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## Play Time

Cynthia Citron

Send comments to editor@smdp.com

## A summer hotel in an autumn garden

### THE UPPER-CLASS VOICE OF LILLIAN

Hellman rings across the elegantly furnished living room of a summer hotel on the Gulf Coast. She's not there, of course, but the 12-person ensemble presenting her play "The Autumn Garden" echoes the attitudes and mannerisms that one often sees in her award-winning dramas. In "The Autumn Garden," however, which Hellman considered the best of her plays, the tone has mellowed a bit. The characters, friends of many years, confront each other with anger or muted sarcasm, but do not attack with the mean-spirited viciousness of the characters in some of her other plays, like "The Little Foxes" or "Toys in the Attic."

And that's as it should be, because these characters are into their autumn years — or later — (as was Hellman), and fairly well marooned in the lives they made for themselves. Each of them has a story, and each, because he or she is so excellent an actor, manages to flesh out and humanize his character, no matter how small the role.

If there is a central character, it is Nicholas (Jeffrey Nordling), a dissolute and disappointed artist, returning to the summer hotel after many years in Paris. With him is his wife Nina (Kitty Swink), who puts up with his drunken outbursts and his wandering eye because she still loves him. And because, she says, every once in a while he goes on "a rampage of good will."

Constance (Shannon Holt) also loves Nicky. She is an awkward, twitchy spinster to whom Nicky was once engaged. Constance is the owner of the summer hotel and she runs it with her young niece, Sophie (Jeanne Syquia), a refugee from the war in Europe. (The play, written in 1951, is set two years earlier.) Also present is Constance's long-time suitor Edward (Josh Clark), who chides her after she delivers a long rambling speech, with "You're very wise, Constance. It must come from not thinking."

Sophie is engaged to a young man, Frederick (Josh Zuckerman), whose mother and grandmother (Eve Gordon and Dawn Didawick) are also guests in the house. This relationship, between the two young people,

is the only one that remains an unresolved mystery, however. They are polite and formal with each other, demonstrating little affection, yet they continue to make plans for their upcoming marriage. Their quirky relationship is never explained, leaving the viewer to fill in the blanks. Is Sophie just wanting to escape from her life as a maid? Is she looking for security and a green card? Or is she making the best of what life has offered her? Frederick's motivation is also unclear. Is he escaping the overbearing attention of his mother and grandmother? Is he having an affair with his mentor, Mr. Payson? (Frederick's mother makes an oblique reference to "that filthy little scandal in Rome.") Or is he settling for a woman who he believes will be malleable and compliant? An assumption that may be a little iffy, as Sophie demonstrates in an emotional outburst that shows she has a mind of her own.

And finally, there is the General (Kurtwood Smith) and his unhappy, ditty wife (Rhonda Aldrich) who never stops prattling. They are an ill-matched couple and it is clear that the General is planning to beat a hasty retreat when the summer vacation is over.

"The Autumn Garden" runs for three hours, but it justifies the length by maintaining its interest. It's a collection of extraordinarily fine actors, extremely well directed by Larry Biederman, moving through a beautiful set gracefully designed by Tom Buderwitz.

Lillian Hellman would be so proud!

The Antaeus Company has produced "The Autumn Garden" with two completely different casts. Each, I'm told, equally wonderful. The play is presented at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. through Dec. 19. Call (818) 506-1983 for reservations and cast schedule.

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## A web of marketing awaits the Spider-Man musical

**MARK KENNEDY**  
AP Drama Writer

**NEW YORK** Robin Buckwalter is fully aware that a Broadway musical about Spider-Man will be opening soon. So far, though, he hasn't felt a buzz of anticipation about it where he works.

That may be bad news to producers: Buckwalter works at a comic book store.

"I haven't heard any feedback from any of the customers that come into the store," says Buckwalter, the 28-year-old co-manager of Galaxy Comics in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Park Slope. "I don't see many ways in which the two worlds intersect."

He says some hard-core fans might splurge for a pair of tickets to celebrate birthdays or anniversaries, but that's about it. Really? So comic book lovers won't be lining up when the mega-musical "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" opens its doors Sunday?

"No," he says, laughing. "I really doubt it."

Such a lukewarm reaction from one segment of comic fans may seem to put backers of the web-slinger's expensive show in a bind, but they are not necessarily relying on that particular demographic to fill the massive Foxwoods Theatre on 42nd Street.

There are plenty of other potential targets:

traditional Broadway audiences who want to see spectacle, admirers of its Tony Award-director Julie Taymor and fans of U2's Bono and The Edge, who wrote the music.

"It's a marketing person's dream to work on a show like this because there really are so many ways to reach your various target audiences," says Amanda Pekoe, president of The Pekoe Group, a marketing company not connected to the Spider-Man musical.

Pekoe, who has managed the marketing and advertising for a wide variety of shows, from the Broadway hit "Rock of Ages" to the cult "Puppetry of the Penis," says her first rule is never forget the core audience.

"No matter what show you're working on — Broadway or off-Broadway — your first goal is to reach out to the people who are typical theater ticket-buyers," she says. "No matter how different or unique or eccentric a show is, that's always the first goal."

After that group is targeted, Pekoe suggests going after more niche markets, in this case fan boys — comic book and sci-fi fans, and the audience that racked up big box office for the "Spider-Man" film franchise.

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