

## AUTUMN CANTICLE



Playwright John W. Lowell's witty and elegant drama is loosely based on aspects of the romance between composer Benjamin Britten and his lover, singer Peter Pears. More than that, though, the passionate roman à clef provides a compelling meditation on themes of mortality and compromise intrinsic to middle age, whether one is gay or not. Distinguished opera performer David Williams (Alan Brooks) has cared for his lover, composer Peter Billings (William McCauley), for decades. Crises threaten the pair's relationship as Billings' health fails amidst a severe case of composer's block, and Williams dallies adulterously with a besotted young grad student (Seth Resnick) who has been worshipfully helping the older man. The revelation of infidelity forces Billings and Williams to confront what they've turned into as they've grown older. Lowell's script juggles sharp, unusually literate dialogue with penetrating, nuanced psychological portraits that eschew campy stereotypes. And, while the play's first scene is overwritten and static, threatening to establish a fusty mood, the work quickly rights itself as the stronger emotional elements come into play. Director Randy Brenner's elegiac staging is tinged with hints of melancholy, and the acting work crackles: The way Brooks' motor-mouthed Williams masks his guilty feelings with patter is powerful — as is the way McCauley's Billings sublimates his feelings of betrayal into self loathing of his own failing body and mind. Celebration Theater, 7051-B Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mat Sun., 3 p.m.; thru Nov. 29. (323) 957-1884. **Written 10/30/2003** (Paul Birchall)