

## On the Town

# 'The Butler Did It,' and does it well

By CLIVE BARNES

**THE BUTLER** *Did It*, a new comedy thriller by Walter Marks and Peter Marks, has an almost entire cast of Butlers and seems to be on its marks. The marksmanship and the butlers started last night at the Players Theater.

Comedy thrillers are clearly difficult to write, because although popular few examples have emerged. But they are also a species of theater very difficult to write about. This is because it is clearly unfair to offer anything but the skimpiest details of the play itself.

It is curious that the actual thriller-thriller is nowadays an almost defunct theatrical form. It was preempted first by the movies and later by TV. Those two highly realistic narrative arts are able to achieve levels of tension and suspense that is virtually outside the scope of the theater.

However, the comedy thriller, which is an urbane, often campy, comment on the original format, remains acceptable.

It specializes in dextrous changes of plot, intentionally ridiculous shocks, intended to amuse and surprise but scarcely frighten.

In recent years the two most successful comedy thrillers have been Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* and, still running on Broadway, Ira Levin's *Deathtrap*. In the first, one of the protagonists was a detective story writer, and in the second the hero is a playwright who wrights and wrenches comedy thrillers.

In *The Butler Did It* — a classic title, by the way — the Marks have made the central character a stage director. He is staging the play — and the characters are called Raymond Butler, Angela Butler, and Victoria Butler. Oh yes, then there is also Aldo. He is the Butler's butler.

The director — in the play, not, if you gather the complexity, of the play — is called Anthony J. Lefcourt, and Lefcourt comes out of left field. He plays games. And he tries to surprise his cast into taking the thriller he is directing,

that play within the play, as a matter of life or death. He is kidding, of course. Or is he? Certainly Detective Mumford — yes, there is a detective, but scarcely a Kojak — is clumsily uncertain. A Butler did it — or did he or she? — and which Butler?

These jokes on the plays of innocence (remember *Dial M For Murder*, or even better *Rope*?) depend on the style of the writing, the swiftness of the direction, and the deftness of the performers. And sometimes the daftness of the audience.

*The Butler Did It* is lightheaded, lighthearted and funny. The plotting is ingenious, and Doug Rogers (he is the real director, not his theatricalized alter-ego) has staged it at a rare old pace.

The acting is never less than adequate, and often good. Alan Mixon cuts a crazily grandeloquent figure as the director, John Monteleone has a promising look of puzzlement as Aldo, while the two women, Gerriane Raphael and Patricia Kalem-



John Hallow, John Monteleone and Alan Mixon are in "The Butler Did It," a comedy/mystery opening Wednesday at the Players Theater.

ber are delightful, and the young Miss Kalember in her New York debut, happens to look gorgeous. (This kind of play brings out sexist remarks, be-

cause they, like the play, are so old-fashioned.)

This is not high art. But then neither is it low comedy — simply a diversion of fun and mayhem.



Alan Mixon plays the director and Patricia Kalember the ingenue in "The Butler Did It," at the Players Theater.