

A STUDY GUIDE

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I. THE AUTHOR. Born and raised in Presque Isle, Maine, John Cariani graduated from Amherst College in 1991. He did his first work in theater in the public schools of Presque Isle; sang in the chorus of a community theater production of *Fiddler on the Roof* while working a day job as a landscaper in Aroostook County; played clarinet for the Amherst College production of *Sweeny Todd*; and premiered his first play, *Almost, Maine*, at Portland Stage Company. In other words, when he writes about life in New England, he comes at his subject with an insider's knowledge.

Cariani majored in History at Amherst, but the lure of the theater overpowered his original plans for a teaching career. Following graduation, he spent three years as an acting intern at StageWest in Springfield, Massachusetts. His next move took him to New York, where he snagged various roles in theater and television, notably several appearances on the crime series, *Law and Order*.

His major break as an actor came in 2004, when he was cast in the role of Motel in a Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*. This performance earned him a Tony nomination and won him the 2004 Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical. (The Outer Critics Circle is made up of reviewers who write for publications outside New York City.)

It was also in 2004 that *Almost, Maine* had its premiere production in Portland, a stroke of good fortune that turned into a nerve-racking ordeal. Cariani's dual commitments as actor and playwright required him to shuttle back and forth between Broadway and Forest Avenue, an experience that he remembers with mixed feelings. As he told interviewer T.J. Fitzgerald in *Broadway World.com*, "[M]y focus was pretty split for a while and I'm not very good at multi-tasking, so I was pretty tired, there, for a few weeks. And that's my biggest memory of 2004—being totally beat." Two years later, in January, 2006, the play moved to New York where it opened Off-Broadway to warmly welcoming reviews, with the *New York Times* noting "its whimsical approach to the joys and perils of romance."

Cariani's second play, *Cul de Sac*, opened five months later, in May of 2006, also Off-Broadway. A darker work than *Almost, Maine*, it was described by *The Times* as "charming" and "witty," but also, "macabre."

In *Almost, Maine* Cariani writes about a slice of American life rarely glimpsed on the New York stage: the people of small-town, far-northern New England, whose lives are shaped by a harsh but beautiful environment.

Shaped, but not warped. Many American dramatists have looked at small-town or rural life and seen mostly violence and depravity. In *Desire under the Elms*, Eugene O'Neill shows us a New England farm family devastated by incest and murder. Tennessee Williams paints a sardonic portrait of arson and adultery at a Mississippi cotton gin in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*. And in *Buried Child* and *The Curse of the Starving Class* Sam Shepard depicts rural families in Illinois and California blasted by infanticide, alcoholism, and greed. North, south, east, and west, rural America has appeared to many of its most important playwrights as a gallery of empty dreams and twisted passions. Cariani is having none of this. Though far from perfect, the inhabitants of *Almost, Maine* are fundamentally decent souls, seeking human connection amid the lonely vastness of the Pinetree State. As the playwright told *Broadway World.com*, "*Almost, Maine* was written for northern Maine and for the people who are from there. And—I think most of the people up there are surprised by that. And relieved that I didn't make fun of them (or the town) in my play!"

On the contrary, the play confirms Cariani's description of Presque Isle: "The sky is big. Lots of farms. Geat people. Great, great, killer winters. Lots of space. And lots to do. Great schools. Great churches." The dramatist sums up his view of the characters in his play in a note he provides for actors performing the work: "And finally—and most important—the people of *Almost, Maine* are honest and true. They are not cynical. They are smart. They wonder about things."

II. THE SETTING. The play is set in various locations in the town of Almost, Maine—a place that doesn't exist on any map of the state. It's a geographic fiction, a composite made up of the kind of people and places the playwright experienced while he was growing up in Presque Isle. But that doesn't stop the author from creating a very specific location for his non-existent community. Says one of the characters in the first of the play's eight vignettes,

You're in unorganized territory. Township 13, Range 7. It's not gonna be on your map, cause it's not an actual town, technically. . . See, to be a town, you gotta get organized. And we never got around to getting organized, so. . . we're just Almost.

This non-existent little town joins an impressive list of imaginary communities invented by American dramatists to provide appropriate locations for the actions and ideas they want to explore. The Brigadoon of Lerner and Loewe is isolated from time and protected from the anguish of change and loss. In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder conjures up Grover's Corners, the site of an archetypal American chronicle of life, death, and endurance. Meanwhile, Lanford Wilson takes us to Eldritch, a dying speck on the map of the Midwest poisoned by the murderous effect of ingrained hatreds.

