

This version of *The 39 Steps* is an uninhibited romp

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Details:

Presented by the Denver Center Theatre Company through November 14, Ricketson Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex, 303-893-4100,

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Subject(s):

[The 39 Steps](#), [Denver Center Theatre Company](#), [Ricketson Theatre](#)

The 39 Steps is uninhibitedly silly — a romp, a trifle, a takeoff on a 1930s Hitchcock film (which, in turn, was based on a novel by John Buchan) The plot, which didn't make much sense in the previous versions, has something to do with an attempt by foreign spies to steal British air defense secrets, and it makes even less sense in this farcical comedy by Patrick Barlow, who, following the basic progression of the film, takes Hitchcock's signature themes and devices and translates them to the stage, employing four actors to play dozens of parts, along with a slew of hilarious and self-referential theatrical tricks.

The action begins when Richard Hannay, one of those suave, handsome Hitchcock heroes, confesses his ennui and his distaste for the latest news, which is about little besides politics and war. He decides to do "something mindless and trivial, something utterly pointless": He'll go to the movies. Pulled instantly into the shadowy world of 1930s film noir, he finds himself seated in a music hall, watching the act of a puppet-like Mr. Memory. Shots ring out. (Do shots ever do anything but ring out?) A beautiful woman with a heavy accent — Russian? German? Who knows?

Who cares? — appears. Hannay takes her home and feeds her haddock. She tells him she's in danger and he scoffs, but then she directs him to look out the window. Sure enough, two men — the same actors who played Mr. Memory and the announcer — are skulking beneath a lamppost. In the morning, the woman staggers out of the bedroom, collapses on top of Hannay and dies — but not before providing a cryptic clue. So now he's on the run, suspected of murder and also determined to solve the mystery.

The Ricketson Theatre was originally conceived as a movie house, which makes it a particularly apt venue, and director Art Manke puts the place to good use. The script teems with references to other Hitchcock movies, and scenes from those films get projected onto the screen in back, along with a few extra jokes. The actors seem to be having a ball. The versatile Sam Gregory, whom we've seen in roles as different as *Measure for Measure's* lecherous Lucio and the viciously passive-aggressive George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, transforms here into the

handsome, reluctant hero. He's the only cast member who gets to play just one role. Beautiful Victoria Mack is the mysterious double agent, a red-haired Scottish lass oppressed by her rigid husband, and the typical Hitchcockian icy blonde — think Grace Kelly, Tippi Hedren, Janet Leigh, Kim Novak. She carries these roles off with aplomb. Tossing bits of costuming on and off, sometimes with amazing rapidity, Larry Paulsen and Rob Nagle play everyone else (each becoming a female as necessary): a hotel keeper and his wife, the smooth-talking villain and his wife, along with hordes of supernumeraries that include not only vaudevillians, police officers, doddering politicians and other humans, but "a horrid, smelly bog," a waterfall and a "cleft." Their timing is impeccable — it has to be — and their antics a hoot.

You might be looking for an alternative to talk of politics and war. If so, the Ricketson is the place to be. Just avoid mysterious women, and don't strike up any conversations with strangers.