Loot: poor taste well done

By Kathy Hardis

The MIT Community Players' production of Joe Orton's shocking, grotesque, and outrageously funny farce Loot is very well presented, but one must possess an unquavering sense of humor to enjoy it.

The prize-winning play leaves nothing sacred — the hearts of Orton's humor are freshly dead corpses, police stupidity and brutality, the Catholic Church and marriage. The jokes are a curious amalgam of vulgarity and ingenuity; the cast of characters consists of Catholics, criminals, detectives, and an exquisitely manhandled cadaver.

The play is about a bereaved husband mourning his dead wife. He is comforted by an efficient nurse (also a seven-time murderer) who literally helped the lady to her end. The scene of grief is joined by the woman's bisexual son, somewhat distracted from his mother's death because he has just robbed a bank with his undertaker's assistant.

The two accomplices are also disturbed by the presence of a sinister-looking man who claims to be an official of the Metropolitan Water Board. Since the two friends had the misfortune of being beaten by him at the police station, they suspect he is a policeman.

When this man demands to search the house, the two villains decide to hide their stolen loot in the coffin and the corpse in the closet. From that point on, the play becomes a crazy juggling act as the corpse and money continually switch hiding places with the precision of the participants in a bedroom farce.

On the whole Loot is excellently written. Orton has a keen sense of the absurd and managed to combine beautifully farcical situations. The dialogue is quick and lively, some of his many jokes are even whosewriterly funny.

The police are the primary subjects of the more loundactistic humor. The detective who has an infallible gift for minute circumstantial deduction fails to notice a corpse lying on the bed. He spends most of his time beating and bullying the miscreants; who have robbed the bank. He is actually only interested in getting his share of the loot.

But the themes underlying this blatanly brazen play are not merely anti-police or anti-Catholic. The play is primarily a presentation of basic human injustices which disguise themselves as respect for those accepted deicides. The Catholic nurse confesses, "I would have practiced euthanasia if my religion had not forbid it, so I murdered her." The pugnacious policeman proclaims, "It is for your own good that authority behaves in this seemingly [alarming] manner." These are attacks on man's intrinsic greed and hypocrisy rather than on the institutions themselves.

The entire cast portrays their bizarre roles with admirable relish. Michael Kriestman is very effective as the ostensible detective, and Diana Sheehan is very effective as the Catholic nurse who has acquired a knack of doing away with elderly patients. Timothy Bird creates a properly pathetic character out of the quavers Irish husband, and Spencer Chersahe and Marthe Wells, the two bank robbers, should be commended on their devious manner of the corpse.

The director David Dorwart has excellently paced the timing of the dialogue and action in a very well staged production. The question of whether or not to see Loot is, however, not a matter of technicalities. The issue lies in the somewhat shocking, maudlin peculiarities of the play. I would not recommend Loot to those who can look beyond the dark nature of Orton's humor and realize it might be somewhat more good-natured than it appears to be.