And well before these American inventions, European writers were fabricating their own imaginary locations for actions and ideas: St. Thomas More gives us Utopia, a country whose name in Greek means literally "nowhere"—the only place we'll find perfection in

this world. Then there's the kingdom of Serendip, the Persian name for Sri Lanka, which is taken up by 18th century playwrights to designate a place of perpetually happy accidents. And, of course, there's the un-named island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, thought by many to be modeled on Bermuda, then an impossibly faraway and exotic landscape where wonders might well happen.

Like these older imaginary locations, Cariani's make-believe community exists to serve as a kind of magnifying glass for the author's vision. Just as a glass captures and concentrates the diffuse rays of the sun, so these communities allow the author to focus his impressions of real life on a single spot and start a dramatic fire.

In Cariani's play, the emotional spark is provided by the "almost-ness" of *Almost, Maine*. My dictionary defines "almost" as, "Slightly short of; not quite; nearly." Like the old Gillette Blue Blade, that definition is double-edged. On the one hand, "not quite;" on the other, "nearly."

On the "not quite" edge, we feel the pang of inadequacy inflicted on us by that little word. From this perspective, it means that the end was in sight, but we never quite made it, and so we nurse an inconsolable regret, made all the worse because we *almost* got there.

But on the "nearly" edge, the word paints a very different emotional picture. Seen from this angle, "almost" is full of promise: Another nail, and the job is done. And the nail is in my hand. Another mile, and we're there. And the tank is full of gas.

So the word "almost" can conjure terrible sadness, or brimming hope; the smell of a musty attic, or the aroma of an apple pie in the oven.

One of *Almost, Maine's* eight vignettes captures exactly this emotional duality. It's called "Sad and Glad," and it's about a guy, Jimmy, who runs into an old girlfriend at a bar on the night before her wedding to another guy, Martin. That's the sad part—for Jimmy, anyway. But then he discovers that the waitress is named Villian, a word he had tattooed on his arm by mistake—instead of "Villain"—and so, maybe, Fate is playing matchmaker between the jilted Jimmy and the lonely Villian. And suddenly the face of "Almost" turns from sad to glad.

Because all of us are constantly walking the boundary between the two senses of "almost"—between hope and regret—it makes perfect sense for *Almost, Maine* to be an imaginary spot on a blank northern patch of the map of New England. *Almost, Maine* is nowhere in particular because *Almost, Maine* is everywhere.

But, paradoxically, Cariani fills this everywhere/nowhere place with an array of specific people and institutions as solid and everyday as a pickup truck. There's the Moose Paddy Bar, and there's Jimmy's cooling and heating business, which he just took over from his father. And there's a fellow named East who works for Jimmy sometimes as a repairman, and who used to be a farmer, but who definitely isn't a lobsterman, because the ocean's a couple of hundred miles away. And there's a woman named Marvalyn whose boyfriend, Eric, doesn't want her spending so much time down in the laundry room. And there are

two regular guys named Randy and Chad who are pretty stunned to discover they like each other a whole lot more than they thought. And there's a sort of a couple named Dave and Rhonda whose friends—including Jimmy and East and Marvalyn and Eric and Randy and Chad—think that Rhonda is a little hung up when it comes to sex. This nowhere little town, it turns out, is actually thick with hopes and dreams; fulfillment and despair.

As Shakespeare writes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the poet's calling is to be a hardheaded visionary, to supply the bodiless products of his imagination with, "A local habitation and a name." One of those names is *Almost, Maine*.

III. THE PLOT. We tend to think of "plot" as being synonymous with "story." But while plots are often stories, there's no law that says they have to be. And this play is a prime illustration of that non-law.

A "story" is a sequence of events, a train of actions linked causally with one another. As the English novelist E.M. Forster tells us, if I say, "The King died; then the Queen died," I am simply giving you a chronicle. But if I say, "The King died, and the Queen died of grief," then I am telling you a story, relating a chain of events which flow from one another.

We are accustomed to having a play tell us a single long story, sometimes with substories that are related to the main narrative. Last season at The Public Theater we saw *The Nerd*, which tells the story of an elaborate ruse by means of which a diffident young architect learns to be bold and self-assertive. We saw *The Old Settler*, which tells the story of a middle aged woman who engages in a hopeless romance with a much younger man. Each of these plays focuses on a protagonist who pursues a consistent objective throughout the course of the action, beginning at a certain point, continuing through various obstacles the middle, and reaching an outcome at the end.

Almost, Maine doesn't work like that. Instead, as we have noted above, it is composed of eight vignettes, each no more than fifteen minutes, plus a prologue, an "interlogue," and an epilogue—which are even briefer than the vignettes.

Seven of the vignettes feature two characters, none of whom ever appears again in any of the other scenes. One vignette has three characters, but we never see any of them again either. The same two characters do appear in the prologue and epilogue, and one of them shows up in the interlogue—but neither is in any of the vignettes. Thus, in eleven short scenes we are introduced to nineteen characters, with each of whom we spend only a few minutes.

