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ISN'T THAT...

# Broadway's Maine Man

John Cariani's having a ball with Brian d'Arcy James (right) in the runaway hit new musical, *Something Rotten!*

Something is refreshingly rotten in New York this summer. And Presque Isle's **John Cariani** is at the heart of it.

INTERVIEW BY COLIN W. SARGENT

**L**iving proof you can get there from here: John Cariani is the toast of Broadway, starring in the post-Shakespearean musical satire *Something Rotten!*

Rare is the playwright who can wow crowds from both sides of the curtain. Ida Lupino and Sam Shepard come to mind, and Bruce Norris, who won the Pulitzer for *Clybourne Park* after acting in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*. Shakespeare, Nobel laureate Harold Pinter, and Noel Coward started as actors. Now Cariani—the clamdigger from Presque Isle—has a real, live shot at ascending into a most exciting sphere.

The stage, too, was Cariani's launching pad. In 1999, he delighted audiences in Off-Broadway's *It's My Party and I'll Die If I*

*Want To*, with F. Murray Abraham. In 2002, he connected with small-screen viewers as forensic scientist Julian Beck in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, a role he played into 2007. In 2002, he was nominated for a Tony for his role as Motel the Tailor in the Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof* starring Alfred Molina. In 2004, his play *Almost, Maine* premiered at Portland Stage to great acclaim, but that was just the beginning. In 2014, the *Washington Post* reported *Almost, Maine* had surpassed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the most-produced high school play in North America; it's now been translated into 20 languages. Cariani's subsequent hit plays are *Last Gas* and *Love/Sick*.

Just how much impact does he have right now? As the Tony season heated up, there

was Cariani performing with fellow *Something Rotten!* cast members for Jimmy Fallon and three million viewers on *The Tonight Show*. Barely weeks before, when *Something Rotten!* debuted, who was front page, center stage in *The International New York Times* but *Almost, Maine's* almost perfect John Cariani. We caught up with the playwright/star in Manhattan between the acts.

**What line or scene in *Something Rotten!* do you wish you'd written?**

The musical is set in 1595...and it tells the story of theater producer/writer/actor Nick Bottom (Brian d'Arcy James) and his little brother, writer Nigel (me). Nick and Nigel need a hit. Meanwhile, Nick's rival, William Shakespeare, is enjoying huge success.



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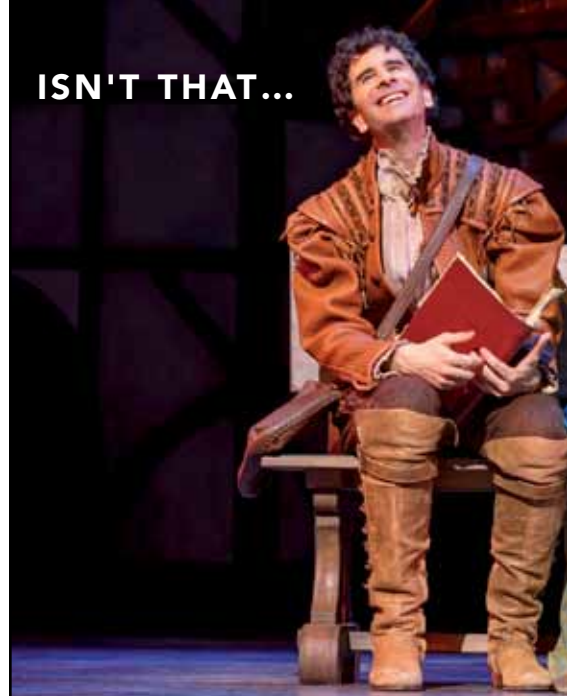
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ISN'T THAT...



He's the rising star of the Elizabethan theater. And Nick hates him. He sings the second song of the show, called "God I Hate Shakespeare." And I love it. Because you can hear the audience howling in ashamed agree-

"...Nigel, played with rather charming nerdiness by Mr. Cariani..."

—The New York Times

ment with his sentiment!

The opening lyrics are:

Nick: *God I hate Shakespeare. His plays are wordy, but oh, no, the great Shakespeare. That little turd! He has no sense about the audience, he makes them feel so dumb. The bastard doesn't care that my poor ass is getting numb.*

Troupe: *How can you say that? How can you say that?*

Nick: *It's easy I can say it 'cause it's absolutely true.*

Troupe: *Don't be a penis, the man is a genius!*

Nick: *His genius is he's fooling all of you!*

I also love this exchange between Nick and Nigel. We're trying to come up with a new idea for a show, and I (Nigel) beg Nick to write something truthful—something from the heart.

Nigel: *I say we should write our life story, two orphan brothers their father lost at sea, whose mother died of a broken heart and how you carried me, your sickly little brother on your back, all the way from Cornwall!*

"John Cariani is a long overdue overnight sensation here."

