



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival



Alfred
Hitchcock's
***The
39
Steps***

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespearean Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*

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Synopsis: *The 39 Steps*

Richard Hannay is at a London theatre, attending a demonstration of the remarkable powers of “Mr. Memory”, a man with a photographic memory, when a fight breaks out and a shot is fired. In the ensuing panic, he finds himself holding a frightened Annabella Schmidt, who talks him into taking her back to his flat. There, she tells him that she is a spy, being chased by assassins out to kill her. She claims to have uncovered a plot to steal vital British military secrets, implemented by a man who is the head of an espionage organization called “The 39 Steps.”

The next day, Hannay wakes up to find her dead, stabbed with a knife. He sneaks out of the flat disguised as a milkman and takes a train to Scotland, where she had told him she was going to find the leader of the espionage group. On the train, he sees the police on his trail. In desperation, he enters a compartment and, in an attempt to escape detection, passionately kisses the sole occupant, the attractive Pamela. She however manages to free herself from his unwanted embrace and betrays him to the law. He jumps from the train and escapes.

He stays the night with a poor older farmer and his young wife who sees in Hannay the dashing, romantic man she longs for. The next morning, he leaves in the farmer’s Sunday coat, and calls at the house the woman had told him of. There he finds the man with part of his finger missing, the seemingly respectable Professor Jordan, who shoots him and mistakenly leaves him for dead.

The fun continues as this frenetic farce careens from place to place and muddle to mess. The conclusion combines mishaps, mistaken identities, and tongue-in-cheek references to everything we like about murder mysteries and film noir detective movies.

Characters: *The 39 Steps*

All the roles in the play are performed by four actors. One plays Richard Hannay; a female plays the three woman in the play; and two “clowns” play every other character, including heroes, villains, men, women, children, and even the occasional inanimate object. The following is only a partial list of those many characters.

Richard Hannay: A dapper English gentleman, Richard Hannay is bored—until Annabella Schmidt comes into his life and starts him on a heroic and hilarious journey.

Annabella Schmidt: An exotic secret agent, Annabella Schmidt is in dire need of Hannay’s help.

Pamela: A beautiful women, Pamela is lured into Hannay’s adventure but is skeptical of his claims of innocence.

Margaret: Crofter the farmer’s wife, Margaret is a shy young woman who dreams of life and adventure in the city.

Crofter: A deeply jealous and suspicious Scottish farmer, Crofter houses Hannay for a night while he is on the run.

Mr. Memory: A stage performer, Mr. Memory has the ability to recall thousands of facts on command.

Professor Jordan: Surrounded in mystery, Professor Jordan may hold the key to learning what and who “The 39 Steps” are.

Who's Steps are These Steps?: A Look at the Writer and Adapters of *The 39 Steps*

By Marlo Ihler

Most may be familiar with Alfred Hitchcock's popular 1935 thriller film, *The 39 Steps*. Some may even be aware of the novel of the same name by John Buchan. So, what about the theatre version of *The 39 Steps*? How does it fit into the scheme of things? All the versions are certainly connected by more than just name. The plot lines and main characters are similar, though not identical, and each version is different enough to warrant some description.

The first rendition, Buchan's spy novel, was written in 1914 and published in 1915. Buchan (1875–1940) was a noted novelist, biographer, historian, member of British Parliament, and ultimately governor-general of Canada who signed Canada's declaration of war against Germany in World War I (Bloom, Harold, ed., *Twentieth-Century British Literature: Vol. I*. [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985] 255).

Buchan wrote *The 39 Steps* for his own interest and entertainment during a period of illness when he was confined to his bed. Ironically, the novel gained so much popularity that it has been continuously in print since its original publication (<http://www.lajollaplayhouse.org/KBYG/The-39-Steps>). The main character of Richard Hannay became a prototype for the thriller genre because Buchan was the first to realize the dramatic value of "adventure in familiar surroundings happening to unadventurous men" (Bloom, 256). This novel was the first in a series of five books featuring Hannay, who was loosely based on a friend of Buchan.

