

Professional Theatre for Maine



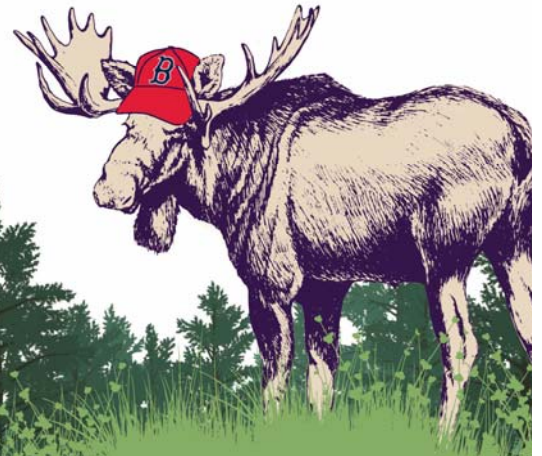
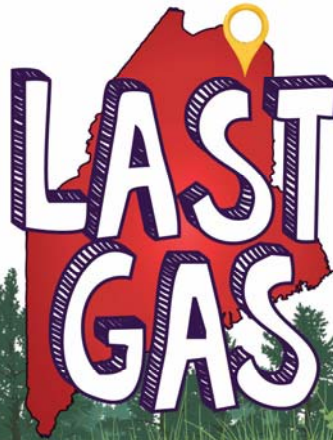
2016-17 Season

Study Guide #1

A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki

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by John Cariani
author of
Almost, Maine



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LAST GAS

By John Cariani

**PRODUCED BY
THE PUBLIC THEATRE
OCTOBER, 2016**

A STUDY GUIDE

By Martin Andrucki

**Charles A. Dana Professor of Theater
BATES COLLEGE**

THE AUTHOR. Raised in Presque Isle, Maine, John Cariani did his first work in theater in his home town. He sang in the chorus of a community theater production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, while offstage he was working as a landscaper in Aroostook County. He saw his first non-musical play—*The Cherry Orchard*—at Portland Stage Company during his senior year in high school, and it was in this same theater that his own first play, *Almost Maine*, premiered in 2004. So the Maine universe of *Last Gas* is familiar territory for this playwright.

Cariani majored in History at Amherst College, where he played clarinet for a production of *Sweeney Todd*. Eventually, the lure of the theater overpowered his original plans for a teaching career. Following graduation, he spent three years as an acting intern at StageWest in Springfield, Massachusetts. His next move took him to New York, where he landed various roles in theater and television.

His major break as an actor came in 2004, when he was cast in the role of Motel in a Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the same show he appeared in back in Aroostook County. This performance earned him a Tony nomination and won him the 2004 Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical. (The Outer Critics Circle is made up of reviewers who write for publications outside New York City.) Most recently, he was nominated again for an Outer Critics Circle award in 2015 for his role in the musical, *Something Rotten*.

It was also in 2004 that *Almost, Maine* had its premiere production in Portland. Two years later, in January, 2006, the play moved to New York where it opened Off-Broadway to warmly welcoming reviews, with the *New York Times* noting “its whimsical approach to the joys and perils of romance.” In 2008, the play was again seen in Maine, here at The Public Theatre. And by 2010 it was heading the list of most-produced plays in America’s high schools, knocking Shakespeare off the top spot, a position he had occupied continuously since 1937.

Cariani’s second play, *Cul de Sac*, opened Off-Broadway in May of 2006. A darker work than *Almost, Maine*, it was described by *The Times* as “charming” and “witty,” but also, “macabre.”

Love / Sick, written later than *Last Gas*, was produced at Portland Stage in the spring of 2013 and here at The Public Theatre in October of the same year. It was subsequently staged in New York at Royal Family in 2015.

Last Gas was first produced at Portland Stage Company in 2010, revived at the Stonington Opera House in 2013, and staged again in 2014 at the Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, New York.

Cariani has also had a successful acting career in film and on television. He has performed with Robert DeNiro in *Showtime*, Christopher Walken in *Scotland, PA*, and Ed Asner in *Elephant Sighs*. On TV, he has been featured in the widely praised series, *Homeland*, and has made frequent appearances on *The Onion News Network*, and *Law and Order*.

THE SETTING. *Last Gas* takes place in and around Paradis’ Last Convenient Store, described by the author as “a convenience / general store in Township 16, Range 8 . . . a remote, unincorporated township in far northern Maine that sits on the edge of what’s wild and what’s not.”

The rank and township system of designating locations in Maine covers a vast area of the state north of Bangor. This territory is divided into large parcels of land, mostly rectangular, arranged on a grid formed by ranges—strips of land running mostly north and south—and townships—tiers of land running mostly east and west. This system reflects the fact that the population in this part of the state is so sparse that

there are rarely enough people available in a given area to create an officially recognized, self-governing, conventionally-named community.

This quality of remoteness, of being on the borderline between “what’s wild and what’s not,” weighs on the characters in the play, burdening them with a sense of being off the map of human connection. “Hard place to get to,” says one character who has arrived from New York. “Hard to get out of,” replies another, who has lived in T16 / R8 his whole life.

