

## **Richmond Hill makes play a 'Maine' event**

**Quad City Times – February 24, 2009 – by David Burke**

Ever heard a joke for the second time?

You might not laugh as loudly, but you enjoy the joke so much that you don't mind it passing through your brain again?

That's how I felt at "Almost, Maine," the newest Richmond Hill Players production, which opened this past weekend — seven months after the series of comedic vignettes first played in this area at Harrison Hilltop Theatre in Davenport.

I don't want to get into too many comparisons between the two versions because each has their strong points.

Some of the best attributes of Richmond Hill's version are Jessica Nicol and Chris White.

Their opening scene, "Her Heart," is a charming and bittersweet scene in which a hiker (Nicol) stations herself in a repairman's (White) back yard to see the Northern lights. The rapport between the two actors is natural — they're engaged and set to be married in the fall.

White returns immediately in "This Hurts," playing kind of a cross between "Rain Man" and "Forrest Gump," a man who can feel no pain, opposite Stacy Herrick. Their chemistry is pleasant enough, but it doesn't quite click.

Nicol is back in "Sad and Glad," playing a woman who encounters an old boyfriend (Alex Klimkewicz) in a bar the night before her wedding. The two are on different maturity levels as actors, however.

Herrick and Jason Platt play a couple on the verge of a breakup in "Getting it Back," leading to a mostly successful visual gag.

Platt and White open the second act with "They Fell," sort of a slapstick version of "Brokeback Mountain."

White and Nicol are back in "Where It Went," as another couple on the verge of a split, providing some more emotion.

"Story of Hope" brings back Herrick and Klimkewicz in playwright John Cariani's most obtuse piece.

"Seeing the Thing" pairs Nicol and Platt in a pleasant scene with snowmobile buddies contemplating the next level.

Platt and Herrick provide a scene that bookends the play and the first act, a sweet interaction that brings a nice close to the show.

With a show that's more attuned to a crowd in its 20s and 30s than 60s and 70s, this 2001 play is definitely out of the box for Richmond Hill. But judging from the Sunday matinee audience (who mostly fell into the latter demographic), it still works.

Director Gregg Neuleib keeps a nice, light pace with the material — some of which, down to the characters' names, is extremely surreal at times — and technical director Jennifer Kingry supplies some nice lighting effects to enhance the show.

It's a Valentine a few weeks late, but still an enjoyable break for those in any stage of a relationship.

## 'Almost Maine' finds love amid the frostbite

Dispatch-Argus – February 25, 2009 – by Julie Jensen

Although the weather is frigid in "Almost, Maine," the current Richmond Hill Players production, the passion is red hot.

The cast of five in this romantic comedy by John Cariani plays multiple roles, and director Gregg Neuleib nicely paces the fast and furious action through eight unrelated scenes plus a prologue, interlogue and epilogue.

Almost is a small town that doesn't quite exist. All the scenes take place at 9 p.m. on a cold, clear, slightly surreal Friday night in the depths of a northern Maine winter.

The set takes over one section of audience seating, including snowdrifts, benches and a laundry room. The northern lights are projected on one wall.

In the prologue, Pete, played by Jason Platt, and Ginette, played by Stacy Herrick, are watching the stars and cozying up to each other, and that's how the play will end, too.

The first scene features Glory, a hiker played by Jessica Nicol, and East, a repairman played by Chris White. She has pitched a tent on his property and tells him she has come to apologize to her dead husband because she killed him. The two end up embracing, and that's just the start of something big.

In "This Hurts," Stacy Herrick strikes up a conversation with Steve (Chris White), a man who can feel no pain. An accident takes them both down a path.

"Sad and Glad" is the story of Jimmy, a heating-and-cooling guy played Alex Klimkewicz, who is crushed to learn that his girl, Sandrine (Jessica Nicol), is marrying somewhere else.

"Getting It Back" is a longtime couple, Gayle and Lendall, played by Stacy Herrick and Jason Platt, giving back to each other all the love they have given.

In "They Fell," Randy and Chad, played by Chris White and Jason Platt, have had so many unfortunate experiences with women, they end up falling for someone in a whole new way—literally, repeatedly and hard.