In the same year that Buchan was appointed as governor-general of Canada by King George V, Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) directed a film adaptation of *The 39 Steps*. He added a love interest as well as altering the "MacGuffin," a Hitchcockian term describing an idea or object whose existence drives the entire plot of the film, though it may never even be seen in the movie (<http://www.lajollaplayhouse.org/KBYG/The-39-Steps>). By their very nature, espionage thrillers and MacGuffins go hand in hand, and few filmmakers are as well known for both as Hitchcock.

Hitchcock's interest in film began as a teenager in London, though later in college he studied engineering and was quite a skilled artist. He began his fifty-plus year career in the film industry in London as a title designer. Shortly thereafter at the age of twenty-four he jumped at the chance to direct when a director fell ill in the middle of a project. Hitchcock took over, and the studio was impressed with his work. Thus began his work as one of the most widely-known and influential directors in cinema history (<http://www.imdb.com>).

After making a few more films, he was intrigued with the idea of adapting Buchan's novel into a movie. As previously mentioned, Hitchcock altered the storyline somewhat, and audiences and critics loved the result. One reviewer from *The Sunday Times* said, "There is no doubt Hitchcock is a genius. He is the real star of the film" (<http://www.lajollaplayhouse.org/KBYG/The-39-Steps>).

Because of the film, he not only received the name "Master of Suspense," but also caught the attention of American producer David O. Selznick, who offered him an eight-year contract in Hollywood (<http://www.lajollaplayhouse.org/KBYG/The-39-Steps>).

Over the next thirty years, he made numerous films that were both successful and cutting-edge through innovative camera work, editing, and use of sound and score. Other films were not as popular, but he still maintained his celebrated image. He was nominated throughout his career for various best director Oscars, but amazingly he never won. The year before he died he received the American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award, as well as being knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. He died of renal failure in L.A. in 1980.

In 1995, two writers with the Midsommer Actors' Company in North England, Nobby Dimon and Simon Corble, created an original concept of *The 39 Steps* that toured as a theatre version to small venues throughout the U.K. with great success (Johns, Dick, *The 39 Steps: A Teaching Resource Pack* [London: The Mousetrap Foundation, 2006] 3). This version was based both on Buchan's novel and Hitchcock's film, and it featured four actors playing all the parts.

Patrick Barlow (b. 1947), co-founder of the legendary two-man British comedy theatre troupe, National Theatre of Brent (NTB), was then asked to adapt the script. Like his work with NTB, the stage version of *The 39 Steps* is a madcap comedy with few actors, in this case four, who play over 150 characters.

From an interview with Barlow in 2006, he says his work on this adaptation stemmed from taking Hitchcock's film and, giving himself "lots of liberty to change" things, and then simply adding others "that make me laugh" (Johns, 9–10). He adds that it is pastiche, a piece that openly imitates previous work of other artists (in this case, Hitchcock), often with satirical intent. "But it is very important that there is a real story going on . . . about a man who is lonely and lost. . . . There is a journey," Barlow says.

Barlow's hilarious adaptation premiered in England in 2005 and moved to London's West End in 2006. The following year it won an Olivier Award for "Best New Comedy." The first U.S. production was at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston, before it came to Broadway in 2008 where it won two Tony Awards and two Drama Desk Awards. It closed on Broadway earlier this year on January 10, 2010, after the longest run of any comedy-thriller on Broadway with 771 performances.

It also had its West Coast premiere at La Jolla Playhouse (California) before its cast started on a national tour set to run from fall 2009 to summer 2010. In addition, the show re-opened off-Broadway in March 2010 (<http://www.ibdb.com>, <http://www.broadway-world.com>).

It is interesting to note that former Utah Shakespearean Festival actor, Ted Deasy, is starring as Richard Hannay in the national touring cast of *The 39 Steps*. Deasy performed at the Festival in 2005 as Bertram's father and Bertram in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, and as The Reverend in *The Foreigner*.

