

Written by Mike Schulz
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Few things are tougher, or more pointless, to explain than the reasoning behind why a joke is funny. I think I've got a topper, though: The reasoning for why a joke *isn't* funny - at least to *you* - even though a hundred-plus people are roaring at it.

This past Friday, the Playcrafters Barn Theatre opened the Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick comedy *Murder at the Howard Johnson's*, and I'd be doing the production a disservice if I didn't mention the audible delight of most of its attendees. There were explosive laughs and sustained, rolling laughs, and to my ears, every one of its many punchlines and sight gags elicited at least some sort of happy vocal response; I had a good time just listening to *others* have a good time. Unfortunately, that was pretty much where my own good time ended.

In fairness, I chuckled on more than a half-dozen occasions, and there are particularly good bits here involving an awkwardly rolling chair and a(n intentionally) cheesy, makeshift gallows; if *Murder at the Howard Johnson's* had to be staged, it could surely have been done with less flair than you'll find in director Chris Zayner's presentation. Yet in all honesty, by the play's second act, it was all I could do to keep my eyelids open. As I see it, the problem with Clark's and Bobrick's farce isn't that it's poorly constructed, but that the structure itself is so limiting; there's barely a whiff of spontaneity or even basic humanity in its conception, and the characters' emotions are as fraudulent as the forced wackiness of their situations.
Howard Johnson's

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is a comedy almost entirely bereft of
surprise

- even the surprise that comes from people just acting like people - and I found the incessant artificiality of it all exhausting.

Composed of three extended scenes, each one set in a different room of a Howard Johnson's hotel, the play opens on Arlene Miller (Monta Ponsetto) and Mitchell Lovell (Gary Koos), whose longtime affair has gone undetected by Arlene's husband, Paul (Jeff Adamson). Awaiting Paul's arrival, the adulterous lovers plan first to ask him to divorce Arlene and then - knowing his answer will be "no" - to kill him, and so begins the roundelay of *Murder at the Howard Johnson's* : Arlene's and Mitchell's attempted murder of Paul, followed by Arlene's and Paul's attempted murder of Mitchell, followed by Paul's and Mitchell's attempted murder of Arlene.



As farcical conceits go, I'll admit that this one isn't bad ... in theory. But while comedies of this ilk are almost never dependent on the presentation of plausible human beings, there has to be at least some degree of reality for the proceedings to work - at the very least, in *Howard Johnson's* , we should believe that the lovers and spouses actually feel for each other, or actually want to murder each other, or actually

something

. Yet from the introductory scene - with Arlene so melodramatically tormented, and Mitchell so egotistically distracted, that both their plot and their romance are obviously (and again intentionally) doomed to comic failure - not only do Arlene, Mitchell, and Paul not act in any lifelike way, but they don't

re

act

in any lifelike way. No one even appears honestly concerned when his or her life is threatened; everything that happens here happens in a fog of blithe empty-headed-ness. (At one point, Arlene interrupts a killing to order clams from room service.) The characters' ardor is as phony as their anger, and consequently, the protagonists are sadly uninteresting as comic figures.

Even *this* failing might've been less bothersome had we been treated to better gags, but most of Clark's and Bobrick's offerings are from the Neil Simon School of Snappy Comebacks - the easy punchlines only underscore how disconnected from the material the characters really are. (Refusing to stage a balcony suicide, Mitchell exclaims, "I can't jump - I'll land on concrete!", to which Paul replies, "Good. It'll break your fall." Ba-dum- *ching!*) Under the circumstances, then, it's rather amazing that the cast comes off as well as they do; Koos' unflappability provides an air of admirable professionalism, Adamson's overwrought incredulity

Affair Play: "Murder at the Howard Johnson's," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through March 22

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leads to several strong moments (he's especially good when whining about Mitchell's childishness), and Ponsetto, alternating between excitable girlishness and melancholy despair, delivers deadpan readings and stares that bring to mind Carol Burnett, albeit a Carol Burnett working from a weak script.

Despite the actors' efforts, though, I felt that the wittiest touches in this *Murder at the Howard Johnson's* actually came courtesy of the set. Designed by Adamson, the play's three separate hotel rooms are, fittingly, suggested through the most minor of scenic adjustments, and the subtle changes in décor - particularly in the wall paintings, which are blandly pleasant variations on similar themes - are sensationally, inspiringly sly. Granted, the design isn't necessarily intended as a funny-ha-ha joke, but given the obviousness of Clark's and Bobrick's writing, I was grateful for whatever cleverness I could find.

For more information and tickets, call (309)762-0330 or visit Playcrafters.com.