

Autumn Canticle

Reviewed By Les Spindle

" Autumn Canticle"

Theater: Celebration Theatre

Location: 7051B Santa

Monica Blvd., Hollywood

Phone: (323) 957-1884

Starts: October 24, 2003

Ends: November 29, 2003

Evenings: Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m.,

Sun. 3 p.m.

Price: \$20

Presented by: Celebration
Theatre

Autumn, that pleasant transitional season, and the soothing strains of classical canticles become panaceas for troubled souls approaching the winter of their lives in John W. Lowell's warmly humorous and sharply poignant gay love story. Reportedly inspired by the real-life romance between composer Benjamin Britten and his life-partner Peter Pears, Lowell has crafted a literate and heart-rending story of love and loss and how we re-evaluate our priorities as the clock of mortality begins to tick faster. Director Randy Brenner's tasteful and sensitive West Coast premiere staging maximizes the unpretentious pleasures of Lowell's life-affirming 1997 drama. The narrative, not fastidiously adhering to facts, charts a love triangle that develops among ailing 52-year-old classical composer Peter Billings (William McCauley); his longtime lover David (Alan Brooks), who's a professional baritone; and the much younger undergraduate music student Walker (Seth Resnick). It's 1972, and Walker is serving as the couple's live-in assistant in their Hudson River Valley mansion. As the play opens, Peter is returning home from the hospital following open-heart surgery. After the usual round of pleasantries, tensions of various sorts surface between the laid-back Peter and the bombastic prig David. Peter's creative drought and health issues threaten to upset the bond that has apparently kept the two men together: their professional collaborations. We soon discover that Walker is more than an innocent bystander and possibly even an opportunist, as he becomes a catalyst for the couple's overdue grappling with long-suppressed relationship issues. Brenner helms a tight ensemble effort, his trio of actors working harmoniously to illuminate this absorbing slice-of-life story, embellished by beautiful music that highlights the dramatic crescendos. McCauley has the strongest role and rises to the occasion with a finely shaded portrayal. Peter at first seems a rather benign presence, restrained by illness and a general easygoing nature; then he becomes more intense and eventually very caustic when some disturbing truths come to light. Brooks is likewise formidable and has a compelling character arc, at first a bit contemptible due to his arrogant and manipulative demeanor, then more sympathetic as we realize there are no true villains in the evolution of this relationship. Resnick supports the two principal characters efficiently as an ambitious scholar, who creates more disruption in the household than he intended. Keith E. Mitchell's classy-looking set is among the Celebration's best ever, with Andrea Housh's textured lighting and Milsa Watson's attractive costumes yielding kindred aesthetic pleasures. Plays about love relationships between middle-aged gay men are rare, and Lowell's gentle but potent dramatization of issues surrounding such a union strikes a universally resonant chord.