

THEATER

Four actors, 50 roles, "39 Steps"

Hitchcock spoof opens Denver Center season

By John Moore

Denver Post Theater Critic

POSTED: 09/11/2010 10:00:41 PM MDT



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)

It's just not like the Denver Center Theatre Company to have this much . . . fun.

Of course, the company is no stranger to comedies, but they are often of the upturned-nose variety.

Seriously, when's the last time you heard someone describe a night with Denver's esteemed regional theater company as "a hoot"?

But that's just what actor Sam Gregory calls the 32nd season kickoff, "The 39 Steps" — a silly yet delightfully faithful spoof of Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 spy thriller.

This is no ordinary stage adaptation: It's four suave and sweaty actors playing more than 50 roles — while basically creating everything out of nothing.

"It's fast, it flies and it's funny," said Gregory, who plays the debonair Richard Hannay, that dashing snob who's sent on the run when police think he's murdered a mystery woman in his London flat.

"One of the great pleasures throughout the history of theatergoing is watching actors make fantasy out of thin air," said director Art Manke, who in 2008 helmed a rather remarkable "The Miracle Worker" here. ("Another laugh riot!" he jokes.)

"That's really what this production does. There's just a bare stage and a couple of trunks — and before you know it, you are taken on this epic chase across the United Kingdom."

Staging it requires inventiveness, technical wizardry and clever problem-solving — such as how to conduct a

four-way police interrogation between just two actors, and how to stage a chase atop a fast-moving train. For the actors, it also requires quick costume changes and precision comic timing.

In Denver, we're more accustomed to seeing those kinds of stage shenanigans at the Buntport Theater.

"It's true: In terms of the imagination involved in the staging of it, we haven't done anything like this in a long time," Gregory said. "But I think the Denver Center really is out to please our audience this year. This is a show that doesn't require any great thought, and it doesn't require any great angst."

As with all stage adaptations, it's a concern just how familiar an audience need be with the source material. After 75 years, one can't assume most 2010 audiences have seen the Hitchcock film. Adaptor Patrick Barlow's script is peppered with winks to Hitchcock's greater body of work as well, from "Psycho" to "North by Northwest."

No matter, says Manke, who admits he's no real student of Hitchcock himself.

"I think the genius of this play is that if you know nothing about Hitchcock, you can come and have a good time," he said. "And if you know Hitchcock, it only makes it that much more enjoyable."

But Manke has come up with a clever conceit to help anyone unfamiliar with Hitchcock to bridge the gap. He's morphing actual sequences from an array of Hitchcock films into his staging.

"It's going to be a multi-media event," he said, "and I think it's really going to help people who have no concept of it."

"The 39 Steps" has been playing New York since January 2008 — an eternity for a nonmusical — and is now being staged all over the country. So Gregory has not had to look far for inspiration. John Behlmann, all of 28, is currently playing the role off-Broadway, and Steven Cole Hughes is playing it through Sept. 25 at the Creede Repertory Theatre. Both are friends of Gregory's — and grads of the Denver Center's National Theatre Conservatory.

Let's just say Gregory, a veteran of more than 30 Denver Center productions, is the oldest of the three. So has there been any trash-talking between Denver's three Hannays?

"I have to say that when I saw John perform off-Broadway, I was a little concerned to see this 28-year-old who's already sweating bullets 10 minutes into it," Gregory said.

"But all I will say is this: You can't play middle age until you've been there yourself."

As for that perspiring of pellets, Gregory was forewarned. When Manke tapped him for the role, he told him: "You better get in the best shape of your life."

So, Gregory thought, "I better take this seriously . . . or it's going to kill me."

He's been running 5 miles a day and working with a gymnast trainer who has helped him build the upper-body strength he'll need for the most physical of his stunts. "I think we're starting to see results," Gregory said with a laugh. "I think it'll be just in the nick of time."

Victoria Mack plays the two principal women, and two other poor slobs not only play everyone else, they rush about all night carrying scenery pieces, props or whatever else is needed to pull a scene off.

So, wait: Four actors play more than 50 characters — yet Gregory only plays one?

"It's true," Gregory admits with a sigh. "I am the guy who in some sense does the least. . . . But I *am* on stage the whole time." In Gregory's defense, Manke adds, "He never once stops moving."

In fact, he's so sweaty by intermission, Gregory gets a complete costume changeover — "down to my underwear . . . and I'm the straight man," he said. That's the comedy term for the guy who doesn't much get the laughs.

"And if the straight man is sweating through his suit," he said, "then you know how bad it must be for the clowns."

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

"The 39 Steps"

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. 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