The setting of this play in fact dictates its action: the struggle to get out of this distant corner of Maine, and to make a new, more rewarding life somewhere else. Four of the six characters who populate the drama are either attempting to do just that, or have left and returned, having failed to find the promised land beyond T16/R8.

Nat Paradis’s Convenient Store represents the last opportunity to find gas, food, or human contact before plunging into the wilderness. As such, it is an inevitable gathering place for the few people who live in T16/R8. Like the streets and markets that pop up over and over again in classical comedy, it is the crossroads of life, the place where the action happens. And unlike the paradise that awaits us after death, the Paradis General Store is not a place where anybody hopes to spend eternity.

THE PLOT. The play begins on the evening before Nat Paradis’s 41st birthday. As on all previous birthdays of his adult life, Nat plans to mark the date by doing nothing. We find him watching the Red Sox pre-game show on television as yet another uneventful day at the “Last Convenient Store” draws to an end. Nat flips the dial, and stops on a commercial that advises its listeners to ask their doctors about a new drug called “Elatra,” which promises to lift its users out of chronic melancholy and get them “back to happy.” Nat follows this advice at once, immediately phoning his physician, Willie. “You said to call if it gets bad again, and I think it might be gettin’ bad again,” he says, But Willie informs him that the drug will do no good, since it’s meant for women going through menopause. Nat hangs up the phone and begins to cry, “simply and quietly.”

So we learn at once that Nat has been depressed, that he’s afraid he’s sliding back into emotional trouble, that he’s willing to try a fishy-sounding drug to solve his problems, and that his tears are lying in wait, ready to flow.

His soon-to-be-seventeen-year-old son, Troy, who has overheard part of his father’s conversation with the doctor and seen the crying, asks if Nat is “gettin’ sad again. . . . ‘Cause Mom won’t let me stay here if you’re getting’ sad again.” So we learn that Nat and Troy’s mother do not live together, and Troy’s visits with his father depend on his mother’s approval.

Nat, a die-hard Red Sox fan, orders Troy to remove his Yankees cap, which Troy refuses to do. Their confrontation escalates, and they wind up wrestling on the floor, at which point Nat's old friend, Guy, enters. Nat and Troy quickly spring to their feet, but their conflict continues as Troy refuses to tell his father where, with whom, or how he plans to spend the evening.

I'll tell you where I'm goin' tonight if you tell me where you were goin' last night. . . . You don't tell me things, I don't tell you things.

At which point Troy drives off in his father's truck, his Yankees cap perched defiantly on his head.

We soon learn that "last night" Nat was arrested while driving drunk many miles south of T16/R8 near a town called Benedicta. As a result, his license has been suspended for ninety days. "It's a long time to not be able to go places," he says, to which Guy responds, "I can take you places."

In fact, Guy immediately follows through on that offer by presenting Nat with an astonishing birthday present: tickets to the Red Sox-Yankees game at Fenway Park scheduled for the next day. Nat is overwhelmed by the gift, but immediately begins pointing out reasons why he can't accept it. Guy doesn't want to hear Nat's excuses for once again doing nothing on his birthday:

GUY: I mean, we're always sayin' someday we oughtta go somewhere, do somethin'.

NAT: You're always sayin' that, not me.

GUY: And—we're *old*, dude. You're forty-one, you know. . . . We're about half done [with this life] here, so let's go! Let's do! (*Nat becomes inert*). . . . What's your problem?!?! I mean, I don't understand— You know, I'm tryin' at least. And, you know, it makes me tired sometimes, bein' the one that's always tryin'.

At this point, Nat's father, Dwight enters, and taunts his son for, "all the nothin' you do all the time. . . ." He, on the other hand, has a date for the evening with someone young and Canadian. They'll be going dancing at the Adult Swing party at the Rec Center, after which they will see what else "the night has to offer." Dwight suggests that Nat find a date and do the same. But just as he produced reasons to turn down the Red Sox tickets, Nat looks for ways to reject his father's proposal. His primary reason for saying no is that there's nobody in T16/R8 for him to take to the dance. But his father surprises him with the news that Lurene, Nat's high-school sweetheart, is back from New York to attend her mother's burial.

The sound of that name "activates" Nat. He "*comes to life*," showing a level of energy and enthusiasm that we haven't seen before. "Jeez, I wish I knew where she was stayin'. I gotta figure out how to find

her.” But Guy points out that Nat won’t be able to get together with Lurene because they will be leaving for Boston that evening to see the game.

This conflict between being with Lurene and going to Boston recurs throughout the play. Nat’s father repeatedly encourages his son to restart his old high-school romance, while Guy constantly urges Nat to forget about Lurene and head down to Fenway with him.

At this point, enter Troy’s mother, Cherry-Tracy Pulsifer, a forest ranger, and thus an officer of the law. Prompted by Nat’s arrest the previous evening for drunk driving, she has come to determine if any “illicit activity” is going on at the store. Nat protests that “there’s nothin’ goin’ on here,” to which Cherry-Tracy replies sardonically: “Per usual, huh?”

