara (sister of Catherine O'Hara) portrays Kätchen, Wilhelm's true love.



The ensemble also includes Sona Cervená, Alan Charlesworth, Janet Henfrey, Jessie Kilguss, Nigel Richards, Dean Robinson, Gabriella Santinelli, Richard Strange, Monika Tahal, Jake Thornton and Jack Willis.

The design team of *The Black Rider* includes Wilson (set and lights), Frida Parmeggiani (costumes) and Heinrich Brunke (additional lights). Wolfgang Wiens provided dramaturgy.



Bent Clausen serves as musical director with David Coulter as associate music director over an eight-member orchestra called "The Magic Bullets" featuring Thomas Bloch, Terry Edwards, Caroline Hall, Rory McFarlane, Jack Pinter and Kate St John. The score of *The Black Rider* calls for an eclectic pit of such instruments as the toy piano, the pocket trumpet, the Stroh violin, the Ondes Martenot, the glass harmonica, the Cristal Baschet, the drunk piano and the musical saw.

Book by William S. Burroughs. Music and lyrics by Tom Waits. Directed by Robert Wilson.