With so many involved in the making and remaking of the story of *The 39 Steps*, it is no wonder it has had such a long life in so many different forms. The Utah Shakespearean Festival is pleased to be a part of this history and knows that audiences will enjoy Barlow's uproarious comedy, *The 39 Steps*.

The 39 Steps Times Four Equals Hilarious

By Daniel Frezza

Mixing old and new generates a potent appeal. The ancient Greeks adapted existing stories for the stage, and the practice happily continues: Patrick Barlow's comedy *Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps* is adapted from an earlier stage version by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon of Hitchcock's 1935 film based on John Buchan's 1915 novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Successful adaptation entails knowing what to change and what to keep — choices shaped by the adaptor's style and understanding of audience tastes. Let's look at the process.

Buchan's novel is set in the summer of 1914. The hero, Richard Hannay, attempts to foil a German plan to assassinate a prominent statesman visiting England, thus drawing the country into war. Buchan called his novel a “shocker” (or “thriller” in modern parlance). The term isn't entirely apt because Buchan intentionally underplays the suspense: by Hannay's light tone in recounting his adventures; by his confidence that he can outwit the villains while eluding the police who suspect him of murder; and by his trust that, when needed, sympathetic people will turn up to help him. Buchan keeps the assassination and impending war in the background, focusing on Hannay's convoluted moves to avoid capture and death. The German spies are introduced only midway through the story and aren't fully developed characters. In the final chapter, when most authors would ratchet up the tension and pace, Buchan exchanges swift action for a psychological game. Hannay confronts his suspects, but they protest their innocence so convincingly that for once his confidence wavers: are they the real villains? Hoping they'll slip up if given time, he plays bridge with them. Only two pages from the end is Hannay certain he has the right men, and the action swiftly winds up (*The Thirty-Nine Steps* [London, Penguin Books, 2004]). It's a fast-moving chase story (innocent-man-on-the-run variety) without subplot or romance.

Alfred Hitchcock believed the chase was natural material for movies “because the basic film shape is continuous. Once a movie starts it goes right on” (Sidney Gottlieb, Ed. *Hitchcock on Hitchcock* [Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995], 125). Hitchcock defined the chase as “someone running toward a goal, often with the antiphonal motion of someone fleeing a pursuer.” The fox hunt is an example; common variations are boy-chases-girl, police-chase-criminal, hero-chases-villain. Buchan's novel uses the last two, plus villain-chases-hero.

Hitchcock kept Buchan's title (it had strong name recognition), general plot, pacing, tone and *timeliness* — updating it to the mid-1930s (a change in detail that actually retains something important). Often Hitchcock expanded on passing incidents in the novel. Buchan introduced a spy with a photographic memory but didn't develop it; Hitchcock made a man with a phenomenal memory a central character. Buchan fleetingly mentioned Hannay's visit to a music hall; Hitchcock set his opening scene and the climactic final scene in a music hall. In Buchan, “the 39 steps” are stairs leading to the spies' location; in Hitchcock, it's the spy ring's code name. The book has no major female character, which wouldn't do for the movies, so Hitchcock added “boy-chases-girl” and the dynamics of the new Hollywood genre, screwball comedy, with its adversarial male-female relationship and sparring dialogue (John Orr, *Hitchcock and 20th Century Cinema* [London, Wallflower Press, 2005], 66).

Censorship caused another change. In 1935 relations between England and Germany, though tense, were officially friendly. To avoid further straining relations, the British Board of Film Censors rejected scripts critical of Germany (James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913-1972* [London, Routledge, 1989], 75). So Hitchcock's film contains no references to Germans.

