

In 'Last Gas,' one more chance for happiness

Written by John Cariani, the play at the Public Theatre in Lewiston is a touching comedy that draws humor from small-town Maine characters.

by April Boyle
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Ever seen one of those side-effect-laden drug commercials that claim to restore happiness and thought, "Is that drug right for me?" To the audience's amusement, the main character in John Cariani's play, "Last Gas," finds out the hard way that what's right for some people may not be right for all.

The play, which opened the Public Theatre's 26th season Friday, is set in remote northern Maine at Paradis' Last Convenient Store – the last chance for gas, food and a phone before entering the wilds outside Canada.

It's a quaint general store, recreated with vivid detail by set designer Jennifer B. Madigan.

Nat Paradis, played with touching humor by Augustus Kelley, runs the store with his randy father Dwight, played by Kurt Zischke. The two share a dated apartment on the second floor.

On the eve of his 41st birthday, Nat finds himself desperately seeking happiness. He is willing to try anything, including a drug called "Elatra." Nat's best friend, Guy Gagnon (Ben Loving) offers to take him to Boston for a Red Sox vs. Yankees game, but the arrival in town of his former girlfriend, Lurene Legasse Soloway (Mary Mossberg), leaves Nat further confused, afraid he'll miss out on his last chance.

Raised in Presque Isle, John Cariani is perhaps best known for his widely produced play, "Almost, Maine," a collection of quirky vignettes about love and life in northern Maine. "Last Gas" lacks the quirkiness of "Almost, Maine," at times feeling a bit long and drawn out.

That's not to say that the play isn't witty or filled with colorful characters. Along with Nat, Dwight and Guy, the small town includes Nat's teenage son, Troy (Brandon Tyler Harris) and Troy's mother, Cherry-Tracy Pulsifer (Katharine McLeod). Lurene moved to New York but has returned to the County for her mother's committal ceremony.

Cariani has a knack for creating characters that poke fun at how Mainers are perceived. Cherry-Tracy stands out as the stereotypical forest ranger, with a penchant for writing citations. McLeod nicely plays up the character's foibles, eliciting laughs with her character's in-your-face personality.

Loving's deadpan delivery as Guy adds to the laughs, as does Zischke's swaggering portrayal of Dwight.

Cariani also has fun weaving in the ongoing rivalry between Red Sox and Yankees fans, including having Nat use the Sox as an amusing excuse to Lurene as to why he is having trouble getting past first base with her.

"Last Gas" is a touching comedy with a thought-provoking twist that reminds audiences about the importance of being true to oneself. Otherwise, the last stop may yield little more than a tank of unhappiness and unfulfilled desires.



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