

Eureka Theatre Returns With *Autumn Canticle*

Three's Company

by Jerry Metzker

The Eureka Theatre, dormant since 1992, is making a comeback with a new production. John W. Lowell's *Autumn Canticle*, which premiered last week at First Congregational Church. When the Eureka Theatre began 23 years ago, the company's original site was Trinity Methodist Church at 16th and Market, so performing in a church appears to be a good omen for this progressive theater company, which has championed the plays of such distinguished playwrights as Maria Irene Fornes, Sam Shepard, Caryl Churchill, Dario Fo, and Tony Kushner.

Autumn Canticle concerns Peter Billings (Daniel Caldwell), one of America's foremost composers, and his life partner, baritone David Williams (David Ogden Stiers, Major Winchester of *M*A*S*H*), for whom Billings has composed most of his compositions. But hard work and bad habits have left Billings' body weak and exhausted his creativity. After returning home from bypass surgery, he finds what little solace he can in writing his memoirs with an eager young devotee, Peter (Michael Oosterom), who has taken up residence in their home. Williams is not pleased with this situation and he works hard to change it.

The characters in *Autumn Canticle* are unapologetically, comfortably gay, and although being so does affect their attitudes and responses, the play itself is about everything but that. Unlike our current display of gay drama (which is as much about display as it is drama), *Autumn Canticle* is about issues that are not intrinsically gay — the loss of talent, the dissolution of a sexual relationship, and the effect of death on a relationship many years old.



Michael Oosterom, Dan Caldwell, and David Ogden Stiers in John Lowell's *Autumn Canticle*

David Ogden Stiers' direction is polished and elegant. In fact, several scenes are so beautifully rendered they linger in the mind afterward. For example, after bringing Billings his pills, Williams drinks out of the same glass. All the sex and cuddling in the world could not convey more clearly or subtly this couple's 30-year partnership than this small, intimate moment.

Granted, there are problems, particularly in the second act, where Williams picks up the water tray and begins to leave the room about 20 times before actually going. But for the most part, *Autumn Canticle* buzzes along without a hitch.

The only weak link in the show is Daniel Caldwell's acting. On stage he is ill at ease, and his line execution falls somewhere between late and fumbled. Although Billings is supposed to be physically unwell, Caldwell has

internalized the illness so deeply that he just looks tired, and that is not the same thing as recovering from open heart surgery. It is no wonder that Ogden Stiers seems, at times, to be pressing the situation. As a director and an actor, he knows it is essential to keep the play moving.

For his part, Ogden Stiers is a consummate performer. His acting goes down like a soothing broth on a cold autumn day. Oosterom is also quite good. ▼

***Autumn Canticle* continues through October 28 at First Congregational Church, Post and Mason, in San Francisco. Call 243-9895, or TIX Booth on Union Square, for tickets and information.**