

‘Murder at HoJo’s’ an amusing trip back to the ’70s

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STURBRIDGE — Sam Bobrick and Ron Clark’s “Murder at the Howard Johnson’s” may be one of the silliest comedy love triangles ever written, one that stretches what would be a skit on Saturday Night Live into a two-hour farce that still manages to be inanely amusing, thanks to the unbridled elan of its impressively cohesive cast and Robert C. Latino’s mischievously sardonic direction.

Set in the ’70s, in a Howard Johnson’s motel room set that Latino has made as resplendently tacky as the real deal, Arlene Miller (Julianne McGourty) and her dentist lover, Mitchell Lovell (Michael Pray), are plotting to murder Arlene’s car salesman husband, Paul (Sean Gardell). She’s bored with their marriage, complaining to Mitchell that Paul loves her too much. When Paul refuses to consent to a divorce, Arlene and Mitchell lure him to the motel room to tie him up and drown him in the bathtub.

Needless to say, those plans go awry, along with many others, in a show that takes a multitude of whimsical twists and turns over the course of a year, in three scenes depicting Christmas, July 4th and New Year’s Eve. There must be some sort of odd sentimental attachment to the same hotel room, because they always return to the scene of each aborted murder attempt, as alliances keep shifting as often as Arlene’s emotional and lustful inconsistency. One minute she wants to kill Paul, the next minute she loves him, plotting with Paul to kill Mitchell for cheating on her with his dental assistant Judy.

One of the funniest moments in the show is Paul exclaiming how anyone would dare to cheat on his wife. Another is when Arlene tells Mitchell how irresistible he is, to which he replies, “how incredibly observant you are.” There is also the inevitable “frenemy” alliance, when both men are sick and tired of Arlene’s flippant behavior, and plot to hang her, with a rope that Paul says has a “flaw” he can’t find.

The trio of McGourty, Pray and Gardell have an intrinsic compatibility that goes a long way to making this extenuated thin material work as well as it can. McGourty is exactly as charmingly kooky and impulsive as Arlene should be, swaying from one man to the other with insouciant, giddy abandon. She's the arrested development version of Jeanne Moreau's Catherine in "Jules and Jim."

Pray is hilariously narcissistic as Mitchell, preening at himself in the motel mirror with self-adoration while combing his hair, a cocky ladies man in love with himself most of all.

Gardell brings a full measure of comic, antic flair to the role of Paul, playing him with mercurial verbal and physical agility. The relived look on his face when he realizes he's not having a heart attack induces a well-deserved chuckle. However, some of the physical slapstick – running around on the ledge, pouring champagne on Paul's crotch, a dose of Novocain accidentally injected – strains for the laughter merited in the show's flashes of crafty verbal wit.

To further comment on Latino's dedication to bringing back the look and feel of the '70s, his set design is a terrific replica of clashing décor, the hotel room screaming with the visual dissonance of blue, orange and brown colors vying loudly for attention, the lamps above the bed slavishly authentic. And even though there isn't a pair of bell bottoms in sight, Pray's flaming red jacket and plaid pants will do nicely to remind you of the gaudy way everyone once dressed. The background musical playlist is also in accordance with the times, including the Captain and Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together."

Some things are best forgotten, but Stageloft's rendering of "Murder at the Howard Johnson's" is worth seeing for the winking expertise that McGourty, Pray and Gardell bring to it.

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