She talks to Nat privately, inquiring about the events of the previous evening, asking if he’s “gettin’ sad again,” and in general wondering what’s “goin’ on” with the father of her son. She wants Nat to take hold of himself, and do his duty as a parent, because, as she says, their son is “somethin’ special. . . . He’s got potential.” She then suggests that she and Nat live together during Troy’s last year in high school, in order to provide the boy with a more stable domestic environment. Maybe, she suggests, such an arrangement might also “help you feel better, if you wanted to.” Nat rejects this invitation.

His father returns, in search of wine-coolers for his young Canadian girlfriend, and again urges Nat to take Lurene to the dance. Guy informs Dwight that Nat will be going to the Red Sox game instead, underlining the conflict between these two options.

Dwight leaves, and Guy once again tries to talk Nat into traveling to Boston, laying out detailed plans for the trip, and insisting that, “I’m not leavin’ without you.”

The phone rings, and we learn that Lurene is the caller. She announces that she will be coming to the store for cigarettes, and Nat is “elated.” Guy, however, warns him not to get “your hopes up.” But Nat’s hopes are, in fact, aroused. He decides to clean up for Lurene’s visit, and goes to the apartment over the store to shower.

While Nat is upstairs grooming, Lurene arrives. Guy tells her Nat isn’t there; she writes Nat a note and gives it to Guy to deliver, but when she leaves, he crumples it and throws it away. Meanwhile, we see Nat, post-shower, just sitting inertly on the couch in the apartment.

Lurene returns, having forgotten to get the cigarettes she came for. She has not yet recognized Guy as an acquaintance from her past in T16 because he has put on so much weight. But when he calls her by her name, she realizes that she does know him after all. He tells her that Nat is upstairs, “cleanin’ up for ya,” but when she tries to run up to the apartment to see him, Guy blocks the way. Why, he wonders, is

she “so excited to see him,” since it’s “not like it worked out with you two. I mean—we all thought it would. . . but then it didn’t. . . . Why do you think that is, Lurene?”

Guy wonders whether Lurene, now divorced, is actually “meant to be” alone. At this point, Cherry-Tracy reappears, and begins dilating on her powers as a forest ranger, which include writing summonses for illicit behavior. Which she proceeds to do, citing Lurene for loitering. Like Guy, she expresses her hostility toward Lurene by preventing her from going to the apartment to see Nat. She advises her to go back to New York, saying, “I just don’t think you bein’ here’s good for Nat right now.”

At that moment Dwight, in pursuit of more wine coolers, enters and greets Lurene enthusiastically. He runs up to the apartment to urge Nat to come down and greet his visitor. “Let’s go get her,” he says, and drags his son down to the store. As Nat enters, he trips, almost falling to the floor, but is saved by Guy.

As Nat and Lurene—who now asks to be called “Lu”—begin renewing their acquaintanceship, they become the center of attention of the other three people on stage: Guy and Cherry-Tracy disapprove of their rekindling relationship, while Dwight enthusiastically supports it. In fact, he suggests that Nat and Lu also go dancing at the Adult Swing.

Eventually, Cherry-Tracy and Dwight leave, and Nat and Lu find themselves out in the parking lot talking about their lives, past and present. They reassure each other that they look good, despite the passing of 21 years since the end of their high-school romance. Lu has abandoned her youthful plans of becoming an astronaut, and instead works for “an organization that helps scientists—women—get access to funding and grants and stuff.”

She expresses limited happiness with her life in New York, “a place where everybody wants to be heard and not many people want to listen.” One of the things you can’t do in the city is what she and Nat are doing as they speak: sit outside and look at the stars

Out of the blue, Nat kisses Lu, surprising both her and himself by his impulsiveness. “I thought I’d never see you again, and now you’re back,” he says trying to explain his behavior, “And it’s awful good to have you back.” Having gotten the ball rolling again between them, he commits a further impulsive act, and invites her to go dancing. At first reluctant because of her mother’s burial in the morning, she eventually agrees.

Meanwhile, Guy, who has been minding the store for Nat, responds to the news of their dancing plans by pressing Nat about preparing for the trip to Boston. Nat asserts that Lurene makes him happy, that she is giving him a second chance “to live the way I’m meant to live.” And given that opportunity, he feels he has to turn down Guy’s birthday gift. No trip to Boston; instead, an evening spent with his high

school sweetheart. The first act ends as he and Lurene head off to the dance, leaving Guy standing in the door of the store watching them go.

As the second act begins, Nat and Lu are returning from the Rec Center, giddy with pleasure after their night of dancing. She expresses regret that Nat's "love child," Troy, is not her son but Cherry-Tracy's. How, Lu wonders, did Nat wind up with someone so improbable. He answers, vaguely, "I guess we both just needed somethin' or someone to help us feel like there was . . . options or somethin' still, and . . . next thing I know . . . she's pregnant, and I'm a dad."

