

# Love Under the Northern Lights: Entertaining Almost, Maine is almost realism, most decidedly magical



*Almost, Maine*, by playwright/actor John Cariani, holds the distinction of being one of the most popular plays of this decade – topping the lists for most produced at both the high school and community levels of theater. Dubbed “a real romantic comedy,” there is no doubt why the show has attracted the attention of these groups. The play is made up of nine short vignettes, all stitched together by a common thread – the basic drive for connection and our need to be loved – populated by well over a dozen colorful and amiably plain-spoken characters. Fueled perhaps by the ever-present Northern Lights ablaze over the town, each short story ambles into the world of magical realism, often with a wink, a pun and more than a few nudges from the author – and all ending with a “surprise” twist.

The fact that Cariani is first and foremost an actor fuels his script in ways that only actors will spot first – especially those looking for a good monologue – as each scene provides actors with countless opportunities to have their “moment.” The show contains no adult language (“Jeezum Crow!” is the expletive of choice throughout) and gives a large cast of 19 actors each a chance to shine.

The show takes place during the same span of 10 minutes throughout the confines of the fictional Maine borough of Almost – a place so far north of everything it’s “almost” in Canada. Actually, it’s “almost” a town as well, since the residents just never really got around to formally making it official.

The synopsis of each of the eight scenes (and the ongoing interstitial playlet) could all be finished with one word: “literally.” We meet a woman who carries her broken heart with her always – literally – in a small bag. A man is immune to pain until a surprise kiss opens him up to intense new feelings – literally. A pair of close friends are surprised to find that they are falling for each other – literally – just falling, face down, repeatedly in the snow. You get the idea.

The script is bookended by the only characters we will meet repeatedly this evening, a sweet young couple earnestly played by Peter Swan (Pete) and Rachel Letourneau (Ginette). When Ginette finally works up the nerve to tell Pete she loves him, things take an unexpected turn.

Under Valerie Remillard’s solid direction, this first scene sets the storytelling tone for the night, where

the unspoken moments hold just as much importance as the dialogue and we soon see that a relationship can be made (or broken) within the measure of a reply.

In the first scene, titled "Her Heart," Glory (Megan M. Ruggiero) has set up camp for the evening in East's (Ian Hudgins) front yard. When he comes out to investigate, he quickly finds out that she is more than just a tourist, but someone on a journey to make amends after a huge personal loss. Ruggiero brings a chatty but matter-of-fact energy to Glory, based on a palpably heartfelt sense of truth as she explains her quest. While I felt that Hudgins leaned into the comedy of the scene a little too often, the duo found a pleasant rhythm and set the tone nicely for the other romantic scenes to come in the evening.

The next scene, "Sad and Glad," is set in the unfortunately named local pub the "Moose Paddy" where Jimmy (Richard Griffin) has a surprise run-in with his ex-girlfriend Sandrine (Katie Clancy). While Sandrine's Clancy makes no attempt to hide the character's disdain for her ex, Griffin is convincingly open and vulnerable as he recounts how he painted himself as the villain at end of their relationship. As the Waitress, Megan Begin manages to make the most of a role that could have become a one-note joke in lesser hands.

The next vignette, titled "This Hurts," ups the ante with some very well-played physical comedy as Marvalyn (played by the very funny Amy Lee Bullock) finds herself unintentionally hitting on her laundromat companion, the straight-laced by-the-book Steve (played with droll finesse by Alex Hatzberger).

It is during "Getting It Back" that author Cariani takes a deep dive into the metaphorical and presents us with some very literal manifestations of love. As Gayle, Heather Vieira is a woman on a mission to return all the love her longtime boyfriend has given her. Amid the heavy-handed visual puns, the author has some touching moments in store when Lendall (Matthew Moos) returns her love - as requested. Both actors find some nice specificity within the laughs so that the payoff of the scene feels real despite all the metaphorical baggage that preceded it.

The most heavy-handed writing of the evening is within "They Fell," a literal imagining of falling in love with all its implied gravitational problems. That having been said, much credit is due to Remillard and her two actors for successfully underplaying this particular scene. Mindy M. Britto as Deena and Caitlin Robert as Shelly fully inhabit their characters, creating a lovely, short-hand, lived-in relationship, bringing playwright Cariani's limited dialogue to life with seemingly effortless comic timing.

Local theater vets C. Richard Koster and Karen Gail Kessler are a wonderful match as a long-married couple in "Where It Went." After an unsuccessful attempt at rekindling old times by going skating, Marci reminds husband Phil "you first kissed me when we were skating." A Carhart-clad Koster embodies the oblivious Phil with a gruff, grounded energy. Frustrated by a lost shoe, Marci begins to strip off her polite, smiling veneer and finally lets Phil know how she is truly feeling inside. When the other shoe finally drops (again, *literally*...) the pathos of the couple's revelations are nicely balanced against the inherent comedy written into the scene.

As Hope in the "Story of Hope," Carole Reavey shows up suddenly on her long-lost love's doorstep to finally answer his marriage proposal from years ago. Reavey deftly handles the language of her stream-of-thought monologues explaining how she came to Almost, Maine. She soon realizes that the man who answers the door - played by a wonderfully low-key Duane Langley - is not the person she was looking for at all. Langley's performance, whether just listening silently to Hope's tale or voicing

his advice on her situation is wonderful, backed by his mellifluous voice and thoughtful line-readings.

The final full scene of the play is "Seeing the Thing," a "will-he, won't he" love story between two snowmobiling buddies, Rhonda (Sarah Quintiliani) and Dave (Stevie Smith.) From the get-go, we see that Dave has been holding a torch for Rhonda, unable to voice his true feelings. When he presents her with a painting, the only person who cannot see the truth of his feelings is Rhonda. The play ends with the finest piece of full-on Mainer-striptease I have ever seen, leaving the audience in stitches.

One of my favorite design elements of the evening was the sound, a fun, pop-fueled playlist where each music track perfectly encapsulated the scene prior. Kudos to director Remillard for eschewing the playwright's instructions to use his approved instrumental tracks and instead, bringing a fun sense of clarity to each scene's endings. The deceptively simple set design by the always delightful Brian Mulvey gives us a nice sense of the not-so-naturalistic setting, wisely keeping the beautiful lighting design by Koster and Adam Ramsey front and center. The lighting duo nailed the magical needs of the piece, giving us perfectly rendered clear skies, scattered with stars and some breathtaking Northern Lights.

*The Community Players present Almost, Maine by John Cariani, directed by Valerie Remillard, playing now through March 3, 2019. The evening stars Megan Begin, Mindy Britto, Amy Bullock, Katie Clancy, Richard Marr-Griffin, Alex Hatzberger, Ian Hudgins, Karen Gail Kessler, Rick Koster, Duane Langley, Rachel Letourneau, Matthew Moos, Carole Reavey, Caitlin Robert, Megan Ruggiero, Stevie Smith, Peter Swan, Sarah Quintiliani and Heather Vieira. Performances at Jenks Auditorium, 350 Division Street, Pawtucket. Tickets at [thecommunityplayers.net](http://thecommunityplayers.net) or 401-726-6860.*