

'Autumn Canticle' raises standard for gay plays

By **Brian Caffall**

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Except for the occasional "daring" play (Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour"), gay and lesbian characters on the American stage were noticeable by their absence until the floodgates opened in the wake of Stonewall.

At first, the mere idea of actually seeing a gay man or a lesbian in a play was regarded as a welcome breakthrough, but, with the proliferation of gay-themed scripts in the past two decades, that thrill of recognition is no longer enough, in and of itself, to justify drawing audiences to a production. The body of work has grown sufficiently large — and sufficiently diverse — for us to be able to judge each new work by its own merits, and to go beyond the idea that our stories are being heard to the question of whether the writer tells the story with a fresh voice.

Such a voice — new, welcome and eloquent — can be heard at Walnut Street Theatre's Studio 3.

John Lowell's new play, "Au-

If you go

What: Walnut Street Theatre Studio 3's production of "Autumn Canticle"

When: Through March 9

Where: Walnut Street Theatre, Ninth and Walnut streets

Tickets: Call (215) 574-3550 extension 4

umn Canticle," explores territory that has been relatively untouched by other playwrights writing gay-themed plays: the dynamics of the long-established relationship.

Peter Billings and David Williams have been together since the day they met as new students more than 30 years ago at the Curtis Institute of Music. Their life together has grown and evolved as both men won fame: Billings as a composer, Williams as the leading interpreter of

Billings' vocal music. They have also weathered the changes that those intervening years have made in their partnership, and are facing the new challenges that neglect, complacency and the erosion of once-youthful passions and confidences have wrought. Beyond that, in a very real sense they are facing their own mortality.

Lowell has done more than simply create a plausible scenario: He has inhabited his story with three men who have their own dimensions, attitudes, strengths and failings. Lowell has a sure and certain ear for dialogue. Each of the three men in this play has an individual voice, and, what's more, those voices reflect the times and the milieu from which they have been formed.

In their very cadences and phrasings these characters bring with them the competitive, somewhat overheated "salon" atmosphere that would have shaped them as students at Curtis in the 1940s, when their classmates would have included

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many of the future stars of American music. It is rare to find a playwright who is able to shape language toward such specificity, to write in such a way as to give context, as well as content, to his characters.

Good as this play is, it requires a sensitive and understanding production to bring out the subtle nuances, and the mounting at the Walnut Studio 3 is all that and more. Director David Ogden Stiers and his cast breathe abundant life into "Autumn Canticle," using the intimate closeness of the playing space to advantage.

At such close proximity, any false

note or hint of "play-acting" would immediately throw the balance of Lowell's carefully crafted script. If anything, the actors hold back slightly in their playing of emotion, but that would also be in keeping with the characters of the two lovers, men of a generation and a social order which valued the vicer of rational calm and stoic reserve. By contrast, Walker Dennison, the stu-

dent whose presence throws off the status quo of the household, is written with his feelings much closer to the surface.

"Autumn Canticle" is not quite a perfect play. It needs a little more dramatic tension, and there are times when the characters overstate issues that have already been presented. With a little adjustment, this already-involving play could really sing. ▼