Lu proposes going up to the apartment with Nat, and he is about to take her up on the offer when he notices that the store is still open, and that Guy is asleep at the till. Lu praises Nat's dancing, which doesn't surprise Guy who knows all about his friend's talent as a dancer. Still caught up in the intoxication of Adult Swing, she grabs Nat and dances with him to demonstrate his prowess to Guy. When she tries to show Guy some of the steps she has just learned, she discovers that he too is an accomplished dancer—even better than Nat. She then has the tipsy inspiration of having the two men pair up to exhibit their combined dance prowess. Nat emphatically rejects the idea, but Lu insists and eventually gets her way as *"Guy grabs Nat and forces him into a quick and excellent series of moves that somehow seem to disappear almost as quickly as they happen."*

Wanting to prolong the evening's fun, Lu again proposes a trip up to the apartment, leaving Guy behind to close up shop. As they climb the stairs, Guy warns that he has plans, and will likely be gone when they return.

In the apartment, Lurene confesses that she has been "feeling pretty alone out there in the world lately . . . and you make me feel . . . not as alone or something." She then kisses Nat "hard," but he fails to respond; in fact he "kind of pushes her away." When he tries to explain his response by saying he is "confused" about the nature of their relationship, she responds, "I got confused, too. And I've *been* confused. 'Cause listen: I don't understand what happened. I loved you . . . and I thought you loved me." Nat protests that he did love her. If that's true, she asks, then why did he break off all contact when she left for college, abandoning their plan of working together so that she could complete her engineering degree, and move toward her goal of becoming an astronaut?

Nat's only response is that he needed to let her "go away and . . . do your thing." Lurene says she forgives him for this, and resumes her attempt at lovemaking, which again fails. An embarrassed Nat offers various excuses—lack of practice, nerves, even the dispiriting burden of being a Red Sox fan. Whatever the reason, the stab at intimacy turns into a fiasco. But Nat begs Lurene to give him another chance by returning the next day to join him in celebrating his birthday. She agrees.

On her way out, she crosses paths with Guy, who is still in the store, waiting for Nat to go with him to Boston. Alone with Nat, Guy asks why, if his reunion with Lu has been such a great success, she's not spending the night with him. "Didn't wanna rush anything. . . . It was good. I kissed her. Lots." And again he refuses to travel to the Red Sox game, citing his plans for the next day with Lurene: "I can't miss out on . . . what I could have with her. I can't."

Guy, growing infuriated by Nat's constant refusal to accept his generous gift, announces that he will be going to Boston by himself, and will probably never come back. Moreover, he declares,

I don't think it's ever gonna go good for you with Lurene. Or anyone like her. And I think it could go good for you with me. 'Cause I think I make you pretty happy. Last night, that made you happy. Made me happy, too."

Nat denies all of this, asserting instead that the previous night "wasn't fun! It was me . . . uninhibited. And someone *saw*, you know, so now I'm just . . . inhibited again. . . . You don't make me happy." On these words, Guy heads for the door, but Nat "*desperately goes to him and grabs/hugs him,*" begging him not to leave.

But Guy insists that, "If I walk down these stairs without you, you're never seein' me again." "Good," says Nat, and once more Guy begins to exit. This time, he bumps into Troy, returning from his mysterious evening out. "Listen," Guy says to the boy, "You be a good man in this world. . . . Want what you have. And what you are." Handing him Nat's unused game ticket, he asks Troy to give it to his father. And with this gesture, he heads off to Boston in his unreliable truck with its starter problem.

Nat enters, and reproaches Troy for coming home late, but then begins to grow enthusiastic about his rekindled romance with Lurene, informing his son that, "She's comin' by tomorrow afternoon. We're gonna have more fun like we did tonight. 'Cause she loves me, you know."

Intent on demonstrating his love, he decides that he needs to go to her at once and wrap up the evening's unfinished personal business. He takes the keys to the truck Troy has just brought home, and rushes off into the night to pick up where he left off with Lurene, ending the first scene of Act Two.

Scene Two begins on the following afternoon, with the Troy watching the Red Sox game, which is in the process of being rained-out. Lurene shows up looking for Nat, and carrying a bag of pies left over from the reception following her mother's burial. So, it seems, in spite of his heated intentions just hours earlier, Nat did not spend the night with Lu, but, like the previous evening, took flight in his truck for mysterious reasons.

Not finding Nat at the store, Lurene decides to leave, but Troy persuades her to wait for his father's return so that they can have a proper birthday celebration. As they prepare, they exchange information about their lives, Troy divulging that he "can't wait to get outta here, get out there into the world," where he plans to become an astronaut. So his plans uncannily echo those of the young Lurene, and just as she was relying on then-boyfriend, Nat, to realize her dream, he's depending on his high school girlfriend to help see him through.

Lurene again decides to leave, but again Troy talks her into staying, saying that his father "doesn't mean to not show up, you know. . . . He wants to like you— . . ."