"Where it Went" is a tale of a less-than-ideal marriage between Phil (Chris White) and Marci (Jessica Nicol).

In "Story of Hope" Stacy Herrick is Hope, who has traveled a great distance to give a belated answer to a marriage proposal and doesn't recognize her suitor, played by Alex Klimkewicz, when she sees him. This one has an ironic ending.

The final scene is "Seeing the Thing" with Rhonda, played by Jessica Nicol, and Dave, played by Jason Platt. He gives her a painting, but she can't make out what it is supposed to be. When he shows her, there's more revealed than just image in the painting.

## Northern Plights

River Cities Reader – February 23, 2009 – by Mike Schulz

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 unflinching 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.

## Jason Platt enjoys the theater of the mind

Dispatch-Argus – February 12, 2009 – by Claudia Loucks

GENESE0 -- Jason Platt first felt the thrill of the stage in high school, and he admits chasing that thrill for the last 19 years.

He is cast in the Richmond Hill Players' upcoming production of "Almost, Maine," which opens Feb. 19 in The Barn Theater, atop Richmond Hill Park in Geneseo.

The Moline resident said he enjoys performing in all kinds of theater -- comedy, drama and musicals. He lived in Taylor Ridge until he was 13, and as an only child had an active imagination and loved playing outdoors.

His love for "the lights" began in high school in Durham, N.C. "When I did my first show in high school, we were in regional competition and performing in front of a house full of strangers and peers," he said.

"When our cast fell into a pinwheel spin near the end, the audience actually cheered. ... I had a shiver roll through my body, and it was amazing."

He has chased that "thrill" for 19 years, "but it's never come back like that. I've only felt it when seeing extraordinary talent from other actors, whether it's sitting in the audience watching the show, or being on stage with them."

He said that high-school play was the one and only time he felt peer pressure. "A friend of mine urged me to audition for the regional-competition show.

"I auditioned with the only song I recognized in the buffet of sheet music, and that was 'Mack the Knife,'" he said -- and the only version he was familiar with was from the 1986 McDonald's commercial that parodied the song as "Mac Tonight."

"I was cast, and as they say, the rest is history. ... Well, history to me, even though it isn't written in any major periodical or anything.

"I love telling stories," he said. "I love to pretend. I can still see the child within myself, and theater lets that child within me come out and play.

His last four shows have been either musicals or dramas. "It seemed like a nice idea to go back to something a bit more lighthearted," he said. "Not to say this show doesn't have its deep moments -- it does -- but it's a feel-good show. If anyone leaves feeling like the world is about to end, there's something just plain wrong."

He had never heard of "Almost, Maine," he auditioned after hearing fellow cast members share how much they liked the show.

"I don't particularly like to do theater just to perform," he said. "I like to tell a good story, and if the story isn't good or doesn't spark my interest, I won't do it. But the whole idea of playing multiple characters within the show seemed to me very fun and challenging, much like the show 'Greater Tuna.' Without the challenge, there is no fun."

He became involved with Richmond Hill in 2007 when a cast member had to drop out of "Death Takes a Holiday" for a military deployment. "Director Tom Morrow did not know me and I did not know him, but he needed help, so I took on the role of Eric with less than two weeks before the show opened," Mr. Platt said.

He also has appeared in Richmond Hill's "Moonlight and Magnolias" in 2008, and in "Misery" and "Angels in America" at the Green Room; "Anything Goes" and "Evita" with Music Guild; "The Winning Streak" at New Ground; "Noises Off" with Ghostlight; "Of Mice and Men" at the Savannah Theater in Savannah, Ga., and "Guys and Dolls" and "Into the Woods" at City Lights Theater, Savannah.

Mr. Platt graduated from Savannah College of Art and Design, where he majored in illustration. He is an illustrator and graphic designer for LinguiSystems. "We produce books for children with special needs," he said. "It's a great job."

When he isn't working or in play rehearsals, he said, his young son, Wyeth Platt, "keeps me young, and yet, oh so tired."

He said one reason he chose the visual arts as a career instead of the performing arts was because he thought it would be easier to find work. "Little did my naive brain think that the two careers are pretty similar when landing a 'big break'."