

'Last Gas' enjoyable from beginning to end

By Dave Sargent | Encore | October 20, 2016

LEWISTON -- "Last Gas" packs a lot of truth about life in the Pine Tree State into this comedy by Maine playwright John Cariani now playing at The Public Theatre.

It has just the right mix of everyday situations that often take unexpected and life-changing twists. Cariani's characters in this play are good people dealing with the curve balls that life is always throwing their way.

Janet Mitchko, TPT's Co-Artistic director, successfully guides this all-new cast through a day and a night when family and friends must face some difficult realities

Augustus Kelley plays Nat Paradis who runs "Paradis' Last Convenient Store" in remote northern Maine. It's a small general store with the usual coolers for soda and beer, pizza-by-the-slice, coffee, cigarettes and basic groceries, and right up front on the counter there's donuts and whoopee pies.

Nat is watching his beloved Boston Red Sox on TV. It's the evening before his 41st birthday and the audience soon meets his teenage son, Troy, as well as the boy's mother, Cherry-Tracy who is a forest ranger. Guy, Nat's long-time friend, is also hanging around the store. It's learned that Nat's old flame, Lurene, will be back in town briefly from New York City, and Nat's father, Dwight, figures the romance might rekindle, with the right encouragement.

Discussions reveal that Nat suffered from depression, and he's fighting "to get back to happy." Dwight insists that taking Lurene to the "adult swing dance" at the Rec Center will get the couple back on track.

This diverse assortment of characters somehow fits together very well. They all care very much for each other, but a variety of situations throw varying viewpoints on their concerns for Nat. Kelley's portrayal of Nat lends sincere weight to his fears about upsetting the status quo. He's troubled and uncertain about the lack of direction in his life.

Ben Loving is excellent as Guy. He brings lots of compassion and low-key humor to the role of Nat's friend. When he buys birthday-gift tickets to a Red Sox and Yankees game for the coming day in Boston, Nat's reunion with Lurene is in jeopardy.

Mary Mossberg plays Lurene, the small-town girl who headed off to the big city. Everyone saw Nat and Lurene as the perfect couple, but it didn't turn out that way.

Brandon Tyler Harris plays Troy, Nat's "love child" with Cherry-Tracy. He is the typical teen who delights in antagonizing his dad at every turn, but he has a keen perception of his father's problems.

As Cherry-Tracy, Kathleen McLeod has most of the comic moments in the play. She's an over-conscientious law enforcement officer who reaches for her ticket book at the slightest and most innocuous hint of "illicit activity." McLeod plays a role that could shift into the absurd, but she manages to keep the ticketing of all the perceived offenders as a humorous twist of personality that never goes too far.

Kurt Zischke plays Nat's father, Dwight." He thinks a reunion with Lurene could be Nat's last chance for "happy." Zischke plays Dwight with a "hip" personality that Nat can't relate to.

All of these actors in debut roles at TPT deliver noteworthy performances. They all come to this production with impressive theatrical credentials.

Cariani's play could have been filled with Maine caricatures, but his picture of small-town Maine and its people rings true. He has spent time in recent weeks with the actors, with TPT's Executive/Artistic Director Christopher Schario and with the show's director, Janet Mitcho. There are no phony Maine accents in this play. The situations fit the circumstances. There's the encounter between Nat's pickup and a moose, and there's some joking about Guy's truck ... "It goes. It just has some starter issues."

"Last Gas" is a totally enjoyable production from beginning to end.

The set by Jennifer B. Madigan is a familiar small Maine store. Madigan also makes imaginative use of space for parking lot where some scenes take place. Costumes by Kathleen B. Brown include the expected and appropriate plaid shirts and denim jeans.

Cariani, the playwright, grew up in Presque Isle and he is the author of the very successful play, "Almost, Maine.



Lurene (Mary Mossberg), Nat Paradis (Augustus Kelley) Dwight Paradis (Kurt Zischke) and Guy (Ben Loving) in a scene from "Last Gas".