Dwight arrives, shortly followed by Cherry-Tracy, who is escorting Nat back from his night's misadventures. He is "*pretty banged up. He has bruises on his face; his arm is in a sling.*" It turns out that, once again, he has fled from T16/R8 in his truck, and once again has run into trouble near Benedicta, this time in the form of a moose on the road. Now not only is he without a driver's license, he is also without his truck, which was totaled in the encounter.

When, despite it all, he attempts to get his birthday party rolling, Cherry-Tracy stops him dead, ordering Troy to return home with her. Lurene also backs out of the party, telling Nat she's leaving, and asking him to "Explain, . . . last night! Explain . . . what happened to us. God."

Faced with these demands, Nat "*becomes inert.*" Finally, he gathers enough energy to account for his behavior:

I was goin' to Boston. . . . Guy got me tickets to a Sox game. . . . For my birthday. We were gonna go, but then found out you were home. And I didn't go with him. And then—he went without me. And then . . . I went after him, Lurene. . . . 'Cause I guess I want him to be the one that takes me places.

So Nat finally reveals the source of his inertia and unhappiness: he and Guy are not just friends, and he has never wanted or been able to accept that fact. At this moment, Nat admits to himself what he has been denying all his life, and he reveals to the others on stage the reasons for his inertia and unhappiness.

Cherry-Tracy lays out for Lurene the background of Nat's secret life:

CHERRY-TRACY: There were whisperings about 'em. Something about the quarry pond when they were kids. People whispered about 'em. . . . And . . . night before last. . . . around ten o'clock, I'm drivin' by the Rec Center . . . and I see Nat and Guy's trucks parked in the lot, but there's no lights on in the place, and I'm thinkin', "What the heck?" So I decide to find out . . .

and there's loud music playin' inside . . . so I go on in to check it out . . . and I shine my flashlight, and . . . I see Nat and Guy. . . . Dancin'. Just dancin'. Together. They couldn't see me. Just caught 'em for a second 'cause they stopped as soon as I could see 'em.

So Nat knew his secret had been discovered, but not by whom, and for that reason he jumped into his truck, got drunk, and headed south, trying to escape the truth.

The other characters respond to this revelation in various ways. Cherry-Tracy reproaches Nat for being dishonest: "You know . . . you shoulda just told me about you and Guy. Because all this time I've been hopin' and hopin' and hopin' that I'd be able to make a go of it with you. And that's an awful thing you made me do."

Lurene is virtually speechless, saying only, "You know, what, Nat. . . . I'll call ya." After which she leaves.

Dwight declares that he "knew about you and Guy. And I don't know what you're gonna do now. But whatever it is . . . you're not gonna do it here. Okay?" He announces that he's going to a VFW supper, and warns Nat not be there when he comes back, which the stage directions tell us is an order that "*is—but shouldn't seem—kind.*" Which is to say, Dwight is forcing Nat to do something positive to change his untenable situation.

Left alone, Nat turns on the Red Sox game, only to learn that it has officially been rained out. As in the first moments of the play, he changes channels and lands on a commercial for an anti-depressant, this one named Rejoya. At this moment, when Nat "*has no one, and nowhere to go, and no way to get anywhere,*" we hear the sound of Guy's truck pulling up to the store.

They greet one another, and Nat explains that his run-in with the moose happened while he was trying to drive to Boston to join Guy at the game. In turn, Guy confesses that he never got to Fenway because he "didn't go so good. Without you. Only made it to Portland."

Not knowing what will happen next, Guy suggests they "just . . . go. . . . Wherever we want to," and do "whatever we want to."

Nat—though "*not happy yet*"—agrees, saying, "All right. Let's go. And see where we go. And what we do."

With that they "*exit awkwardly,*" headed for Guy's unreliable truck. The last sound we hear is that of an "*engine not turning over. We hear it again. And again. . . . as the lights . . . slowly . . . fade to black.*"

THE CHARACTERS.

“Character,” Aristotle tells us, “is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids.” Stanislavsky used the term “super-objective” to designate the overriding sense of “moral purpose” that drives a play’s characters. As the action unfolds, a character defines himself by what he is willing to do to get what he wants—and also, as Aristotle points out, by what he “avoids” doing. Will the character fight for his objective? Or will he shrug his shoulders and walk away when he runs into opposition? Two different choices; two different kinds of character.

Generally, the character whose intentions are the most forceful and who makes the boldest choices in pursuit of them is the figure we call the “protagonist.” This term descends from the Greek word “agon,” which means a contest or a conflict—like a wrestling match. The word is also related to “agony”—what one suffers during such a struggle. Like “protagonist” “drama” is also Greek in origin and derives from a word meaning “to do.” So when we go to the theater, we expect to see the main character of a drama—its protagonist—energetically doing things to accomplish a compelling objective, and in the process confronting powerful opposition and defining himself.

How does this apply to Nat Paradis? About to turn 41, with his life “half done,” he wants “to feel better and get back to happy.” His son immediately mocks this goal asking, “How can you get back to bein’ somethin’ you’ve never been?”

