

# ALMOST

From page 1

of the country as well as people think they do.”

So he set his play in rural Maine, in a mythical town called Almost, which is 200 miles from the ocean. (Cariani’s a native of Presque Isle, Maine, whose name means Almost Island.)

“Almost, Maine,” opens at the Florida Repertory Theatre Friday, Nov. 30 and runs through Dec. 23. (The play also had a run at Theatre Conspiracy last season.) Cariani is flying down for the opening and will be giving a talk-back after the first two performances.

“I grew up in a place that is about as opposite New York City as you can get,” he says, “and I find it very inspiring. New York has giant buildings and lots of people and everything is man-made. When you go to northern Maine, you’re aware of a very powerful force – nature, God, whatever you call it. There’s a lot more wonder. There’s a lot to wonder about in those empty places.”

In his play, “everything takes place at 9 o’clock on a Friday night, in a town that doesn’t exist in Maine, in the middle of winter, and the northern lights are hovering in the sky above. And the residents



John-Patrick Driscoll & Michelle Damato in *Almost, Maine*

PHOTO COURTESY FLORIDA REPERTORY THEATRE

of this town called Almost are falling in and out of love in unexpected and sometimes hilarious ways.

“People say it’s one of those plays, you think you’re watching something that’s very realistic, and all of a sudden it’s very different than the world you live in. Some people call it a Mid Winter Night’s Dream.”

“Almost, Maine” had a successful run off-Broadway and the New York Sun called it “Love in the time of frostbite.”

“That made me happy,” Cariani says. The play was originally a series of monologues he wrote for himself. He was looking for material that was interesting and not already overly familiar to use while auditioning, so he began writing monologues and telling directors it was from an obscure play.

“The monologues became stories and the stories became plays,” he says. “A friend of mine who’s a director, Gabriel Barre, directed it in Portland. In New York he came to see me when I was putting up these short plays; his wife turned him on to them. He saw that there was a through-line in the stories: they were all set in Maine, and all had an element of magic realism or the absurd in it. He said, ‘There’s a play here,’ so he helped me move the process along to turn this into a real play.”

“I was hoping to be in it, but I realized I couldn’t write it and be in it at the same time. Some people could do it, but I couldn’t.”

But his experience as an actor helped him enormously when it came to writing a play. If he noticed the actors having trouble in the same spot, over and over, he knew it was his fault, not theirs.

“If they continue to be stumped or confused by a certain section of the play, I had to fix it, because if they’re not clear, then the people watching it aren’t going to be clear at all either.”

On stage, he was always highly aware of the audience’s response throughout a performance.

“I’ve been in enough plays that you can feel when the audience gets bored,” he says. “The director does the best they can, and the actors do the best they can, and it just comes down to the story. There’s a disconnect that happens in all plays. You feel the audience just take a snooze. I wish there was a way to have that never happen. That would be the perfect play for me.”

He’d notice too, that audiences perked up whenever a play dealt with romance.

“When the love story kicks in, they sit up and pay attention,” he says. “They’re engaged in a way that they’re not engaged when it’s about politics or a power struggle. And I hate most movies that are romantic comedies, because they’re very awful. They’re very corny, and they don’t have to be. So I

thought I’d try my hand at writing something that wasn’t corny. ‘Almost, Maine’ is surprising and it is sentimental, and I don’t think there is anything wrong with that. Cynicism gets too much credit for being hip and cool, and I think it’s boring and lazy.”

Cariani was influenced by the collected writings of Antoine de Saint-Exupery (known for writing “The Little Prince”) and by a quote from Carlos Santana: “There’s nothing more powerful than innocence. If you get stale or bored, remember what it was like the first time you held hands with someone who changed your molecular structure. You got the willies.”

“Romance, in the true sense, doesn’t mean it has a happy ending,” Cariani says. “Tragedies end with death and comedies end with marriage, and romance is somewhere in the middle, where you’re not quite sure that everything will work out perfectly, but for now, it seems like everything is OK.”

The play includes the colorful Northern Lights.

“People have lost their mind trying to replicate them (on stage),” he says.

“I saw them a lot growing up. They stop you cold. They’re remarkable: bands of light waving in the sky. They look like curtains and they move, and they feel like they’re close to you and then they’re not. They feel like they hum, but they don’t, it just feels like that. The sky is really huge...there’s nothing to get in the way. It’s all farm country, it’s clear, open land. Usually you see white, yellow and green. Occasionally you’ll see red. And once in my life I saw a little bit of blue. It has to do with what element is getting ionized.”

Cariani says he’s seen “a handful, five or six professional productions” of his play. “Some I’ve loved and some I’ve hated,” he says. “I’ve seen a production where people talked like they were from coastal Maine. The men wore mullets and they had very little respect for the intelligence of the characters. They played it like just like a silly play, a little sit com. They weren’t playing the stories at all.”

In every production, he’s seen something good that he hadn’t expected. “It happens in every production that it blows up in a way that you never saw it before,” he says. “In the production at Florida Rep, they asked me if they could rewrite something, and they did it, and it’s amazing. Pretty cool.”

He refuses to be more specific, saying he wants the audience to be surprised.

He’s thrilled Florida Rep is putting on his play, saying he’s heard of its reputation, and that their production could influence other quality regional theaters to stage it as well, “bringing it to a whole new level.”

Cariani has a few things he’s working on now, including a play about pursuing happiness. “And we’re only guaranteed the pursuit, we’re not guaranteed the happiness,” he says. “That’s what the Founding Fathers said, even.”

But Cariani is enjoying his spell of happiness.

“When it rains, it pours,” he says. “I had a job, which is always exciting, on Broadway, a Tony nomination, and it was my first time on Broadway. And to have my play premiering while all that was going on, was almost too much. And then the Red Sox won the World Series at the same time. It was a surfeit of good luck.”

“If you can get through all the bad stuff, this stuff comes along.” ■

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