



Written by John Cariani January 1 - February 14, 2010 Stiemke Theater

A STUDY GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS

This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of ALMOST, MAINE.

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Synopsis

On a cold, snowy night the residents of Almost, Maine deal with the toughest thing there is in life: love. Happy and unhappy romances are as abundant as the stars that twinkle above the

citizens of this small town. Through seven short vignettes, we are able to see these people become excited by the idea of love and what it means to be or not.

With your class have a discussion about love. What good can come from it? What are some bad things that can come from it? What do you think it's like to be in love? Do you think there is somebody out there for everyone?

"It says that people from Maine are different, that they live life 'the way life should be...'"



About the Author



John Cariani was raised in Presque Isle, Maine and participated in theater in high school. Cariani attended Amherst College and studied history. After graduating in 1991, he studied theater as an acting intern at StageWest in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1996, Cariani moved to New York City to pursue an acting career.

He made his debut at an Off-Broadway Theater in IT'S MY PARTY (AND I'LL DIE IF I WANT TO) and continued to act in shows for many years. In 2002 Cariani joined the cast of "Law and Order" and made his debut on Broadway in FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, as Motel, in 2004. For this performance he won an Outer Critics Circle Award and was nominated for a Tony. In that same year, he began his career as a playwright and wrote his first





play ALMOST, MAINE. It premiered at the Portland Stage Company, received instant acclaim and was named one of the best plays of the year by The Wall Street Journal. The play is also featured in *New Playwrights: Best Plays of 2006*. ALMOST, MAINE has been produced at 300 theaters in the United States and has also been produced internationally. In 2006, Cariani wrote his second play, CUL-DE-SAC which was premiered Off-Broadway.

Maine Facts

Here are some interesting facts that you may or may not have known about Maine:

Maine is the eastern-most and northeaster-most state in the United States.

Maine is about the same size as the rest of the New England states (Vermont, New



Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island) combined, with a total area of about 35,400 square miles.



Maine is the only state in the country that's attached to only one other state.

With 1.3 million residents Maine is the most sparsely populated state east of the Mississippi River. It has 40 people per square mile.

Maine has more moose per square mile than any other state.

90% of the nation's toothpick supply is produced in Maine.

Why do you think the Cariani made up a town for the play? Why not set it in a real city? Do you think that there is any significance in the name Almost? Discuss these questions with your class.





Why Vignettes? by Zoe Cohen

The format of *ALMOST, MAINE* is quite unique. Unlike many plays you may have seen it is, as playwright John Cariani puts it, “comprised of nine complete tales, each of which begins, climaxes, and ends” (68). While there are many reasons why a playwright might choose to write in this way, for this particular play, we can focus on two possible motivations. The first is technical and has to do with timing, and the second is more of an artistic choice, concerning the content of the piece.

ALMOST, MAINE has eight scenes which each feature different characters and tell their own complete story, as well as one more story that is broken up between the prologue, interlogue, and epilogue. All nine of these stories take place at the exact same moment in time. This is hinted at by the Northern Lights, which serve as





is limited at by the Northern Lights, which serve as transitions between scenes. Obviously it is not possible to actually tell each story at literally the exact same moment on stage, you can imagine what a mess that would be! Breaking the play into nine vignettes allows each story to be told effectively, while maintaining the feeling of simultaneous timing.

Another way to look at the format of the play has more to do with the content of the stories themselves. Think of each scene as a puzzle piece, each printed with an image that is unrecognizable. It is not until you arrange all of the pieces just so, fitting them together in the correct order that the bigger picture becomes visible. This is not unlike the painting Dave has created for Rhonda in scene eight, "Seeing the Thing." Describing his painting, he explains:

And this is my version of one of those stare-at-it-until-you-see-the-thing-things. Ever seen one of those? Some of the old painters did it with dots...but I did it with a buncha



little blocks of colors, see, and if you look at the blocks of colors, it's just colors, but if you step back and look at the whole thing, it's not just little blocks of colors, it's a picture of something. (59)

This becomes a metaphor for the play as a whole. This is not to say that each individual scene is lacking somehow, that it is "just a block of color" per se, for surely each is, as Cariani puts it, "its own unique emotional nut to crack" (68). It is undeniable however that when viewed together, the stories take on a new emotional complexity. While each scene tells its own story with a beginning, climax, and end, when viewed together we can see the bigger picture, a grander story - one concerned with the very nature of humans, love, and magic. ALMOST, MAINE tells nine stories, but it also tells one story.

The format of this play not only allows the playwright to



suggest a synchronicity of time, but of message. It also makes for a really fun, diverse theater-going experience!

The Vignettes

“Her Heart” featuring East and Glory

“Sad and Glad” featuring Jimmy, Sandrine and a Waitress

“This Hurts” featuring Marvalyn and Steve

“Getting it Back” featuring Gayle and Lendall

“They Fell” featuring Randy and Chad

“Where it Went” featuring Phil and Marci

“Story of Hope” featuring Hope and a Man

“Seeing the Thing” featuring Rhonda and Dave

Just from looking at the names of the vignettes and characters involved, what do you think each scene will be about? Discuss and record your answers with a small group. After you see the show, go back to your guesses and see how accurate you were.





The Northern Lights

by Peter Mol



The northern lights, or *Aurora Borealis*, is one of the most beautiful natural occurrences that can be seen on Earth. Since the beginning of time it has taken place in the sky above.

Aurora Borealis is actually a collection of charged particles in the magnetosphere (a volume of space that surrounds the Earth). Earth has a magnetosphere because of its internal magnetic field. Since the sun is so





hot (almost 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit on the surface), it is constantly burning off pieces of its outermost layer. Those pieces contain electrons and protons (also known as plasma) which then escapes into outer space. Solar winds collide with Earth's magnetosphere and the electrons and protons are unable to penetrate it so they move along side of the magnetosphere and try to bend it. This is what causes the colors we see in the sky.

There are only three different colors that can be seen: blue, green and red. Different gases give off different colors and the Aurora Borealis is primarily made up of oxygen, red, and nitrogen, green and blue. Depending on how fast the molecules are moving and the altitude of the molecules, the three basic colors can vary in shade.

Although the Auroras may be seen anywhere on Earth, they are mainly seen in the northern latitudes. To see it, the sky needs to be fairly dark and clear of clouds. The



best time to see it is around midnight, or a few hours before or after. The moon can sometimes be very bright, so this must be taken into account when looking for Aurora. There is always at sometime an Aurora happening on earth; however, it cannot always be seen.

There is a lot of folklore behind Aurora Borealis. The Fox Indians of Wisconsin believed that the northern lights were the spirits of their slain enemies waiting to take revenge. The Algonquin Indians believed that the lights came from Nanahbozho the Creator lighting a fire in the north to remind his people of his continued love.

Divide into groups and do some more research on the folklore behind the Aurora Borealis. What else did you find? Share your research with your class and discuss why you think these folklores exist.

The vignettes are supposed to take place at the same ex-



act time underneath the northern lights. Why do you think Cariani chose to do this? What is the significance of the northern lights? Discuss your ideas with your classmates.

Resources and Further Reading

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VISITING THE REP

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater, and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

**For more information on our education programs and our productions,
please visit our website at www.milwaukeeerep.com**

"You need three things in the theatre – the play, the actors and the audience, and each must give something." – Kenneth Haigh

Theater is described as a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the process: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors and the audience. Plays require audiences to give a new life to performances through their careful attention and enthusiastic reactions. The audience has an active role to play and the actors rely on you to be respectful and attentive. Through your observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation. You are important in the final performance and your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

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