Every sane person wants to be happy, so Nat’s objective is nothing special. Indeed, as Thomas Jefferson observed, it’s the common pursuit of humanity. What interests us about Nat, then, is not that he wants to be happy, but rather why, as Troy says, he isn’t and never has been. That’s the question the play will answer, thus bringing about the major revelation and turning point of the plot.

The answer to that question explains the most puzzling aspect of Nat’s character: the fact that, when confronted with opportunities to “get back to happy,” he repeatedly does nothing. In fact, on a number of occasions when offered a chance to do something happy-making, he becomes “inert.” Which is not what we expect of protagonists. So this makes Nat an unusual main character.

Nat is what Aristotle might call an “avoider.” He’s constantly finding reasons not to do things: he rejects going to Boston with Guy; he turns down Cherry-Tracy’s invitation to move in with her; he makes excuses for avoiding Adult Swing; he pushes Lurene away when she attempts physical intimacy; he fails to appear for his own birthday party. Back when Lurene was counting on him for help in getting through college, he just cut her out of his life without warning or explanation. As she says, “You didn’t come down and help me. You didn’t do anything. You never showed up, never called, never returned my calls. You just . . . disappeared.” At one point, Dwight asks, “He stand you up, Lurene? . . . Not show up? . . . He does that, doesn’t he?”

Having a no-show as protagonist is a paradox. Not being there is pretty much the opposite of what we expect from somebody on stage. But in fact, as we eventually learn, it is the essence of Nat's character.

For his entire life, Nat has been attempting to make a central element of his identity disappear, namely his homosexuality. He has always known that he is gay, but he has never been able either to accept that fact or to make it go away. So he opts for being a kind of cipher—a not-self. Which explains why all the major relationships in his life are stand-offs.

Thus, part of him wants to go to Boston with Guy, but another part of him says no, because that would be a dangerous flight into forbidden emotional territory. So he vacillates and does nothing.

Desperate to convince himself that he can be “straight” like everybody else, he keeps taking his relationship with Lurene to the threshold of intimacy, and then retreating—because he is not physically attracted to her.

He did sleep with Cherry-Tracy but, as he says, that was “somethin’ that shouldn’t have ever happened. . . . Nothin’ sexy about it. . . . I just didn’t love her.” So now he keeps her at arm’s length, connected only through their shared responsibility for Troy.

Twice Nat takes to the road when it seems his secret is about to be divulged. On the night before the play’s first scene, as he’s dancing in the dark with Guy at the Rec Center, someone shows up and shines a flashlight on them. We learn it was Cherry-Tracy, but at the moment Nat had no idea who had discovered his hidden identity. So he got drunk, jumped in his truck, and headed south. Except for getting drunk, he does the same thing on the night following *Adult Swing* when, instead of rejoining Lurene, he heads south in pursuit of Guy, at last saying yes to their relationship. Both times he fails to make it even as far as Benedicta, a spot on the map about 80 miles south of T16 / R8. Given that Benedicta means “blessed,” which is another way of saying happy, it seems appropriate that Nat just can’t get there. Or can he?

As the play ends, he has revealed his secret self to everyone. With nothing more to hide, it seems he can stop being inert, and move ahead with his life. He jumps in Guy’s truck—which we have been repeatedly told has a starter problem. Inevitably they will head south, a direction that will take them to and through Benedicta—a journey to happiness. But what about that starter problem? And is Guy’s truck really reliable enough to carry them as far as they need to go?

Nat is certainly not the first protagonist in western drama who has a problem with inertia. “Well? Shall we go?” says Vladimir to Estragon at the end of *Waiting for Godot*. To which Estragon replies, “Yes, let’s go.” A modest objective, immediately contradicted by the stage direction: “*They do not move.*” It’s also possible to see in Nat a touch of Hamlet, another character who is always finding excuses for not taking

action, wondering whether to be or not to be, unsure of his identity. (There's even an echo of Shakespeare in the fact that Lurene brings pies from her mother's burial reception to Nat's birthday party, reminding us of Hamlet's bitter joke about his mother's wedding, where "funeral-baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.")

Guy advises Troy to, "Want what you have. And what you are." Can Guy count on Nat to do the same?

Lurene is a casualty of Nat's confusion and inertia. Instead of helping her to realize her dream of becoming an astronaut—which means someone who navigates among the stars—Nat simply dropped out of her life. Without Nat, the plan failed, leaving Lurene sadly earthbound in New York, a place where you can't even see the stars. Her life half over, like Nat's, she finds herself divorced, childless, living in a city where no one listens, working on the fourth floor of a skyscraper—not high up on the top story. She's not exploring space herself, but instead is helping to find funding that will enable other women to reach for the stars.

She feels "lousy," alone in the world, confused, as if her life has reached an unhappy standstill. In this, she's a kind of mirror image of Nat, the man who consistently does nothing. They turn to each other, hoping that they can solve each other's problems.

Nat knows—but won't admit—that this solution is hopeless. But she doesn't know the truth about him. She is pursuing a phantom, a non-existent heterosexual Nat. When she tries to embrace him, he disappears in her arms.

