

'Maine' players in the mood for love

Posted by Bill Iddings | Chronicle correspondent August 06, 2009 03:46AM

WHITEHALL -- No one can fault "Almost, Maine" for lack of heart. Playwright John Cariani's mystical romantic comedy's got heart everywhere you look. One woman comes heart in hand, her broken ticker wrapped in a paper bag.

IF YOU GO

- What: "Almost, Maine," presented by the Howmet Summer Theatre Festival.
- When: Final performance 7:30 p.m. today.
- Where: Howmet Playhouse, 304 S. Mears, in Whitehall.
- Tickets: \$14 for adults, \$10 for students. Box office opens at 5:30 p.m. Call (231) 894-2540.

On a succession of freaky Fridays -- starry nights that would make van Gogh cut off the other ear -- the residents of a fictional New England burg, where moving south means to Vermont, are fools in the mood for love.

Right time (now), right place (Howmet Playhouse). The magic of the Howmet Summer Theatre's Festival's "Almost, Maine" embraces patrons -- and vice versa -- at first sight.

Jeremy Meier captures Cariani's sense of magical lyricism, directing a quartet of imported professionals gleaned from the Howmet players: Michael Bradley, Jeff Sanders, Hayley Clark and Jessica Rothert.

They play a collection of around 20 characters in the second of Howmet's 2009 offerings to unfold as a sequence of vignettes. The first was the season-opening "All in the Timing."

Love -- the snowball that any second could smack you right in the kisser -- is what everybody's after. Bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue, "Almost, Maine" covers eight scenes divided evenly into two acts spread over two hours as a special effect of the northern lights trips libido switches.

Bundled against the elements, the men and women of "Almost, Maine" come off as nice enough folks, if a bit odd.

(Unlike the northern overexposure of Jeff Daniels' "Escanaba in Da Moonlight," they're not yokels vying for the crown of village idiot.)

There's a fella (Sanders) who can't feel pain, a lapsed lover (Bradley) with a tattoo proving that some misspellings are prophetic, and a woman (Rothert) who takes too long to give the biggest answer of her life.

By their nature, sketches are sketchy. Some flop, one literally (less would be more).

"Almost, Maine" touches the loneliness of being together. The ending's a snow job in the finest sense, even in August.

An actor and freelance writer, Bill Iddings is The Chronicle's former film critic, and author of the online blog Extra Iddings.

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