



For romantic comedies that display a proudly eccentric or whimsical bent, it's a fine line between *aw-w-w-w* and *u-u-u-ugh*. And playwright John Cariani's *Almost, Maine* - a series of comically romantic vignettes that involves 19 Northeasterners in a frigid American province - seems almost designed to encourage irritated sighs and eye-rolling amongst its more jaded attendees. It's the sort of literal-minded fantasy in which one character carries the remnants of her broken heart in her purse, and another returns to her boyfriend's apartment with armfuls of "all the love you ever gave me," and angrily dumps them on the floor.

Die-hard cynics, though, need not apply. For everything that's coy and twee about *Almost, Maine*, just as much is buoyant and unexpectedly beautiful, and in the play's present incarnation at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre, director Chris Walljasper's wholly charming six-person cast allows you to swallow even its stickier elements with ease. Titter all you want at Cariani's contrivances and obvious metaphors. (We're also given a young man unable to feel pain until love whacks him in the head, and one of the piece's performers is double-cast as women named Hope and Glory.) But the sincerity with which the routines are performed here is inspiring; a production that could've been romantic-comedy mush - chilly con corny - is, instead, unfailingly sweet and honest.

*Almost, Maine* is Walljasper's third directorial outing since April (his most recent was the Harrison Hilltop company's *Proof* at the Green Room), and it features his most confident, impressive work to date. Like the play's characters, who are oftentimes happy to remain still while the world spins around them, Walljasper appears content to let an odd or touching moment linger without ramming its significance down our throats; there's an especially lovely bit here wherein a couple's missing object is miraculously found, and in the silence that

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Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 23 July 2008 02:19

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follows, we slowly glean that only one of the scene's characters will ever recognize the magic behind its recovery. Walljasper handles *Almost, Maine*'s heartbreaks and elations with disarming delicacy and tact, and even during the play's most overt slapstick - embodied by one priceless sequence in which two of the townsfolk *literally* fall in love - he roots the comedy in actual feeling and specific, life-sized emotions.

This can't have been easy given Cariani's unconventional conceits. (*Almost, Maine*'s most obvious forbears appear to be TV's

*Northern Exposure*

- not merely for its wintry climate - and the output of writer/producer David E. Kelley, especially *Picket Fences*

.) But the director's job was no doubt made easier through the game, earnest performers recruited for the show, who don't overplay the nuttiness, and who manage to keep their characters grounded during the show's most fanciful excursions.



With his blond hair and beard, J.W. Hertner is unrecognizable from his dark-haired, clean-shaven Leo in Scott Community College's recent *Design for Living*, but his *talent* sure isn't. Hertner gives a spectacular performance in

*Almost, Maine*

, conveying quiet yearning and a determined hopefulness with exceptional subtlety, and his comedic instincts are superb; he's fantastically funny when making a tentative advance toward a longtime co-worker, and when disguising another character's discomfort through a torrent of meaningless exclamations. ("Great! Great, great, great, great,

*great*

!") Hertner's scene partner in this latter case is the marvelously expressive Jessica Sheridan

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(nee Stratton), whose later portrayal of a depressed wife and mother is a devastating piece of drama in this mostly lighthearted offering; Sheridan shakes with anger and misery, and does so with such heartrending truthfulness that she leaves you shaky, too.

There were times during Thursday's performance when cast members Jaci Entwisle and Daniel Schaub seemed less than comfortable, and weren't fully connecting with their co-stars. (I caught both actors momentarily breaking focus and stealing quick glances at the audience.) But Entwisle is sensational as a surface toughie new to the ways of romance - yet eager to learn - while Schaub is terrifically exasperated as Sheridan's disappointed husband and Hertner's (understandably) off-put pal. In her three roles, the appealing Annie Shortridge radiates a tricky blend of eagerness and good common sense. And I'm glad to finally get to write about James Bleecker, who, in two June productions at the Green Room, took on a demanding lead in *Jerry Finnegan's Sister*

and offered scene-stealing support in the fabulous

*A Year with Frog & Toad*

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*Almost, Maine*

offers a bit of Bleecker's best in both, with his vibrant stage energy tempered by an engaging effortlessness.

These actors form a winning sextet, in a winning *production*, in this first show at the Harrison Hilltop locale. And I'll close by mentioning an unanticipated perk to the locale - a former Davenport bank - itself: a series of second-floor office windows that, with no fuss, add illumination to the playing area, that add an air of surprise (delightful things occasionally pop out of them), and that should easily suggest the exterior of a two-story dwelling for future endeavors ... such as August's

*Named Desire*

*A Streetcar*

I had enormous fun in

*Almost Maine*

, and Harrison Hilltop's venue now has me psyched for New Orleans.

For more information, visit ( <http://www.harrisonhilltop.com> ).