

Couples who incorporated local theater into their date night last Valentine's Day weekend had two very different choices.

On the one hand, you had Fairbanks Drama Association's production of "Almost Maine," which News-Miner reviewer Tom Moran describes as an "endearing production ... tracking an emotional arc that brings the audience from guffaws to misty eyes and back again."

Good-natured and sweet, "Maine" is a play made for couples to hold hands through.

Meanwhile, up on the hill, Theatre UAF offered the production "Closer," an unflinchingly raw love story with an entirely different emotional arc. That arc doesn't as much bring the audience from one emotion to the next as it grabs ahold of them and jerks them right out of their chair.

This is not a production that your family-friendly theater down by the river would touch with a ten-foot pole; while FDA does often present plays that are intended for mature audiences, it's unlikely we will be hearing some of the language and strong sexual content riddled throughout "Closer" in any of their shows in the near future.

That's why I think it is so important we have a university with a theater program, as well as alternative theatrical groups such as Revive the Red Tent.

While by and large most people in Fairbanks who attend plays would prefer the safety net of an "Our Town" or "A Christmas Carol," there is a contingency who would also like to see theater that steps outside of the mainstream.

Directed by Theater UAF senior student Ian Buoncore, "Closer" doesn't seem at first glance to fit into the context of alternative theater. After all, Patrick Marber's play was made into a mainstream

movie directed by Mike Nichols and featuring mainstream performers Julia Roberts and Jude Law.

All four performers — Andrew Cassel, Brandi Larson, Katrina Kuharich, and Mallory Smyth — equally pull their own weight, no performer really outshining another.

With a play that focuses so much around the chemistry between people, it's good to see the chemistry clearly exists amongst the performers.

I suspect the hours of rehearsal, navigating through their character's various nuances and exchanges, tend to create that chemistry automatically.

Despite the darkness, there are some moments of humor, albeit of the shocking variety. There's a great comical exchange between the sex-addicted dermatologist Larry (Cassel) and the failed author Dan (Smyth) that involves no spoken dialogue and is a highly explicit conversation in a chat room that the audience views in real time on a large screen on stage.

True to the era that the play is set, the browser used for the chat room is Netscape, an attention to detail that I found quite charming.

The real star of "Closer" is Marber's dialogue; some of the conversations that take place between the characters are downright brilliant in terms of properly capturing the brutal usage of words that

can occur between dysfunctional couples.

It is not thrown out there for shock value, it is simply how these people talk.

These are conversations that people have as they push and pull their way through the messy elements of relationships between people who are messed up to begin with.

Buoncore does a great job as the director pulling all of this together, and I find it highly admirable that a student was able to so successfully manage a mainstage production.

Theatre UAF students have shown their talents before in directing smaller one-act plays, but it is rare for one to direct a play of this scale.

For those couples who missed date night Valentine's Day last weekend, there's still a chance to see "Closer" with performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. on Sunday.

If it hasn't been made clear yet, it is intended for mature audiences only.

As with "Almost Maine" you can certainly hold hands lovingly during the play, just don't be surprised if the hand you hold is sweaty when all is said and done.

*Scott McCrea is a local writer who has been reviewing theater in Fairbanks for close to 20 years.*



Theatre UAF presents "Closer" featuring Brandi Larson and Andrew Cassel. Kade Mendelowitz photo.