

MURDER AT THE HOWARD JOHNSON'S

Reviewed by Gail M. Burns, September 2008

This is the second time this year that a playwright has had me right up until the last minutes of a play and then – whump! – dud ending. Do I write that this production offers an hour and forty-four minutes of entertaining theatre and one minute of disappointment? Or do I pan the whole thing because I didn't like the ending?

In the case of Murder at the Howard Johnson's there are two playwrights involved – Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick – and they are proof that two heads are not better than one. In the production currently running at the Theater Barn the intermission falls between Acts II and III of this three-act comedy, and I cheerfully thought up at least three different finales – all of which pleased me very much and none of which were the one selected by the playwrights.

Now, it's their play, not mine, but their ending made me realize something about the production that surprised me. I had been sitting there enjoying the interpretation director Michael Marotta and actor Matthew Daly had put on the character of cuckolded husband Paul Miller, but the ending implied that I was supposed to have seen him very differently from the way I did. Whose fault was this? Alas, I must suspect Marotta and Daly, because, in hindsight, Clark and Bobrick had been fairly explicit all the way through. Paul is a complete and total failure – a man for whom nothing EVER goes right. And I had developed much more hope than I should have for Daly's Paul.

A quick-but-not-too-revealing plot summary discovers that no one is actually killed during the course of Murder at the Howard Johnson's although everyone tries to kill everyone else at least once. In Act I we meet Arlene Miller (Jessica Lynn Johnson) and her lover, a smug dentist named Dr. Mitchell Lowell (Joseph Dal Porto) in Room 907 of a Howard Johnson's* Motor Lodge somewhere in America. They are planning to kill Arlene's whiney used car salesman husband, Paul (Daly), so that they can marry and live happily ever after. (Arlene claims, and rightly it turns out, that Paul won't give her a divorce.)

All three characters live to see the final curtain, so you can guess how that plan goes. It goes the same way when, in Act II, a reunited Paul and Arlene try to off an unfaithful Mitch, and when, by Act III, after Arlene has betrayed both men, they rig up a scaffold and noose in Room 1015. (You can tell it's not Room 907 only because Room 1015 has slightly better wall art and a much uglier bedspread.)

This is not the greatest play ever written. When its initial Broadway run in May of 1979 lasted for four, count 'em, four, nights, despite a strong comedic cast – Bob Dishy, Tony Roberts, and Joyce Van Patten – and an award-winning director – Marshall W. Mason, founder and, at that time, Artistic Director of the Circle Repertory Company. Clark and Bobrick collaborated on three other comedies that made it to Broadway, though exactly how I am not sure. None of them ran more than

10 days. Murder at the Howard's Johnson's was their second biggest flop, after No Hard Feelings, which opened and closed on April 8, 1973.

In the intervening decades Murder at the Howard Johnson's, and possibly Clark and Bobrick's other attempts at drama too, has become a fairly popular offering at dinner and community theatres. That says something about what passes for theatre much of the time, but we'll have that discussion another day. For a September evening at the Theater Barn, with this lively cast and a dead-on deadly motel room set by Abe Phelps, this play is a pleasant diversion.

But the ending – I really wanted SOMEONE to die – left me realizing that Marotta and Daly had over-sold the character of Paul, and that the point Bobrick and Clark had been heading towards was not the one I had been led to.

Maybe you will just love the ending. It is certainly easy to like Daly and to get a kick out of the sorry nebbish he portrays. Paul is a man who dresses entirely in gray polyester suits and comes to meet a strange Mexican at a Howard Johnson's motel on the promise of purchasing hot cars. While Daly has ratcheted his voice up a few notches and channeled it straight out his nose, it is not quite enough to conceal his natural charisma. Clark and Bobrick intended Paul to be utterly loathsome, and Daly made him quite ingratiating – in an obnoxious kind of way – which is why my favorite notion for the final scene had Paul as the lone survivor. I wanted to see him win for once.

Dal Porto was also not quite slimy enough as Mitchell. The script gives him several lines that imply that he is only a few notches up on the evolutionary scale from Orin Scrivello, D.D.S., who, coincidentally, Daly played in last season's production of Little Shop of Horrors at the Barn. I wondered if Dal Porto was using the same dental uniform.

But I digress...Dal Porto wasn't unctuous enough. He played Mitchell as too much of a nice guy and regular Joe. And how can you dislike a man who wears peach-colored cotton briefs?

Johnson puts every ounce of energy into her portrayal of Arlene, and she is most enjoyable even though Clark and Bobrick have not written a very clear or cohesive character for her. Just what does this woman want?? And why doesn't even she know the answer to that question? I would be all for hanging her high myself except I liked Johnson and wanted to see her make it through – if for no other reason than it would be too thoroughly misogynist if she didn't.

Marotta has left the play in its late 1970's universe. 1979 was the year before I moved to the beautiful Berkshires, and I have vague memories of EST and the other self-realization schemes parodied here. I am sure the script was funnier thirty years ago. That is the trouble with topical humor.

Costume Coordinators Elyse and Leah Miller have dressed Johnson very nicely in some actually attractive 1970's ensembles (who knew there were any?), although

her lovely Act III gown (did I mention that Johnson is a very pretty young woman?) is more modern than period. The Millers do better by Daly than Dal Porto in creating costumes with appropriate '70's sleaze (just to jog your memory for men's fashions, Saturday Night Fever was released in 1978).

Like I said at the beginning, Marotta and his energetic cast had me right until the final moments of this play. Its not easy to spin straw into gold – well, maybe not gold in this case, but an attractive yellow metal – and the Theater Barn has come close enough to make this production a fun fall outing.

Murder at the Howard Johnson's runs through September 28 at the Theater Barn, located on Rt. 20 just west of the town of New Lebanon, NY. The show runs an hour and forty-five minutes with one intermission and is suitable for ages 12 and up. Call the box office at 518-794-8989 for tickets and information.

* Remember Howard Johnson's? Not the low-budget chain of motels that bears the name now, but the REAL Howard Johnson's restaurants with their orange roofs and 28 flavors of ice cream? That's before they got scooped (pun intended) by Baskins Robbins. My mother loved their ginger ice cream with the real pieces of candied ginger in it – every time we were traveling we would have to stop at Hojo's so mom could get a cone. They were cool, but not quite as cool as Schrafft's or the Horn and Hardart Automats. Boy, am I dating myself...

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