

Quirky romance warms hearts in snowy ‘Almost, Maine’ at Weathervane

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“Almost, Maine” at Weathervane Playhouse presents a collection of nine alternately heartwarming, surprising and at times sad vignettes about people finding or losing love.

They’re all quirky stories, always with a twist, which director Deb Lemire and her cast of 17 approach with an often delicious playfulness. The work, playwright John Cariani’s first, premiered in 2004 and is one of the most frequently produced plays in the United States.

“Almost, Maine” takes place in the mythical town of Almost, which never quite organized to become an incorporated town. Its eccentric denizens include everyone from awkward would-be couple Pete and Ginette (Nathan Jarosz and Kaylee Lhotsky) to Marvalyn and Steve (Kerry Scanlon and Noah James), who experience the bizarre while doing their laundry. With the latter, you can take the phrase “they were struck by love” literally.

You’ve got to buy into the surreal to play along with these loosely connected short scenes, which look at love from very unusual perspectives. Cariani employs whimsical symbolism in many of them, including the endearing Glory (Jeannie Clarkson) carrying around her broken heart in a paper bag in “Her Heart.” Or Angela Bozic’s Gayle dragging in big red bags full of her boyfriend Lendall’s (Jimmy Rizopoulos) love — which she wants to give back to him — in the charming “Getting it Back.”

These characters, portrayed in the snowy environment of the “deepest part of a Northern Maine winter,” have a folksy bent reminiscent of “Northern Exposure.” It’s clear that most of these roles are fun for the actors, which makes sense, considering playwright Cariani is also an actor whose Broadway work includes originating the comical role of Nigel Bottom in “Something Rotten!”

Alan Costa's set features snowy drifts, evergreen trees, frames of houses and a beautiful starry sky. As bizarre things happen with the residents of *Almost under the northern lights*, it's beautiful to see those lights depicted between scenes.

Sad side of love

The impulsive characters are prone to sudden proclamations of love or kisses that come out of nowhere. But in several scenes, a marriage is crumbling or characters endure the pain of the one who got away.

The heaviest vignette, between David Obney's Phil and Meg Hopp's Marci, is the most uncomfortable. In "Where it Went," this disillusioned husband and wife both point fingers and Obney goes over the top with his character's angry yelling.

Characters also may discover love in the most unlikely places. That happens when Scanlon's Marvalyn accidentally whacks James' Steve, who can't physically feel pain, with an ironing board in a laundry room.

The element of surprising romance works well in some scenes and falls flat in others. In the story "Where it Went," pacing was awkward and languishing lines seemed to just hang there between actresses Tabitha Rox (Deena) and Lindsay Ibos (Shelly). Rox also used odd gestures and body language that went beyond quirky.

This cast includes at least seven newcomers to the Weathervane stage. Some played double duty, including Ibos, who also plays Rhonda in the sweetest scene of all Sunday afternoon, "Seeing the Thing," which she shared with Matthew Engle as Dave. These actors have a delightful spark together as snowmobile buddies who discover a lovely common ground through a special painting.

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