The reason we never see the same character appearing more than once is that all these vignettes are taking place at the same time in our small town: "Everything takes place at nine o'clock on a Friday night in the middle of winter."

So this is not the kind of continuous story with a complex train of incidents and extensively developed characters that we most often encounter in the theater. Instead, what holds *Almost, Maine* together—apart from the fact that all the action takes place in the same small town at the same moment—is the fact that each of these short scenes is about the hazards we encounter in the pursuit of love. What gives the plot its unity, in other words, is the structural principle of theme and variations. Every scene is about love, but every scene looks at a different aspect of this focal subject.

In the Prologue, for instance, Ginette and Pete declare for the first time that they love each other, an event that would seem un-problematically wonderful. Except that it's Ginette who says it first, and Pete takes just a bit too long to pick up his cue and respond in kind. So what should be a wonderful moment stretches into a long interval of discomfort for poor Ginette.

As if that weren't bad enough, Pete then begins an extensive riff about how, even though they're sitting right next to each other, they're really not as close as possible (Ginette's preferred view of the situation), but instead they are really as far from one another as they can be. "[I]f you think about it technically," he explains in a geek-squad sort of way, "If you're assuming the world is round, like a ball, (*gathering snow to make a snow ball for use as a visual*) the farthest away you can be from somebody is if you're sitting right next to them. See, if I'm here (*points out a place on the snowball that represents him . . .*), and you're here (*points out a place . . . that represents her, and it's right next to him . . .*), then (*Pete now shows that if you go around the world the other way—all the way . . .—that he and Ginette are actually as far away from each other as they can possibly be.*) . . . that's far. . .

Not surprisingly, Ginette is less than overwhelmed by this sophomoric paradox, and feeling that the romantic aura of the moment has been snuffed out by Pete, she stands and begins slowly moving away from him, a retreat she continues all the way through Pete's increasingly desperate attempt to talk his way out of the mess he's made of the evening.

Pete tries to rescue the situation with another paradox. By moving away from him, he tells her—building on his original insight—"you're closer. . . . and closer. . . . and closer." By which time Ginette has disappeared, exiting stage left and leaving Pete to savor his geographical koan all by himself.

What happens in this brief scene anticipates most of what is to follow in the next eight vignettes.

We meet two nice people who have come to a crucial moment in the drama of love. But, because love is so tricky, it's essential that everybody watch his step. One move can be decisive, for better or worse.

The slightest hesitation, or miscue, or fumbled opportunity can create a world of loss and hurt. But an opportunity deftly seized, a word well-spoken, a healing gesture can bring a player safely home to love's end-zone.

In the Prologue, it looks like Pete has stumbled onto the loser's side of the field. Seated under a scintillating winter sky, next to a sweet girl who loves him, he totally squanders his opportunity for romantic success. Instead, by misplaying the scene, he's left alone on stage, under a winter sky that now seems cold and forbidding. Pete was almost there. But not quite.

The remaining scenes play variations on this pattern.

For example, in "Her Heart" a woman travels to Maine to view the soul of her estranged husband in the northern lights, which she believes are actually the torches of the newly dead who are finding their way to heaven. By seeing the lights, she will have the chance to say the goodbye that remained unspoken while her husband was alive.

With her, in a brown paper bag, she carries the shattered pieces of her heart, broken when her husband abandoned her. While searching for the lights, she meets Earl, the repairman, who falls in love with her on the spot. She tells Earl her story, they see the northern lights, she bids her dead husband farewell. And Earl repairs her broken heart. If she had't come to Maine, she wouldn't have met Earl, and her heart would remain broken. So we have another almost tale—about love almost missed.

In other vignettes, couples try to break up and fail; or they discover, sadly, that they no longer love each other; or they realize, against all odds, that they do. One way or another, at nine o'clock on this particular winter Friday in Almost, Maine, the drama of love is being played out in its many variations.

IV THE CHARACTERS. Rather than attempting to discuss each of the nineteen characters in this play, we can make some general observations about the ways the people of *Almost, Maine* respond to the complications of love.

A number of the characters have strong physical reactions, especially to love's loss. In "Sad and Glad" Jimmy gets himself tattooed when Sandrine leaves him, intending to label himself "Villain" for his failure to hold on to her. By accident it comes out "Villian," and becomes the key that opens the door to his next amorous encounter. In "Her Heart," Glory's heart is literally broken because of her husband's betrayal, while in "They Fell," Randy and Chad are actually knocked to the ground when they discover their hidden feelings for each other. In "The Story of Hope," Daniel is physically transformed after Hope leaves him, becoming shrunken and bald—so different from his former self that Hope no longer recognizes him when she returns.

