

Murder, comedy mix well in Shuler production

By Tim Keller
Special to The Chronicle-News

RATON — Murder turns out to mix quite well with laugh-out-loud comedy in the Shuler Theater's opening production of its summer repertory season, "Murder at the Howard Johnson's."

The 1979 play by Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick opened Friday and Saturday nights, with four performances remaining over the next two weeks.

Director Rick Trice has done a great job of using visual, physical comedy to supercharge the humor in the script. Many of the production's best laughs aren't nearly so funny when encountered as simple words on a page. The simplicity of the play — three 30-minute scenes with a cast of three — puts the focus where it belongs, on the sometimes absurd shenanigans of a wife, her husband, and her lover.

The scenes take place in three different rooms of a Howard Johnson's hotel over a period of 53 weeks — Christmas, 4th of July, and New Year's Eve — so the story evolves a lot between scenes. In each, two members of the love triangle plot to murder the third. Each gets a turn as intended victim. As if three attempted murders aren't enough in a cast of three, there's also an attempted suicide or two.

Addressing the audience before Saturday's show, Trice joked that with so much murder in the plot, he'd be signing up three audience members after the show to rehearse for the remaining performances. Much of the play's comedy comes from long, drawn out failures: these three characters turn out not to be very good at murder.

Part of the absurdity is that, in each scene, the perpetrators spend a lot of time telling their intended victim about the planned murder before they begin to put it into action. This is nutty, but nutty is funny.

Credit for the steady laugh stream goes at least as much to the three actors as to the playwrights. The actors' timing, facial expressions, and physical comedy are the reason for going. That two of the actors are local Ratonians is a tribute to the town's long and strong theater tradition.

Jillian Solano, currently in her seventh season with the Shuler's Kaleidoscope Players, grew up at the Shuler Theater and starred as Annie in "Annie Get Your Gun" while still at Raton High School. After studying Musical Theater



Tim Keller/Special to The Chronicle-News

With surprises for all, the Shuler Theater comedy "Murder at the Howard Johnson's" revolves around a love triangle of husband, wife and the wife's dentist lover. From left are Perry Self, Jillian Solano and Billy Donati.

Performance in New York City, she brought her singing and acting talents home to Raton.

As Arlene Miller, Solano is at the center of "Murder at the Howard Johnson's." Arlene's mid-life crisis lasts the whole play as she veers from boyfriend back to husband and on ... to something else. Solano provides a perfect counterbalance to the two men in her character's life, and she's often a comic foil for their zaniness.

The Kaleidoscope Players imported Los Angeles actor/director Perry Self for a busy sum-

mer season at the Shuler. Self opens his season with a bang as Dr. Mitchell Lavell, Arlene's philanderer dentist lover. Self's rubber-faced expressiveness and physical comedy are delightful. Watch for a misplaced Novocain shot to enjoy Self at his best.

Another tribute to Raton's theater talent comes from watching Billy Donati match Perry Self face for face and fall for fall. Fans of the KRTN radio personality Billy D have no idea of the comedic resources Donati has in his facial expressions. He likes to say that he has a face

made for radio. He has a face made for the stage.

Donati plays Paul Miller, a dishonest used car salesman and Arlene's longtime loyal husband. Miller is boring, long-suffering, and cynical, but he's never been out of love with Arlene. Donati's performance is a hoot, and when the lights go down to end the show, his face is the last thing we see: it's enough to give the play a perfect ending.

Ursula Garcia's costumes are critical to the actors' characters and performances; they're perfect, and the actors often use them to accentuate the

show's comedy.

Trice deserves credit not only for pushing his actors so far into physical comedy, but also for designing a nifty set that passes for three Howard Johnson's hotel rooms. He leaves just enough light between scenes for the audience to enjoy watching the crew make set changes. His use of a ninth-floor window and ledge typify his impressive staging, putting every element of his set to good use.

The script holds special treats for dentists, salesmen, housewives, married people, gun buffs, self-help searchers, and people cheat-

ing on their partners. If you don't find yourself on that list, the cast will make sure that you laugh, too.

"Murder at the Howard Johnson's" returns to the Shuler Theater July 6, 11 and 12 with 7:30 p.m. performances.

There's a Sunday matinee July 7 at 2:30 p.m.

General admission tickets are \$15 for adults, \$13 seniors, and \$5 children. \$100 buys a book of ten tickets good for any of the summer season's five shows through August 11.

Tickets and information are available at the Shuler Theater; (575) 445-4746.

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Trinidad School District #1

is proud to welcome and announce the hiring of new Athletic Director, Head Football Coach and Physical Education Teacher for Trinidad High School, Ivan Lewis.

Coach Lewis has received his Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University and has completed a coaching internship in the NFL with the Atlanta Falcons.

Lewis possesses a Master's of Science in Educational Leadership (Educational Administration) from Arkansas State University. He is one of the few English majors who minored in coaching. He has had head coaching experience in multiple sports: football, basketball, and baseball in both Louisiana and Arkansas. A testament to his coaching abilities happened when one of his high school receivers broke the Arkansas state record for receiving touchdowns in a single game.

Coach Lewis will begin his duties in the district around July 8, 2013.

More information will be forthcoming.

Longtime radio talk show host in Denver dies

Associated Press

DENVER Rick Barber, a longtime Denver radio talk show host whose "The Rick Barber Show" aired for 30 years, has died following complications from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as Lou Gehrig's disease. He

Barber died Friday in Denver, KOA-AM announced.

A U.S. Army veteran, Barber first came to Colorado and KWGN in the early 1970s and worked at KWBZ and KDEN. He served in Wyoming and New Mexico before returning to Denver in 1982 with KOA.

His last KOA show was in 2012.

"He always considered his show a radio magazine, and not just a talk show. Dad loved his listeners," said Barber's son, Ian Barber.

Funeral services were pending.