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Super spoofers

The Denver Center delivers a good evening of Hitchcock

By Gary Zeidner

After seeing **The 39 Steps** at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, I tried to recall all of the Hitchcock references the show contained. I counted no fewer than seven, and I'm almost certain I missed at least a handful more. Then, at the same moment that I was so impressed with the number and variety of those Easter eggs, I realized that unless one was at least 40 or so years old or was an unapologetic film buff, virtually every one of those Hitchcock shout outs would be lost. Time and tide, eh?

My musings on mortality aside, let me be absolutely clear that even if you are an 18-year-old who has never seen a movie in your life, you will laugh your ass off at *The 39 Steps*. From Richard Hannay's (Sam Gregory) first droll introduction in front of the still-drawn curtain to the last time that same curtain rises for the absurdly sweet finale, this is a show that delivers the goods, carries them inside and puts them away in your pantry, and it does it all with a welcome, lopsided smile.

The 39 Steps began as an adventure novel written by John Buchan in 1915. It introduced the world to Richard Hannay, a sophisticated gentleman of quick wit and boundless energy who used brains as much as brawn to outmatch his foes and overcome the odds. In a way, Hannay is at least the spiritual greatgrandfather of many other top tier action heroes, from James Bond to John McClane.

In 1935, Alfred Hitchcock adapted and produced *The 39 Steps* for the screen. Other, lesser film versions followed over the years. Then, in 2008, *The 39 Steps* got a Broadway makeover. Rather than play it straight, as in the book and prior films, the Broadway version turned this taut tale of pre- World War II international espionage into a joyous spoof of itself and its idiom. *The 39 Steps* as a comedy wowed critics and audiences alike and earned six Tony Awards — including Best Play — along with three Drama Desk honors.

As usual, the Denver Center Theatre Company takes exceptional material and produces it exceptionally. *The 39 Steps* is, without a doubt, one of the funniest plays I've seen in years. Walking out of the Ricketson Theatre, I felt like a kid who has just ridden his first roller coaster and wants nothing more than to get back in line to do it again. The copious laughs come strong and steady in this perfectly paced parody.

Hannay's harrowing ordeal — during which he must clear his name of false murder charges and thwart a ring of nogoodniks bent on bringing England to its knees — takes him from London to Scotland and back again. He interacts with dozens of characters ranging from paper boys to nonagenarians. Amazingly, all of the characters in *The 39 Steps* are played by just four actors. (Ok, four actors and one purposefully obvious stuntman.)

As mentioned above, the inimitable Sam Gregory plays Hannay. Every other character comes to life thanks to Victoria Mack, Rob Nagle and Larry Paulsen. (You might guess that Mack is charged with acting every female character, but both Nagle and Paulsen get bewigged and bebosomed as well.) So many characters from so few actors in so little time requires costume changes faster than a rascal's hand up a prom dress. At times, one character disappears and another appears so quickly that it almost defies logic.

The 39 Steps has something for everyone.

Hitchcock fans get a new take on a beloved classic as well as all those juicy references to the master's other works. Film noir buffs can enjoy a live action take on what they mostly only ever see on screen. And everyone likes to laugh, right? So, anyone else, young to old, cinephile to philistine will leave the theatre happy. If laughter were cowbell, even Christopher Walken's prescription would be filled by *The 39 Steps*.



On the Bill

The 39 Steps plays through Nov. 14 at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, 14th and Curtis in Downtown Denver. Tickets start at \$34. For tickets or information, call 303-893-4100 or visit www.denvercenter.org.