One of Lurene's most memorable moments on stage is the scene in which she tries to teach Troy how to dance. She has obviously seen in this young man an image of his father—the Nat she knew and loved in high school. "I'm gonna do a turn out, and then I'm gonna spin into you," she says, demonstrating the steps she learned with Nat the night before at Adult Swing. *"Lurene turns out and twirls into Troy, ending up in his arms and against his chest. A beat. Lurene feels things she probably shouldn't be feeling. She suddenly beaks away from Troy."* What she shouldn't be feeling is sudden, intense physical attraction to this boy—like his father an impossible partner in a dance she can never finish.

The script describes **Guy** as "*stoic, steady, wry, and fat.*" "Stoic," "steady," and "wry" we recognize as attributes of the classic Mainer. But why "fat?"

Possibly the playwright wants to signal that Guy is emphatically not a gay stereotype: physically trim and meticulously groomed. Instead, he is as out-of-shape as the next middle-aged straight guy grabbing a six-pack at the grocery store. And he's an avid Red Sox fan to boot. This regular-guy identity is crucial to Guy's long life in the sexual closet—it's his camouflage. Except it's not camouflage because it's authentic. Central to the play's meaning is that homosexuality is a way of life for regular guys too.

The stoicism and steadiness come into play in Guy's long patience with Nat, who can never face up to the real nature of their relationship. We can see the tensions arising out of this situation early in the play. Nat laments that the 90 day suspension of his driver's license is "a long time to not be able to go places." Guy's response carries a double meaning:

GUY: I can take you places. . . . Where do you wanna go? . . . Where were you goin' last night. . . .
Musta been goin' somewhere.

NAT: I wasn't.

GUY: Well . . . wherever it was . . . I coulda taken you. Where do you wanna go?

NAT: I don't wanna go anywhere, Guy. I was just drivin' . . .

GUY: Oh, come on! You must wanna go somewhere.

NAT: I needed to think. . . . I don't wanna go anywhere, Guy.

The ostensible subject of this exchange is Nat's drunken drive south on the previous evening after they were discovered dancing in the dark at the Rec Center. But Guy's insistence on his willingness to take Nat places is really an offer of intimate companionship, of his readiness to transport Nat emotionally to a different place. And in persistently questioning him about his destination, Guy is goading Nat into facing the truth about himself.

"Let's go!" Guy urges. "Let's do! . . . What's your problem?!? I mean, I don't understand— You know, I'm tryin' at least. And, you know, it makes me tired sometimes, bein' the one that's always tryin—"

We see here that Guy and Nat are a dramatic odd couple, sharply contrasting physical and psychological types. Nat is slight and passive; Guy is large and buzzing with repressed energy, filled with the desire to change their lives.

But he also wants to prevent Nat from steering his life in the wrong direction—toward a false heterosexuality. Thus he becomes a virtual duenna, thrusting himself between Nat and Lurene, trying to keep them apart, and standing watch down in the store while they retire to the apartment upstairs.

Finally he loses his patience and sets off by himself to Boston and Fenway Park. But he only makes it as far as Portland, discovering that without Nat the trip isn't worth it. He wants to go places, but not by himself. So once again, he's back in the Township, where he renews his entreaties to Ned to leave with him: "We could just . . . go. . . . Wherever we want to. . . . And do whatever we want to." The destination and exact purpose of this flight from home are undefined, even irrelevant. What matters is being somewhere else, doing something else. As noted earlier, Aristotle describes character as moral identity defined by one's deeds. Guy wants go where he can do what he wants to do, thus becoming somebody other than Nat's fellow cipher.

Like Lurene, **Cherry-Tracy** is a casualty of Nat's sexual dishonesty. Having borne him a child, she has for years nurtured the hope that they might actually develop a deeper relationship with each other. In fact she invites him to move in with her, both to help raise Troy, but also—implicitly—to take a step toward serious physical intimacy. Nat being Nat, he declines, and Cherry-Tracy, being who she is, does not take this rejection lying down.

Instead, she wields the powers of her office—forest ranger—to serve Nat with a summons for selling donuts illegally. It's a trifling offense, but it represents her desire to "punish" him for his inertia.

She takes her duties as forest ranger very seriously, declaring that, "this is a place where it's more wild than not, and I look after the wild parts and have jurisdiction over what's civilized. . . . I got powers."

She is also proud of what she has done with her life, contrasting herself with Lurene, who fled T-16 / R-8 looking for success. Cherry-Tracy, on the other hand, boasts that she "did somethin'. Became somebody. And didn't even have to go away to do it. Did it right here. In this part of the world."

It is Cherry-Tracy, pursuing her devotion to law-and-order, who investigates the loud music coming from the Rec Center, and discovers Guy and Nat dancing together—the first clear evidence of the nature of their relationship. What had been whispers and rumors are confirmed. Exposed, Nat runs away, getting himself arrested for drunk driving. Thus, Cherry-Tracy precipitates the train of events that leads to Nat and Guy's decision to start their lives over somewhere else.

