Written by Mike Schulz
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Granted, it's only February. But after seeing the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's Thursday-night presentation of *Almost, Maine*, I thought a reasonable case could already be made for actors Jessica Nicol and Chris White emerging as area theatre's most endearing romantic pairing for 2009. Although, to be fair, the accolade could just as easily go to Nicol and *Almost, Maine* co-star Jason Platt. Or to Platt and co-star Stacy Herrick. Or to Herrick and co-star Alex Klimkewicz. Or to White and Platt. Whichever.

Fear not, however; Richmond Hill's latest is anything but racy, and about as funny and charming and magical as you could want. Composed of eight independent vignettes and a ninth that opens and closes (and silently middles) the proceedings, actor/playwright John Cariani's *Almost , Maine* features a collection of Northeasterners falling - sometimes quite literally - in and out of love one starry, wintry night, and despite the romantic comedy's frigid setting, the show exudes a

captivating warmth.

But it frequently does something even *better*. There are moments (a *lot* of moments) in director Gregg Neuleib's production when the humor and poignance dovetail in a way that makes you giggle and chokes you up in the same breath, and the effect is nearly blindsiding; you're almost *embarrassed* to be as moved as you are. *Almost, Maine* is a quick-witted and engaging entertainment, yet the show - which finds its five-person cast enacting 19 roles among them - also boasts a wholly unexpected emotional impact, one that's all the more surprising considering that Cariani's piece is so determinedly eccentric.

The community of Almost, Maine - an inland township that, we're told, "never got around" to establishing itself as an actual *town* - exists in some vaguely surreal, exactingly literal-minded universe where love is a tangible entity, and where clichés such as "suffering from a broken heart" and "waiting for the other shoe to drop" routinely manifest themselves physically. (One of Nicol's characters carries the shattered remains of her broken heart in a brown paper bag.) With Almost's denizens experiencing romantic anguish and exaltation without fully addressing the ludicrousness, if not downright impossibility, of their situations, *Almost, Maine* could have easily been terminally whimsical - a *Northern Exposure* with no Joel Fleischman for the oddballs to bounce off.

Yet while a few conceits and contrivances are nearly too precious for words, what makes this rural rom-com soar, appropriately enough, is love. Cariani is so obviously enamored of his

characters and their fumbling attempts at happiness that the plaintive, comedic musings are graced with a kind of cockeyed poetry, and the heartaches - even the slapstick-y ones - are treated with utmost respect. No one here is a mere punchline, and in Richmond Hill's take on the show, the characters' dignity is matched by the dignity with which its director stages their encounters.

There are plenty of big laughs to be had, and Neuleib proves himself a master at conversational awkwardness; a scene of Nicol's bride-to-be trying to gently extricate herself from a reunion with Klimkewicz's former beau makes for especially hilarious (and touching) discomfort. Yet as good as he is with the pacing of characters' small talk and breathless ramblings - nearly segment for segment, the production is refreshingly unforced - Neuleib is just as inspired with the silences. When White and Nicol, as a pair of unhappily marrieds, react with wordless agony to a miraculous gift from the heavens, or when Platt momentarily delays a long-awaited rendezvous with a quiet gesture of gratitude, Neuleib lets the beauty of the moments sink in slowly, and with supremely delicate elegance.

Unlike so many others you could name, *Almost, Maine* isn't a romantic comedy of cardboard cutouts, and Richmond Hill's acting quintet follows suit with genuinely flesh-and-blood portrayals; the performers never condescend to their roles, and at no point does anyone simply play a "type." Klimkewicz, the one cast member previously unknown to me, delivers spot-on, deadpan comedy with tender shadings of melancholy, and Herrick - last seen, and spectacular, in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* - is a continually forthright and invigorating presence. (The actors are partnered in Cariani's only weak vignette, in which a onetime Almost resident seeks out the lover she abandoned years earlier, but Klimkewicz and Herrick perform the piece more than admirably.)

Platt lends his shrewd comic underplaying and unfailing stage honesty to four rather marvelously textured roles; he's so subtly expressive and emotive that his simple act of sitting on a bench and staring at the sky is filled with tragicomic longing. Nicol is as fully believable

portraying a tough cookie who's never experienced love as she is a flighty hiker who's felt it all too acutely; this radiant performer's focus, bearing, and stellar comedic and dramatic chops bring to mind Laura Linney at her best. And White, to my mind, has never been better than he is in *Almost, Maine*. He displays his usual polish and off-handed knack for inventive line readings, yet given the production's most disparate set of characters, the actor also exudes a warmth and benevolence that's unlike anything audiences have previously seen from him.

White's work here is expansive and big-hearted, and perfectly befitting such an expansive, big-hearted presentation, one that also boasts beautifully understated lighting effects by Jennifer Kingry, and a stunningly fine selection of segue songs and musical cues. The lightly evocative selections here - with hauntingly lovely violin strains that stay with you for days after hearing them - are such superb mood-setters, in truth, that if Richmond Hill had decided to package and sell its *Almost, Maine* accompaniment, the CD probably would've made a killing. I'm certainly hoping the show does.

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