Murder at the Howard Johnson's was a new comedy by Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick, starring Tony Roberts, Bob Dishy, and Joyce Van Patten, at the Wilbur Theatre, 52 Tremont St., Boston, through April 5.

By Leigh J. Passman

When the press announcements for Murder at the Howard Johnson's were first released, the news media reported that a Howard Johnson's might contest or even sue the producers Lee Guber and Johnson's might sue for use of the company's name. Instead, the company started promoting the show in its area hotels and advertised on ticket envelopes and other theater paraphernalia. Howard Johnson's should have sued the theatre for plagiarism. Howard Johnson's Hotel room like it was saved from ABC's script. Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick's "comedy" script looks like it was saved from ABC's Three's Company scrap pile.

The play opens in a Howard Johnson's Hotel room in a Midwestern city. (Karl Eiger's sets are a good re-creation). Arlene (Van Patten) and Mitchel (Roberts) are scheming to murder Paul (Dishy). Arlene and Mitchel are having an affair, but Paul, a hardworking car salesman, balks at Arlene's request for a divorce. Paul dares them to kill him and promises to return to her one husband... and one lover.

The murder motivations and schemes are absurd and the humor crude or trivial. Any attempt by the show to satirize our era of easy divorce and the "me" generation is blunted by the extreme absurdity of the plot.

As I said before, even these actors could not rescue this play; they struggle to save it. Tony Roberts is adequate as the lecherous dentist. Joyce Van Patten (who replaced Marcia Rodd on short notice) is weak in her more difficult role. Dishy is probably miscast, sounding more like a Catskill Mountain comician (where he got his start) than a midwestern car salesman.

As the play closes Paul laments, "...everything I do is wrong... I'm a loser...I'm checking out...". He's right, but he should be talking about the play: it's wrong, it's a loser, and it will promptly check out.

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