S

The Nitrate Hymnal: Moving Pictures

Special to The Washington Post By JOE BANNO

art form. Bob Massey and David Wilson's "The Nitrate Hymnal," which had its world premiere Thursday night at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Auditorium in Alexvery few years, a new opera comes andria, is the latest assault on the battlealong that's intended to redefine the ments of traditional opera.

back to 17th-century opera, with lithe, chanpunk guitarist, much of "Hymnal" hearkens tlike vocal lines written as nearly continuous recitative, and a chamber orchestra (acoustic strings, electric guitars, key-But despite Massey's pedigree as a postboards and drums) playing a gently supportive role.

prising human form) to carry her to a reunion with the husband she loved but bememories and keep her alive. Through the iage. At the end, Death arrives (in a sur-Even the plot has an early-baroque gloss: Michael, a filmmaker watching his grandmother's life ebbing away in a hospital bed shows her home movies to rekindle her films, grandmother and grandson relive her husband's geriatric decline, her son's suicide and her courtship and troubled marrayed. The filmmaker is left with his cellu-

The modern element of filmmaking pheus charming Death to win his bride Euwith Wilson—is acting as a double-Orpheus aside, we might as well be watching Orrydice back from Hades. Massev—whose cache of home movies from his own grandfather sparked this fictional tale he's created here, telling a story of redemptive art while using his own art to redeem a lost loved one oid memories.

feels fresh. That's not to say Massey, whose

But if the form of "Hymnal" hasn't reinvented the operatic wheel, its sound world



Massey, creators of "The Nitrate Hymnal." David Wilson, left, and composer Bob

indie-rock composer. But the canny orchesand Glenn Branca—but the musical stew is rration by David Durst (with contributions from Massey and producer Jean Cook) uses the guitars for color, to growl threateningly day job is as a news aide at The Washington Post, doesn't raid a few genres—post-punk rubs shoulders with post-Sondheim; progressive jazz melds with fusion; and brief visits are paid by Shostakovich, Piazzolla driven music than you might expect from an under the strings or simply add a little grit very much his own. There's less guitar

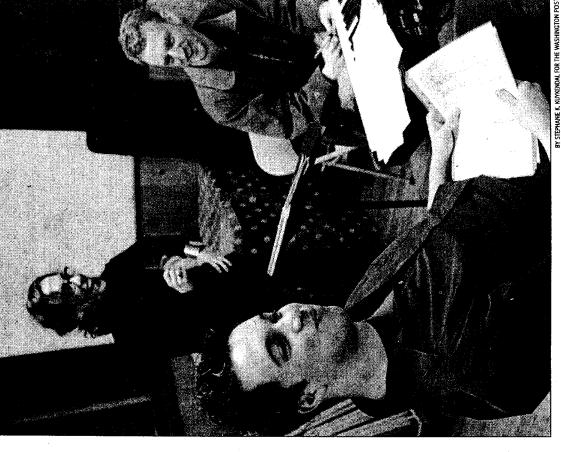
to the texture.

yet rarely build into musical sentences or Melodic fragments are repeated too often, The vocal writing is unfailingly lyrical paragraphs, let alone songs with catchy hooks. But that's judging "Hymnal" by rock and-roll expectations and not by the work's own emotional logic or dramatic trajectory—both of which are capably served by the though much of it is less than memorable

what she appears to be. Marcus Kyd is unect in the role of a nurse who is not quite nerability. As Michael, Cesar A. Guadamuz sings in a warmly communicative pop settlingly effective as son Walton—seen on-The singing is an amalgam of classical rigor, jazz flexibility and Broadway belting sweetly lyric turn as Mimi, the grandmother. Brian Baker's tenor is a slender reed of a voice, but he sings grandfather Robert with tenderness and a touching vulcroon, while at the other end of the vocal spectrum, Hai-Ting Allison Chinn uses her unabashedly operatic mezzo to imposing efy on film, his thoughts voiced on the soundbest exemplified by soprano Susan Oetgen's track by Massey.

potent a presence as music. Wilson has lova scene, or a moment of reverie is slowed to vised the creepy suicide footage as well, and Throughout "Hymnal," film is as vital and ingly restored Massey's 8-millimeter source material and then manipulated it to underscore the drama, as when a mundane action is looped to create the visual rhythm for capture an evanescent smile. Wilson de coordinated live video feeds that interact with the performers.

Schweizer, who has a knack for finding the gesture that can distill a pivotal moment in a He is well supported by director David character's life, and for drawing committed acting-and clear delivery of Massey's often eloquent lyrics—from his attractive



seen in the home movies.

"Nitrate Hymnal's" Cesar Guadamuz, left, Susan Oetgen and David Durst in rehearsal.

to the otherworldly chill of Mike Daniels's young cast. The design elements further Schweizer have created, from Beth Bal dwin's chaste white hospital-curtained set, amplify the visual world Wilson and

ights, to costumes by Lynn Sharp Spears that touchingly echo the 1940s fashions

out performance and tomorrow afternoon at Music and sponsored by the Washington Performing Arts Society, repeats tonight at a sold-The Nitrate Hymnal, produced by Anti-Social