

In Door County shows, lonely hearts seek connection

Review: Mike Fischer, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



'Almost, Maine' showing now until October 15 at Peninsula Players.

Photo by Len Villano.

The night after watching "Every Brilliant Thing," I drove to Fish Creek to catch Peninsula Players Theatre's just-opened production of John Cariani's "Almost, Maine," which plays in a different and lighter key while touching on some similar themes.

They're all sounded in this solid production by director Patrick New's quartet of actors (Erica Elam, Joe Foust, Matt Holzfeind and Karen Janes Woditsch), who honor Cariani's plea that actors play for keeps when embodying the 19 lonely souls searching for love in the play's nine vignettes.

With its magical realism, sometimes overly obvious metaphors and insistence that love is always in the air, the characters in "Almost, Maine" can easily play as caricatures, in scenes so sweet they cloy.

But when done right – think the fabulous Milwaukee Repertory Theater production in 2010 – "Maine" confirms what Cariani writes and "Every Brilliant Thing" suggests: "Sadness and pain are the funniest things in the world."

This is a very funny "Maine," but one also feels for each of these people – living lives they desperately want to share but trapped within the prison house of the self. As the play's title suggests, they're often almost but not quite able to escape; in the darker vignettes, they either never get out of their shell or escape too late.

But there's also the woman who gives her broken heart to a man who wants to fix it. Two versions of best friends who finally admit they've fallen in love. A sleeping giant named Steve (Foust) who could never feel pain, until he's awakened by a kiss.

Even when characters like Steve insist they don't hurt, actors like Foust suggest that they do; this cast doesn't underestimate all we must overcome before awakening to a sense of our best selves. But awakened these characters do, in a production that might readily find a home on any list of the brilliant things providing reason to be alive.

"Almost Maine" continues through Oct. 15 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. For tickets, visit www.peninsulaplayers.com/. Read more about these productions at [Tap Milwaukee.com](http://TapMilwaukee.com).

PROGRAM NOTES: 'ALMOST, MAINE'

Moving While Standing Still: “Be creative with them. Enjoy them. Just keep them as short as possible,” Cariani insists, in commenting on the scenic changes required by his play’s many vignettes. Scenic designer J Branson’s solution? A track built into the Peninsula stage that functions like a moving walkway in an airport, whisking a particular vignette’s actors and set off stage as a new scene slides on.

Not only does this design element solve a functional problem. It also illustrates one of the play’s themes. Numerous characters in “Almost, Maine” are stuck and seemingly standing still. But they’re moving all the same; the earth turns and time passes. As suggested above, some characters miss that moment when the northern lights – almost another character in this show, and vividly recreated here by lighting designer Michael R. Trudeau – blaze brightest in their lives. One can either slowly slide toward oblivion by passively drifting along a grooved track or deliberately step into one’s own life and seize the day.



The Empathy Gym: While the 19 characters in Maine can be played by as many as 19 actors – a popular approach in the many high school productions of this play – most professional productions follow Cariani’s lead and use four. That saves money, of course. But it also challenges actors to live one of this show’s great themes: The importance of thinking outside one’s own skin and learning to see things from multiple perspectives, which in turn allows initially isolated people to come together.

Love is in the Air: Taking advantage of the latitude he has in casting specific scenes, one of New’s decisions involves deploying the cast’s two women in a vignette that’s usually played as a bromance involving two buddies who stumble toward Brokeback territory. While this scene in “Maine” has been played with two women before, it’s the first time I’ve seen it done this way. Elam and Woditsch nailed it, as besties coming together even as they struggle to acknowledge their still-greater love. Par for the course, in a show suggesting that love is indeed in the air, waiting for the moment when we finally let ourselves breathe and expand to fill the full potential of who we are and all we can be, together.