So, despite her command of both wilderness and civilization, and despite her powers to summon and punish, she is helpless before Nat's apathy and deception. As she says after Nat acknowledges being gay, "You know . . . you shoulda just told me about you and Guy. Because all this time I've been hopin' and hopin' and hopin' that I'd be able to make a go of it with you. And that's the awful thing you made me do." Her final summons charges Nat with "criminal impersonation. Pretending to be someone you're not in order to obtain a benefit. Although I'd be real interested in knowin' what that benefit was." And the victim of his criminal impersonation is Cherry-Tracy.

We might say that Nat is bracketed by **Dwight and Troy**, his father and son, both of whom serve as foils to his character. The *American Heritage Dictionary* gives us two definitions of "foil," one literal, one metaphorical. The literal definition is, "A thin layer of polished metal placed under a displayed gem to lend it brilliance." Which leads to the metaphorical meaning: "One that by contrast underscores or enhances the distinctive characteristics of another."

Dwight and Troy clarify or enhance Nat's character by being emphatically different from him.

Dwight is constantly on the move, rummaging around for wine coolers, wooing the young Canadian, headed off to Adult Swing, driving down to the VFW in Caribou, playing in the cribbage tournament. He comes to the store with a clear purpose, does what needs doing, and leaves, headed for the next event in his busy life.

High on his list of objectives is bedding younger women, at which he has had considerable success, until the Saturday night of the play, when he strikes out. But no matter; we can well imagine his getting back on the horse down in Caribou. His straightforward heterosexual energy stands in sharp contrast to his son's self-stifling behavior. The old saw, "Like father, like son," absolutely does not apply in this case. But Dwight wants Nat to be like him, at least as far as his erotic inclinations are concerned. Not that he wants a womanizing son, but he does want a son with a woman, and that woman is Lurene.

His eager matchmaking between Nat and Lurene arises out of his fears about his son's sexual identity. "I'm not stupid," he tells Nat when the truth has come out, "Not as stupid as some people suppose people like me are. I know what you are. . . . I knew about you and Guy." Rather than allowing Nat to keep living his life of inertia at the Convenient Store, he orders him out, an act the script asks us to view as a kindness, presumably because it will force Nat to face the facts and take his life in hand.

Troy is another case of the apple falling very far from the tree. He is focused on a clear goal in life, and he pursues it energetically. Ironically, that goal is the same as the one Lurene longed to achieve when she was in high school: to be an astronaut. Lurene says she wishes Troy were her love child, and this shared ambition suggests that he is in some uncanny way her spiritual offspring.

But unlike Lurene, Troy will not pin his hopes on support from Nat. Instead, he has declared independence from his father by becoming a Yankees fan, a fact he defiantly advertises by wearing a Yankees cap—over his father's strenuous, and ineffective, objections.

"I can't wait to get outta here, get outta here into the world. . . . Yeah, I want to go into space. . . . And I'm not just saying that."

As evidence of his seriousness he offers a portfolio of facts: he has a girlfriend who is "wicked smart"; they study together; she has a father who's a professor who thinks Troy has "potential." And to make sure all turns out well, he and she are planning to help each other get through the University of Maine, studying engineering.

Should we assume that this reprise of Lurene's dreams and plans will turn out as badly as hers did? Or does the fact that Troy, unlike his father, is prepared to defy social expectations—the Yankees cap—lead us to believe that he will be the anti-Nat, that he will stick with his wicked- smart girlfriend and their plans, and that they will find their way "into space?"

THEMES. We can turn to Shakespeare for a succinct statement of this play's moral vision. In a famous scene in *Hamlet*, Polonius advises his son, Laertes, about how to behave during his stay in Paris:

This above all, to thine own self be true
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Nat violates this precept every day by denying his sexual identity, and this continuous dishonesty makes him false to all the important people in his life. He abandons Lurene at the crucial moment when she is about to begin her college career; he allows Cherry-Tracy to nurture empty hopes of making a life with him; he refuses to acknowledge the truth about his relationship with Guy, freezing both of them in a go-nowhere, do-nothing inertia.

His falseness, then, is a kind of contagious illness, causing stunted spiritual growth among too many of the people of T-16, R-8.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. What is the significance of the title, *Last Gas*?
2. Why do you think Troy has decided to be a Yankees fan?
3. Lurene wanted to be an astronaut when she was younger. Why?
4. Why is Cherry-Tracy always handing out summonses to people?
5. Do you know people who refuse to admit important facts about themselves?
6. Have you ever been to far-northern Maine? What do you think life would be like there?
7. Why does Nat hesitate to go to the Red Sox game with Guy? What's holding him back?
8. Do you think Nat and Guy will manage to get to the make-up game on July 4? Why? Why not?
9. The stage directions say that it's actually a kindness when Dwight orders Nat to leave the store and the apartment. Do you agree? Why? Why not?
10. Lurene finds herself physically attracted to Troy. Why does this disturb her so deeply?