

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Capturing the soul of Edgar Poe

interview by David Jordan

Starting today, Nexus Theatre is bringing a "highly unusual" play to Edmonton. Poe: *The Highly Unusual Life of Edgar A* is neither a biography nor an enactment of Poe's fiction, but a blend of both.

Though this may be a good time of year for young and old alike to brush up on their Poe, this play is not just a seasonal resurrection of the master of the macabre. Brent Fidler has dedicated the past two years to researching and producing this one-man tribute to Edgar Allan Poe.

Fidler was kind enough to grant the Gateway this exclusive interview.

**Q:** What sort of research did you do for Poe: *The Highly Unusual Life of Edgar A*?

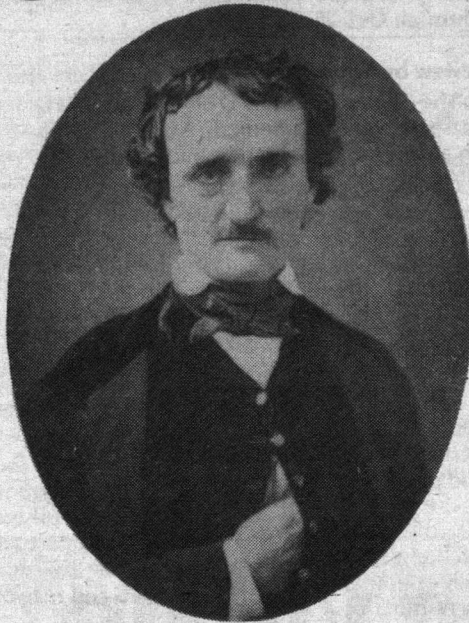
**Fidler:** Prior to sitting down and writing the script, which took me well over a year, I read every single poem that Poe wrote, every one of his tales, and then I sent away to the archives in the U.S. for special permission to use some of the editorials that Poe wrote.

**Q:** Nexus Theatre's promotion of this production emphasizes the Halloween thriller aspect of Poe. Is that the main thrust of the production, or will you also be doing some of his less sensational poems and some less than sensational moments of Poe's life?

**Fidler:** First of all, Nexus is hosting the show, and I'm producing it, so it is being done by my company, Theatre Crossing.

I think we do both. The play itself is not a sensational play, like Hollywood has done, with Vincent Price in "The Tell-Tale Heart," where you get this visceral kind of horror, where it's BOOM, 'Oooh, I'm scared.' What I'm trying to do in the play, which hasn't been done before, is take Poe's life, the character, and paint a psychological portrait of what kind of episodes in his life formed and painted this guy.

For example, Poe wrote "Alone" right after he got out of Manor House School in England. He was eleven or twelve years old then; he felt very isolated, very alienated,



Edgar Allan Poe circa 1848

and that poem came out of it. So I keep trying to show the influences that were working on him at particular points in his life.

**Q:** So you're mixing a biography with enacting some of his fictional works?

**Fidler:** I don't like to use the word 'biography.' What I do is take Poe's life from the time he was a child, right through to his death; I talk to the audience as Edgar Poe, in the living, personal tense. Then I use another theatrical technique, called "the magic wall," where I bring the audience back in time, and they get to go "(gasp) I'm reliving this moment in his life," where maybe his mother is killing herself. That creates a psychological moment — or the moment of watching his father die — then I combine those moments with different characters from his poetry, like the madam in "The Tell-Tale Heart," or that strange haunted man from "The Raven." So they get quite a few different versions of Edgar.

**Q:** Who do you see the play appealing to? Will it be enlightening to students of American literature as well as to Halloween thrillseekers?

**Fidler:** The horror of it is the horror of the soul. It's the horror that each of us feels deep down. There's a dark side to us, whether it's a demonic side, or a fear of death, or whether it's just dark. We fill that side in North America with thousands of movies, with booze and dope, and whatever, to get away from it. In that sense, I think the Halloweeners will get a little more than they bargained for.

**Q:** A little bit of personal background: you've been playing Poe for a while now; how far back does your interest in Poe go, and how did it begin?

**Fidler:** I've been doing the show for two years now, and I'm a little removed now from its initial sources, so I don't really mind talking about it too much. I've loved Poe ever since I was a teenager. I read Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Jules Verne, and Arthur Conan Doyle — I'm a great fan of them — and Poe fit within that genre.

About two years ago, I lost a very close friend of mine to suicide, an actress. At that point, I was a little mixed up as to continuing. I couldn't go on doing these three-week rehearsal plays, and light Neil Simon stuff. I really felt taken back by this thing.

I started reading Poe again one night, a biography, and it was just incredible the amount of death and suffering around his life. And yet there is such a strength, such a positive energy line running throughout his life, that he was able to turn all of that around and use it, to write it out of his system.

In a sense, I took on that energy myself to help me deal with my work.

**Q:** How did the play come about?

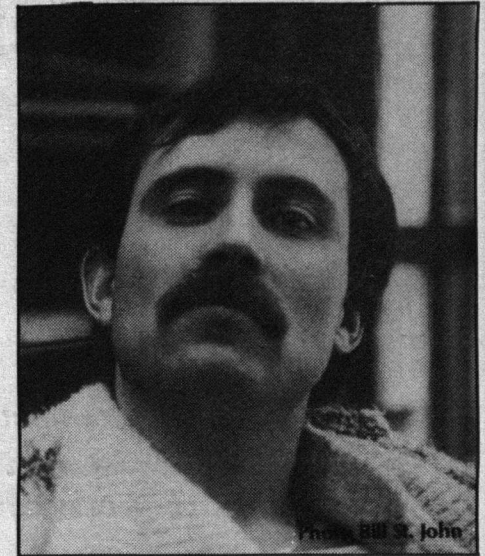
**Fidler:** It was quite simple. I locked myself in my old turn-of-the-century house for a year, and I wrote the play myself. I spent a long time writing the play — it's my first playwriting experience — and I wanted to get totally

involved in it.

I broke the cardinal rule of not mixing playwriting and acting, and I took on rather strange qualities, drinking quite a bit of brandy, smoking opium, because Poe was very much an opium addict. I think in order to really understand a lot of the characters involved in Poe's writing, it was necessary to understand what he was experiencing in that heightened state.

I worked with a process called osmosis, which, if you look it up in the dictionary, you will see means a process whereby one writes without any conscious or deliberate effort. After I had done a lot of my research, there were times when I would fall asleep at my desk when I was stuck, and my imagination, my dreams would come out. When I woke up, I would drag myself to the typewriter, and write the play like that.

*Poe: The Highly Unusual Life of Edgar A* plays at the Nexus from Oct. 25-31. Showtime is 8:00 pm; for information call the Nexus Theatre at 429-3625.



Brent Fidler circa 1984

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