

Daffy 'Butler' delights

By Peter Wynne

Drama Critic

Q. "The Butler Did It" is (choose one): 1. A whodunit; 2. A thriller; 3. A parody of whodunits and thrillers; 4. All of these.

A. Yes.

This daffy entertainment, which opened at the off-Broadway Players Theatre last night, is at least everything mentioned above and boasts a plot with so many twists that one is put in mind of the politician said to be so crooked he has to screw his socks on in the morning.

The script is the work of composer and lyricist Walter Marks ("Bajour" and "Golden Rainbow") and his brother, novelist Peter Marks ("Collector's Choice" and "Hang-Ups"). And if at times their humor is more blunt instrument than stiletto, it doesn't much matter. The show offers two hours of good, clean fun, and if you miss the New York production, don't worry too much. This one, I suspect, will be turning up at summer stock and community theaters till after the millennium.

Play within a play

Not that you should avoid the show's current incarnation. A revival may not have so fine a cast as that assembled for the world premiere by director Doug Rogers.

It's hard to explain exactly why the performances are as good as they are without revealing many of the show's surprises. Let's just say that "The Butler Did It" features a play within a play and that most of the actors have two roles — one set of characters performed abysmally on purpose and another set played rather well.

In addition to being a parody of whodunits and thrillers, the play is also a comedy about show business — theories of acting, rehearsal practices, drumming up publicity, infighting among performers, things like that. Little of it is new in itself, but the material is used in unexpected ways.

Alan Mixon is a proper blend of oil and ice water as the desperate and despotic Anthony J. Lefcourt, and Gerriane Raphael is his match as the unscrupulous Angela. These two are the stars, but they are ably supported by Gordon Connell as the absent-minded Raymond; John Monteleone as the youthfully lecherous Aldo; Patricia Kalember as Victoria, an ambitious debutante; and John Hallow as the uncanny Detective Mumford.

The single setting by Akira Yashimura evokes a tacky Art Deco living room, the sort you'd expect in some Twenties thriller. Gregg Marriner's lighting provides the needed atmosphere while poking fun at the use of lighting in such plays through extra boldness. A similar sensibility prevails in Merrill Cleghorne's intentionally clichéd costumes.