

ColoradoDrama.com

The 39 Steps

In its day, film noir wasn't comedy, though its heightened sense of danger certainly placed it in the realm of melodrama. Today, however, film noir is definitely camp and is often used to inject surrealism into comedies. So, it is a natural leap to take a classic from that genre, Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, and hyperbolize the already exaggerated situations. The result, in all its hilarity, is director Art Manke's incredibly clever and fresh adaptation of Patrick Barlow's script, drawn from Hitchcock's movie and the original novel by John Buchan.

Manke's conceit—having the main character, Richard Hannay (Sam Gregory), leave his boring life and enter into a hyperbolized version of the original, black and white film (with an additional smattering of references to other Hitchcock classics, including *Psycho*, *North by Northwest*, *Vertigo*, and *The Birds*)—enhances the various layers of the script in a way that stretches farce into the realm of the absurd, a theatrical mirror of sorts for Woody Allen's 1965 romantic comedy, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which Tom, a character from the film noir of the title enters into the real life of Cecilia, a clumsy New York waitress.



Sam Gregory as Richard Hannay
Photo: Terry Shapiro

Take the standard shtick of farce (fast pace, impeccable timing, lots of doors and entrances, mistaken identity, mugging, physical mismatches, etc.), add extra-dimensional travel between mediums as well as some of the most ingenious uses of props in memory, fold in the demands of costume and character changes placed on four actors playing 50 roles and the various anomalies generated by these parameters, and top it off with four extremely talented actors, and you have a recipe for non-stop laughs.



(L to R) Larry Paulsen as Clown 1
and Rob Nagle as Clown 2
Photo: Terry Shapiro

Gregory charms us into Richard's dull, bored, tired life, with an invitation to do something utterly mindless: go to the cinema and see *The 39 Steps*. Quickly, we are kidnapped by two shady characters (played by Larry Paulsen and Rob Nagle) in the lobby and drawn into the film.

From there, Gregory is alternately alarmed, gallant, and dry, as only the English can be, while he juggles Richard's star-crossed romance with a magnetic love interest (Victoria Mack)

and a series of high-risk hijinx with Nazi spies, Scotland Yard, and dozens of other eccentric folk all maximized for guffaws by Paulsen and Nagle. Paulsen's mesmerizing "Mr. Memory" and his turbaned lady of the manor remind us of Jerry Colona at the top of his zany game. Nagle's ultra quick character, costume, and dialect transitions between inspector, straight man, and paper boy are flabbergasting.

Mack's cameo as the brunette, Eastern European spy is tantalizing, and her repressed red-headed farmer's wife alluring, but her sublime emotional shadings as the knockout blonde that turns Richard's head is what sets up the final twist for a hearty, Technicolor laugh.

The original use of the Ricketson as an art cinema house is revisited as the patrons enter the theatre to clips from Paul Muni and Joan Crawford noir films and some newsreel baubles, including a feature on a Busby Berkeley audition for fresh showgirls and a vintage FDR pitch for war bonds. Nice editing by El Armstrong, particularly the appearance of Hitchcock himself (that famous profile!), with an impressive dubbed voice-over adapted to the show (sound design by William Burns).



Victoria Mack as Annabella
and Sam Gregory as Richard
Photo: Terry Shapiro

David Kay Mickelsen's period costumes are a treat, shading the English v. Scot repartee, which is conducted in a delightful, *Pigmalian*-style dialect razzle-dazzle, coached by Kathryn G. Maes. All this, plus Charles R. MacLoad's lighting and Michael C. Smith's flexible set pieces open up the stage business to the clever farcical choices that wow us. Needless to say, Art Manke's directorial derring-do deserves a Standing O.

The only shortcoming in this clever script is that we occasionally forget that Richard has a life outside the film into which he has stumbled, which makes for a somewhat abrupt transition between the last two scenes, where Richard is joined outside the film by an actor from the film. A short scene or freeze frame at the beginning of the second act, in which Richard steps out of the movie by himself, or even a few additional lines of explanation from Richard in the next to the last scene, would elucidate the ending. As it is, the moment is too ephemeral to set us up properly for the absurd finale we are about to witness.

The Denver Center Theatre Company's production of *The 39 Steps* runs through November 14th. 303-893-4100 or www.denvercenter.org.