—Showbiz411





Nick: No!

Nigel: Why not? I say we should write something that's emotionally true, something from the heart.

Nick: No! Was the Bible written from the heart?

Nigel: Well I would hope so!

How do you respond as 1) an actor and 2) a playwright, to *Something Rotten*?

I don't audition for a lot of musicals. Mostly because many-most-new musicals suffer from book troubles. The book of a musical is the spoken part—the story part. The part that links the songs. And new musicals often suffer from...unclearly told stories.

When I first read *Something Rotten!* I knew I wanted to be a part of it—as an actor—because it has such a strong book, even in its early incarnations.

As a playwright...well, I learned a ton from our book writers, Karey Kirkpatrick (he's written and directed several movies, most notably the animated feature *Chick-*

"Of course with an ensemble this good, the carrying is shared: Cariani squirms adorably..."

—*Time Out New York*

*en Run*) and John O'Farrell (a best-selling British humorist). They are smart, generous guys. *Something Rotten!* is a comedy. It is an entertainment. And Karey and John wrote and worked to make sure that what they were writing was funny and entertaining. They put the audience first—and were constantly thinking about how to improve their experience. The best way to improve

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## ISN'T THAT...

an audience's theatrical experience is to tell the story clearly and economically. They cut jokes and trimmed scenes—ruthlessly. (During previews we were given up to 30 pages of cuts and trims and edits every night—stuff we had to learn and put in that night!) It was amazing to watch them serve the show and the audience experience—not themselves or their egos or their funniest lines. They cut some of their funniest material—for the good of the show! And the composer, Wayne Kirkpatrick (Karey's brother and a songwriter who is best known for writing the Grammy-winning song "If I Could

"Cariani, who was a memorable Motel the Tailor in the Alfred Molina *Fiddler on the Roof*—and who wrote the popular *Almost, Maine*—makes a fine counterpart as the poetic Bottom brother. Several times, he falls into what you might call an "arrested flinch take," and it's lovely."  
—Huffington Post

Change the World," recorded by Eric Clapton), was forced very late in the game—about a week and a half before we opened—to cut the most beautiful song in the play. It was a show-stopping ballad in the second act—but it no longer fit in the show as the book was being rewritten. The song was cut for the good of the whole—and for the good of the story—and for the good of the audience's experience. And *Something Rotten!* is much better for it.

**How does Shakespearean humor—or humor about Shakespeare—come closest to Maine humor?**

It's low. And the best Maine humor is low. So many academics celebrate Shakespeare's low humor and dismiss contemporary low humor, and I think they all need to take a good hard look at how incongruous that is.

**How did you get this great gig?**

I did a musical called *Minsky's* back in 2009. I played an accountant who falls in love with a character named Beula, played by Rachel Dratch. We did an out-of-town tryout of the show in Los Angeles at the Ahmanson Theater. But it never quite came together as hoped. Great show—just...not quite great enough! And we never made it to Broadway.

Cut to early 2013. The director of *Minsky's*, Casey Nicholaw (he is best known as the director of *Spamalot* and *The Book of*



"Cariani and Reinders make a charming romantic duo (he's neurotic and nerdy, she's beatific and kind)." —Deadline

Mormon), asked me to come in and do a table read of a new show called *Something Rotten!* and read the role of Nigel...I guess that's a classic example of one door—closing and another one opening.

**What Maine friends and relatives have seen you above the footlights in *Something Rotten!***

Many of my best friends from high school are coming or have come. My brother and his family. My parents.

**To what extent is this Willie the Shake meets *The Producers!***

It's actually Shakespeare meets *The Producers* meets *42nd Street* meets *Spamalot* meets *The Book of Mormon*. To every extent!

**Take us into the most challenging 30 seconds of your role.**

The toughest part of the play for me is the first singing I have to do. It's a 30-second snippet of "God I Hate Shakespeare." It's high. Very high. And it's out to the audience—not singing to another character. It's totally presentational. And that scares me. I am not the world's most confident singer. It's not really "what I do." (I'm an actor—and I've done lots of plays and TV shows and movies—not as many musicals.) I don't live to have people watch me sing. I don't live to sing for people! So...that's my toughest 30 seconds.

The easiest part is a passionate fight I have with my onstage brother, Brian d'Arcy James. He's a great actor. A powerful actor. And it's fun to get to stand up to him—and for myself, as Nigel!

**If a Mainer wants to see you after the show, what's his/her best shot?**

Leave a note at the stage door before the show, and I'll see if I can arrange a backstage tour!

**For the rest of us sublunary pedestrians, tell us three things you can't do.**

No Mainer is sublunary.

Three things I can't do. I don't like to admit that I can't do stuff. But...I can't sew. (I want to learn though.) I can't play chess well. And I can't build or make things with my hands very well. ■



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