Cut to 1996 when playwrights Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon created a stage version of the Buchan/Hitchcock tale. In the intervening sixty years, playwrights forged new ways of telling stories. Simpler sets and small casts became common and, especially in the 1990s, epic narratives were attempted with small forces. Corble describes their play thus: "The action takes place in a London flat in the year 1935. . . . A team of decorators relieve their boredom by acting out an adventure using only their ladders and planks to suggest the sets needed. The action of the decorators in changing the ladders or in creating the sound effects with their tools, is at least half of the show" (http://www.corble.co.uk/page_1212501185000.html). Their show debuted in May 1996 in Richmond, using four actors, four stepladders, some planks and a drop-cloth (Andrew Johnson. "Thirty-nine steps to an unlikely theatrical triumph," *The Independent*, 15 June 2008). The play had numerous successful regional tours throughout Great Britain — demonstrating the maxim, attributed to Renaissance playwright Lope De Vega, that all one needs for theatre are two trestles, some boards and a passion.

In 2002 producer Edward Snape bought the rights to the script. Patrick Barlow, co-founder of the National Theatre of Brent, known for its successful small-scale productions of epic tales, was invited to play Hannay. In 2004 Barlow rewrote the script, keeping the staging and four actors but basing it more on the film than the book. After a successful national tour, it transferred to London in 2006, where it was a hit and won the Olivier Award for Best New Comedy in 2007. It opened to rave reviews on Broadway in January 2008 and ran until January 2010. It continues in its third year in London.

Both plays retain the film's 1930s period—thus effecting an important change: the story is no longer contemporary, though the presentation style is. Modernism, which held sway for much of the twentieth century, repudiates the past, whereas "postmodernism gaily embraces it, quotes it, and even recycles it. A postmodernist work of art, therefore, is not about 'something' so much as it is about itself" (Robert Cohen, *Theatre*. 6th edition [Boston, McGraw Hill, 2003], 304). The result is a stylized simulation of a reality (the story of a popular film and book) that *comments* on the simulation. The staging highlights the theatricality of the means of story telling, emphasizing to the audience that they are watching a performance, and recapturing some of the fantasy of children's play. "In an age when reality tends to disappoint, we are looking for more than reality in the theater" (Cohen, 279). And especially in hard times, we are looking for fun.

Barlow follows the film fairly closely but introduces his own changes. The spies are German again; one attempts to recruit Hannay. Hitchcock developed an insignificant moment in the book into a tense comic-serious scene where Hannay must improvise a speech at a rally, winding up with a stirring close. Barlow adds a foreshadowing of the speech's theme and extends the speech, making it a moving appeal for caring and human decency. He includes Buchan's airplane chase. (Hitchcock didn't use that idea till *North by Northwest* in 1959.) He adds an opening scene to establish the staging approach and introduce the two actors who will play multiple roles, plus a sweetly sentimental final scene for the hero and heroine. But the chases, staging, and humor are the main things. Hitchcock added a lot of comedy, and Barlow adds more (Patrick Barlow, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* [New

York, Samuel French, 2009]). Carol Middleton, reviewing the 2008 Melbourne production, saw the play “not as a satire of the original, but an extension of it, mining the comic element” (<http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/melbourne/the-39-steps--melbourne-theatre-company-1349.html>). It reminds me of Liszt’s opera paraphrases: the goal is to present the well-known tunes and simultaneously to display dazzling virtuosity. And to get laughs. Barlow, that is, not Liszt.

(Enter a man wearing the mask of Tragedy chased by a man wearing the mask of Comedy and wielding a rubber chicken. Tragedy slips on a banana peel and skids offstage. Comedy turns to the Author.)

COMEDY: This is too high-brow! “Lope de Vega?” “Postmodernism?” “Liszt!” Don’t you *get it?*

AUTHOR: You’re right. I think I do get it, though. Like millions of us, Barlow got hooked on “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.” And he can *actually write* that brand of wacky humor. So if you love Monty Python (and who doesn’t?), come see this show and laugh your head off. *(Comedy swats the Author with the rubber chicken. A sixteen-ton weight falls on them.)*