

theater

"Good Evening": Divinely silly "39 Steps" certainly is one

By John Moore

Denver Post Theater Critic

Posted: 09/17/2010 04:24:02 PM MDT



Larry Paulsen and Sam Gregory make something out of nothing in the DCTC's production of "The 39 Steps."
(Terry Shapiro)

"39 Steps" — and not a single misstep.

The Denver Center Theatre Company's good-time goof on the Alfred Hitchcock spy thriller is as much a return to the glory days of "The Carol Burnett Show" as 1935 Hollywood.

From its clever start to its "now you can exhale" finish, four hard-working actors transform this sprawling story of a cocksure British bachelor who's been framed for a spy's murder from a tense film thriller into a bravura stage comedy. And they do so with both a vaudevillian sense of panache — and a prepubescent sense of humor. It's a hoot.

We walk into the Ricketson Theatre and right into an old-fashioned night at the movies, greeted by 1930s coming attractions, newsreels and a clever pre-admonishment from Hitchcock himself to "silence your mobile devices."

And what better setting for all this silliness than the Ricketson, which opened as a cinema in 1979 before being converted for live performances?

The only regret about "The 39 Steps" might be "The 39 Steps" itself. After all, not many Hitchcock buffs would rank this cheesy bit of cinematic espionage as among his best work. But it turns out this evening is an ode to the entire Hitchcock canon.

We open with Richard Hannay, perfectly personified by the perfectly coifed Sam Gregory as the delightfully self-absorbed playboy without

a purpose. So he goes to kill time with us at the movies, where he is literally pulled through the screen and into the world of "The 39 Steps." Kind of.

Hannay finds himself at a theater performance by Mr. Memory, and shots ring out. But we've actually moved to a movie set of some kind, where Hannay himself is joined by three 1930s actors for the rest of the storytelling. Together, they sally forth in "work with what you've got" high-spiritedness to tell the epic Hitchcock tale as a seamless intermingling of props, lights, sound and visuals.

Even if it doesn't all quite make sense, it sure is fun.

The entire night is one long comic wink. Gregory is joined by the elegant Victoria Mack and two great clowns in Rob Nagle and Larry Paulsen who have fully tapped their inner Tim Conway. They execute an endless array of perfectly timed physical gags, quick costume changes and gymnastics of both the verbal and physical variety.

All they need is an electric fan to produce hurricaneforce wind; a hanger lined into a scarf to make it look stiff in a breeze; an empty film reel will do nicely for a steering wheel. A chase on top a "moving" train is a triumph of ingenuity and imagination.

As Hannay, Gregory is literally on the run from start to finish, and it's a job he carries off with sublime conceit and young John



Sam Gregory hopes to work you into a lather of laughter, while he works himself into a sweat in the Denver Center Theatre Company's "The 39 Steps."
(Terry Shapiro)

Cleese dashing-do — and without a raised eyebrow out of place. But the evening really belongs to the comedy team of Nagle and Paulsen, who pull off nearly 50 roles between them — many at the same time. They easily distinguish their many characters with the switch of a hat or a quick dash under a counter. These are clowns both Beckett and Burnett would hail.

References to Hitchcock films — and stolen quotes — pepper Patrick Barlow's witty script, which calls on "The Man Who Knew Too Much," "The Birds," "North by Northwest" and, well, probably every other Hitchcock film.

A film screen that lines the back wall acts almost as a fifth character, providing its own punch

lines. When the runaway couple takes shelter for the night in a remote Scottish Inn, for example, a flash of the Bates Hotel sign elicits loud snickers.

There are so many "aha!" moments for Hitchcock buffs, in fact, that by the time Mack says the word "Vertigo" aloud, the whole audience sees it coming and says it with her. And those paying the most attention will also pick up on nods to everything from "Casablanca" to "Hairspray."

Who knows how many hundreds of takes go into the making of a film? But this heroic gang of four gets just one on stage. And of the one they pulled off on opening night, it can only be said "*Print!*"

*John Moore: 303-954-1056 or
jmoore@denverpost.com*

"The 39 Steps" *1/2 (out of four stars)**

Quick-change spoof. Presented by the Denver Center Theatre Company at the Ricketson Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex. Written by Patrick Barlow, from the Alfred Hitchcock movie. Starring Sam Gregory, Victoria Mack, Rob Nagle and Larry Paulsen. Through Nov. 14. 1 hour, 45 minutes. 6:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 7:30 p.m. Fridays; 1:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays. (Note: performance schedule changes significantly after Oct. 19.) \$35-\$67. 303-893-4100 (800-641-1222 outside Denver), at all King Soopers or denvercenter.org