In one vignette, though, the physical change happens with love's arrival, not with its loss. In "This Hurts," Steve describes himself as suffering from "congenital analgesia"—a biological inability to feel pain. Since pain serves to warn us when we are harming our bodies, he must make a list of things that hurt so as to keep clear of danger. He explains all this to Marvalyn, whose jealous boyfriend Eric doesn't want her spending too much time out of his sight. Charmed by Steve as they do their laundry together, she impulsively kisses him, and we know that love is afoot. Flustered by her action,

Marvalyn grabs her ironing board and attempts flee, but in the process she whacks Steve in the head—and for the first time in his life he says, Ouch! With love comes pain, and Steve, it turns out, is a kind of Sleeping Beauty, roused to feeling by Marvalyn's kiss. Whatever the nature of their changes, physical or psychological, all these characters share one common quality: no one we meet on stage ever does an act that is intentionally hurtful or cruel. If someone causes another pain, it is because of thoughtlessness or inadvertency.

This is true, even in the case of Hope, whose failure to answer Daniel's proposal of marriage has left him a shrunken man. As she explains, Daniel proposed on the night before she was to depart for college in pursuit of her dreams. "I was leaving in the morning. . . What was I supposed to do?" So she has youth and confusion as exculpating factors, and even so she returns full of remorse and love. She has broken his heart, but not out of cruelty or indifference.

Since much drama is based on the conflict created by human evil, we might expect such decent characters to create a theatrically boring world. But it is precisely by showing the ways that fundamentally good people can cause themselves pain or blunder into folly that *Almost, Maine* creates its distinctive energy. As the author says about his characters, "the people of *Almost, Maine* are honest and true. They are not cynical. They are smart. They wonder about things." And yet, they still make trouble for themselves.

V. THEMES. Every scene in the play is about gaining or losing love, about discovering love where it is least expected, and not finding it where it had always been.

A woman travels to Maine to say goodbye to her dead husband, and meets the repairman of her heart. A long-married couple seeks to escape the hectic routines of their life by ice skating on a winter night, and they discover that the joy is gone from their relationship; a woman returns to town to accept a marriage proposal she left unanswered years before, and discovers that the man is now married to somebody else; someone gets whacked by an ironing board and realizes that feeling, and possibly love, have entered his life. Love, the play is telling us, is something that *happens*, a dynamic process, like the movement of the heavens themselves. And as with the heavens, sometimes it's dawn, and sometimes it's dusk.

This point is made clear in the Epilogue, which is a mirror image of the Prologue. Pete is looking off stage in the direction from which Ginette left at the beginning of the play. But Ginette enters from the opposite side. Sensing her presence, Pete turns to her and holds up his snowball as if to ask her whether she has been all the way around the earth. "*And she has! . . . and she's back—and she's 'close' again. . . . They sit on the bench together, and resume looking at the stars.*") For Paul and Ginette, the sun both sets and rises again on the possibility of love, just as it sets and rises for the other characters we meet in the play.

Almost, Maine also makes extensive use of surrealism, a non-realistic approach to theatrical representation in which metaphors—or figures of speech—become literally present on stage.

For instance, in realistic plays we are accustomed to hearing characters say something like, “My heart is broken,” But in *Almost, Maine* Gloria actually carries the pieces of her broken heart in a bag. The figure of speech becomes concrete.

Similarly, we’re not surprised if a character in a realistic play says, “I’m going to take back all the love I’ve given you,” as if love were a physical object like money or clothing. But we are shocked when, in “Getting It Back,” the characters carry sacks of love around, actually exchanging it like a tangible commodity.

These moments of surrealism are there, it seems, to tell us something about love’s extraordinary nature. Not only is love always coming and going, arriving unexpectedly and vanishing without warning. But when we do fully encounter it, when we really take it in, its presence hits us as a kind of miracle, something wholly out of the ordinary. We can take love for granted, and stow it away in life’s pantry together with all the rest of the everyday bottles and cans. But if we take the trouble to look at it closely, it stuns us with its wonder in the same way these surreal moments on stage strike us with their poetic force.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does the playwright make up an imaginary town? Why not just set the play in his hometown of Presque Isle?
2. Why does Pete tell Ginette that they are as far away from one another as they can possibly be when in fact they’re sitting right next to one another? What does he mean by that? And what is his motive for saying it just then?
3. Why do you think East falls in love with Glory so immediately?
4. Why do you think Sandrine stopped seeing Jimmy?
5. Why does Marvalyn feel so attracted to Steve? What do you think her boyfriend, Eric, is like?
6. Why are Chad and Randy literally knocked off their feet by their feelings?
7. What do you think happens next with Phil and Marci? What does it mean when her shoe drops from the sky?
8. Is the title “Story of Hope” ironic? If so why? What does “irony” mean?
9. Why do all the scenes in the play take place on a Friday night?
10. Why is the town called “Almost?”