

## LAST GAS at The Public Theatre

by Steve Feeney  
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It has been six years since Maine native John Cariani's "Last Gas" premiered in Portland. He has talked about working on the play since but, if memory serves, he's made no essential changes from the earlier production to the one now underway (through October 23) at The Public Theatre in Lewiston. If this one feels just a little edgier, that probably has more to do with the performances.

This new incarnation again pays a visit to a lonely gas station/convenience store in northern Maine. There, three generations of male members of the Paradis family and their friends and lovers seek fulfillment.

Nat Paradis, on the eve of his 41st birthday, tries to avoid his periodic depression from returning. He wants to be a good father to his teenage son Troy but hangs his paternal hat, literally and figuratively, on fandom for the Red Sox (the son defiantly wears a Yankees cap) and little else. His relationships to Troy's mom Cherry Tracy and an earlier love interest named Lurene have failed, though second chances loom.

Nat's father Dwight is an aging playboy whose very specific taste for younger Canadian women is one of the running jokes in the show. He also cares enough to see an opening for his son when Lurene returns to town.

Nat's Buddy Guy has other plans. He's secured the two of them Red Sox tickets for the next day's game and, fearing his developing relationship with Nat is in jeopardy, is not happy with his friend's excitement about the return of his old flame.

The female characters in this show try hard but don't fare particularly well in this rural world depicted by the author. Both women, through laughter and tears, slowly learn they are barking up the wrong tree when it comes to the painfully ambivalent Nat.

If this all sounds a touch downbeat, the Janet Mitchko directed show is also fueled by a good measure of lively comedy. In addition to the aforementioned passions of grandpa, there are gags about whoopee pies, balky pickups and civil citations that earned healthy laughs during the Sunday matinee under review. There was also some particularly well-crafted and performed parallel and overlapping dialogue between Lurene on the phone and Nat and Dwight in the store. And, an interlude of spirited country dancing got several characters temporarily out of their shells and the audience cheering.

The professional cast is led by Augustus Kelley as Nat, Ben Loving as Guy, Kurt Zischke as Dwight, Katharine McLeod as Cherry Tracy, Mary Mossberg as Lurene and Brandon Tyler Harris as Troy. By the close, each had effectively stamped their role with touches of individual style.

The two level set by Jennifer B. Madigan, lit by Jim Alexander, evokes the public and private realm of rural, working class life, as do the costumes by Kathleen P. Brown.

This tough, tender and entertaining production will likely have special appeal to those who have undergone, or have at least contemplated, a restart in their own lives.



*Mary Mossberg and Augustus Kelley star as Lurene Legasse Soloway and Nat Paradis in "Last Gas." Ben Loving, in the background, plays Guy Gagnon.*