

The playwright and his play are both lucky finds

By Douglas J. Keating
INQUIRER THEATER CRITIC

A *Autumn Canticle*, at the Walnut Street Theatre's Studio 3, is the first professional production of a play by John W. Lowell, a writer in his mid-30s, and it is an impressive debut. *Autumn Canticle* reveals a writer with a keen understanding of human behavior who can create telling dialogue that has the true ring of everyday speech.

It says something about the haphazard manner in which talent is developed in the American theater that a writer and play of this quality were discovered quite by chance.

Lowell was working as a clerk in a West Coast record store when he became acquainted with actor-director David Ogden Stiers and showed him the play. Stiers shepherded it through a workshop in California to the Walnut, where he is presenting it in an understanding, nicely acted, generally strong production.

Lowell is a composer as well as a writer, and the play reflects his interest in music. It's set in 1972, and the central characters are a middle-aged gay couple, a well-known composer and a baritone — a pairing reminiscent of the real-life couple of Benjamin Britten and tenor Peter Pears. Peter Billings and David Williams have been living and performing together, with Billings at the piano playing songs he wrote for Williams, since they met on their first day of class at the Curtis In-

Review: Theater

AUTUMN CANTICLE

Written by John W. Lowell, directed by David Ogden Stiers, settings by Thom Bumblauskas, costumes by Melissa Wayne, lighting by Troy A. Martin-O'Shia. Presented by Walnut Street Theatre.

The cast:

David ... William M. Whitehead
Peter ... William McCauley
Walker ... Callum Keith-King

Playing at: Walnut Street Theatre, Studio 3, Ninth and Walnut Streets, through March 9. Tickets are \$22 to \$25. Information: 215-574-3550, ext 4.

stitute of Music.

It has been a close, productive relationship but in the decade before the time of the play, the arrangement has changed significantly. After a disastrously received opera, Billings has been unable to write music and, at about the same time, he lost interest in sex. Now, at 52, Billings is not a well man. As the play opens, he's just returned home from the hospital after having open-heart surgery. The other character is Walker Dennison, a graduate student who is cataloging Billings' oeuvre and who has been cooking and keeping house for the older men.

Dennison figures in a key incident in the play, but Lowell's con-



The three characters in "Autumn Canticle" are played by (from left) Callum Keith-King, William M. Whitehead and William McCauley. The director is David Ogden Stiers.

centration is fixed on the older men as they work out their problems. It's an intense, eloquent exploration of self-understanding, devotion, infidelity, coming to terms with mortality and — above all — the abiding love of a

committed relationship.

The poignant, satisfying conclusion is reached through mature and realistic discussion.

The playwright keeps his attention closely fixed on the Billings-

Williams relationship. He is not discursive, but he has a tendency to overwrite what is pertinent. In many scenes, the characters have too much to say; they are slow getting to the point and talk about it too much once it's been made. The overload of detail and repetition, though it all rings true enough, can be wearing for the audience.

Although Billings is the famous partner, Williams has the largest role in the play and is the one who must change most to preserve the relationship.

William M. Whitehead works slowly into his portrayal of this handsome man with a sharp, bitter wit and a prickly personality, but in the latter stages of the play he gets him about right. William McCauley plays Billings, who though more famous, is a more ostensibly ordinary, more likable, more emotional man than Williams.

The actors present nicely matched (though contrasting) personalities whose deep commitment is apparent.

Dennison is young, unwise, enthusiastic and devoted to the older men. Callum Keith-King's portrayal brings out all these traits.

The confined, close-to-the-audience playing space of the Walnut Theatre's Studio 3 is eminently suited to this intimate, almost claustrophobic examination of relationships and personalities. There's a real sense that these are real people dealing with real problems.