

## Warren Gerds/Critic at Large:

### Review: Players' Put Polish to Colorful Comedy 'Almost, Maine'



**Matt Holzfeind and Erica Elam in 'Almost, Maine'.**  
Photo by Len Villano.

**FISH CREEK, Wis.** - The play "Almost, Maine" is like a prism. Shine through a single beam of light – the concept of love – and fanning out on the other side is a colorful array of variations. The blue could be of the dramatic/thoughtful, the yellow of the happy/fulfilling. In between would be the softer reds. Struggling love could be the darkest violet. What is the color of humor? That's your choice. But this prism gives off humor, too.

John Cariani's play is lovely, cosmically so at times. The mind bend starts with the title – a fictional place in Maine that's unincorporated because the folks never got around to being fully official. That tongue-in-cheek aura runs through the play, delighting.

"Almost, Maine" has been popular in this area in productions by campus and community theaters. That the Peninsula Players Theatre would present "Almost, Maine" as its fall presentation is something of a surprise. But, being the best of the best in area companies, Peninsula Players Theatre does the thing up superbly.

This production, playing through Oct. 15, contains notable elements:

The 19 characters are portrayed by four actors. The pros – Erica Elam, Joe Foust, Matt Holzfeind, Karen Janes Woditsch – are prisms, too, as they radiate the nuances, temperaments, souls, mannerisms and expressions of their gallery of characters. The stories include that of a broken heart, literally; a misspelled tattoo; a long-delayed answer; falling in love, literally; and a painting that takes a certain vision to see – mostly amusing and sometimes an important reminder for couples.

The set is a two-fold draw. One element does not move. The basic backdrop is a snowy, rolling Maine landscape with wisps of horsetail clouds in the sky; the backdrop is viewed through a cutout of a building (a barn? a house?) on a lathe-like, wood-like plane. To the audience's left is a little gray house with a snow-capped canopy and a single pine tree nearby. To the audience's right is a little brick house with a snow-capped canopy and two pines nearby. The entire stage floor is covered with "snow" – all white, not fluffy, but at least an inch of softness. Other elements move and are part of the distinctive quality of this production. Some pieces fly in and out – like the window of a tavern, including representations of neon signs. Other pieces slide in and out along the floor on platforms – like the chairs and table of said tavern. Additionally, the sliding apparatus often carries an actor or two for the scene. The scene-change concept works brilliantly for this play. Coolest of all are star and Northern Lights displays that include splashes on the ceiling of the theater – a first for the Peninsula Players.

Interpretation. One compelling scene that is often played by two males in this case is played by two females. Another scene, with a couple out for a bit of ice skating, closes with something definite but a choice for the audience of what course the couple will take – this interpretation to me being the course of honesty. Of course, acting is all about interpretation, and director Patrick New and the players bring the characters a multitude of colors on their palette.

The ephemeral. Performances are never the same from night to night, but this possibility from opening night Wednesday will continue: These pro actors read the audience and let the audience absorb and react. More than once Wednesday, Joe Foust finessed the timing of a line, or a word, before – seemingly intuitively – getting the most out of it. It's a kind of artistry – here today, gone tomorrow – that's definitely/indefinitely there.



**Joe Foust and Karen Janes Woditsch in 'Almost, Maine'.  
Photo by Len Villano.**

**Creative:** Playwright – John Cariani; director – Patrick New; scenic designer – J Branson; costume designer – Kyle Pingel; lighting designer – Michael R. Trudeau; properties designer – Pauline Oleksy; sound designer – Megan Henninger; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; stage manager – Alden Vasquez; production manager – Cody Westgaard; managing director – Brian Kelsey; artistic director – Greg Vinkler

**Cast:** Pete, Jimmy, Lendall, Daniel – Matt Holzfeind; East, Steve, Phil, Dave – Joe Foust; Ginette, Glory, Waitress, Gayle, Shelly, Hope – Erica Elam; Sandrine, Marvayn, Deena, Marci, Suzette, Rhonda – Karen Janes Woditsch

**Running time:** One hour, 53 minutes

**Remaining performances:** To Oct. 15: 7 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays except Sept. 17, Oct. 1 and Oct. 15 at 3 p.m.

**Info:** [peninsulaplayers.com](http://peninsulaplayers.com)

**Epilogue:** 2017 was an excellent season for Peninsula Players Theatre. Artistic director Greg Vinkler envisioned the landscape of five plays – each a project of its own with individual creative teams – with flexible pro actors matched into mostly multiple productions of variant colorations. This is good stuff, essentially made in our backyard.

**THE VENUE:** The location of Peninsula Players Theatre's Theatre in a Garden is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. Flowers and other decorative foliage grace footpaths that weave through the grounds, which have been extended to the south. Driving along Peninsula Players Road and passing farms and trees, the thought may occur: "This theater is in an unusual place." The 621-seat theater house features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wooden slats of the side walls are rolled open to the outside. For cool fall nights, the theater floor is equipped with radiant heating for comfort. While the company dates back 82 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure, which got wobbly with age. The location on the shores of Green Bay provides playgoers with pre-show picnicking and viewing the sunset. Here's a theatrical rarity: The Players' website provides sunset times.