



in collaboration with
THEATRE SCENE

Almost, Maine

February 8, 2012 by Steve Hallex

Welcome to winter wonderland, presented by 1st Stage. If you've been to this theater, things will seem a little different this time. The arena-like seating is curtained off for the performance, and chairs are placed in the round on the stage itself. Getting to your seats will be tricky with very strict no-walking-on-the-stage's-set rules in place. Seated, you just might feel a chill, with much of the stage covered in theatrical snow, with more to follow as the play progresses. As you wait for the actors to take the stage, chilly music, reminiscent of George Winston's album "December" plays on the sound system.



You have now entered *Almost, Maine*. No matter what day you attend, it is Friday night at Nine O'Clock; Aurora Borealias is expected in the northern sky. In notes from the playbill, playwright John Cariani says: "This play is about one moment in time—what happens to people in a heartbeat. It is a play about people who are really, truly, honestly dealing with the toughest thing there is to deal with in life — love."

Well, I'm not quite certain love is the most difficult struggle in life, but it is normally the most complicated. Many of those complexities appear in full view over the two-hour course of *Almost, Maine*. Considering the topic is so broad and so universal, Cariani—correctly— fragments his story, preserving only the unities of time, place, and theme. What is presented instead is a series of nine sketches, each focusing on different characters, but each taking on the vicissitudes of love.

Cariani and director Michael Chamberlin put their four-person cast to the test with this setup, but actors Jessica Shearer, Elliott Kashner, Jonathan Lee Taylor, and Megan Dominy prevail like a nor'easter. Each must portray a minimum of four characters over the course of a couple hours, and it surely tests range and versatility. Shearer, for example, portrays Ginette, a love struck teen, then returns as Sandrine, a straight-laced bride-to-be, then becomes Marvalyn, a flighty boarding house tenant, followed by Phil, a preoccupied lesbian mill worker, and finally Hope, a conflicted young lover who travels the world.

If this play has one major flaw, it is one shared with most anthology plays. Namely, an inconsistency of material. Some of the sketches are strong, yet others are mediocre. Sketch number four is the strongest. Steve (Taylor) is a young man with a mysterious physical condition that leaves him unable to feel most pain. Armed with well-meaning advice from his older brother, he keeps a list on a composition notebook of all the things that can hurt him. After a series of comedic run-ins with housemate Marvalyn, he thinks he has fallen in love with her. When she accidentally hits him on the head with an ironing board, Steve falls to the floor in seething pain realizing, yes, indeed he is in love.

Too few playwrights fail to acknowledge that love is basically a realization of lack. To love somebody is to realize that someone fills in the spaces left out at birth. I applaud Cariani for his observation.

It's not all ponderous. The sketches usually contain comic undertones, and some are comedies to begin with. Cariani's favorite device is to make some common metaphors literal. I will not present any examples and spoil the fun, but he employs it in virtually every segment.

Almost, Maine is not a perfect play but is one that engages the imagination in surprising ways, and is clearly a wonderful canvas for inspired directors such as Chamberlin. Don't be too critical, either: this drama has ways of getting inside of you, and challenging you. Most likely, your impression of it will improve in the hours after you see it, as was the case with me.