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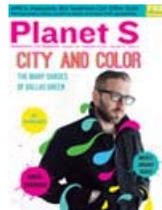


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Monday, January 30, 2012 12:37:22 PM

Review: The 39 Steps At The Globe Theatre

by Aidan Morgan



Andrea Runge and David Leyshon in Patrick Barlow's 'The 39 Steps'

One hundred years ago, the English novelist John Buchan found himself suffering from a duodenal ulcer. He checked himself in to a private nursing home in Kent on the southern coast of England. At some point during his stay, Buchan's six year old daughter informed him that she had counted the stairs leading up to the home. "There are thirty-nine steps," she said. Buchan liked the phrase so much that he incorporated it into the novel he was working on, a "shocker" about a man on the run from a shadowy organization of German agents.

What a difference a century makes. Now it's 2012, and the various adaptations of Buchan's book are legion, with radio dramas, televised adaptations, feature films (most notably Hitchcock's movie), and stage plays. Richard Barlow's take on the material – inspired more by

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In this issue's Bonus Column, CBC Saskatchewan Weekend host Dan Reynish says he wants to write a regular prairie dog column. Should we give him one?

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Hitchcock than Buchan – is proof of just how far you can bend the source material without breaking it altogether.

The 39 Steps is the story of Richard Hannay (David Leyshon), a generically handsome between-the-wars Londoner who goes out for a night at the theatre and ends up enmeshed in a web of unlikely and elaborate intrigue. He meets several attractive and mysterious women (all played by Andrea Runge) and tangles with a gallery of villains and clowns (the versatile Randy Hughson and Gareth Potter) as he travels to Scotland and back in an effort to clear his name of murder and discover the truth behind “The 39 Steps.” Oh yes, and thwart a few evil machinations along the way.

The full arsenal of British comedy tactics are deployed – men in drag, ridiculous puns, mockery of Scots and the occasional dirty joke. The play takes apart not only the spy thriller genre but the experience of theatre itself, with props that malfunction, actors that miss their cues, and stage technicians hurrying the action along. Fortunately, *The 39 Steps* never pauses long enough to take itself seriously.

The 39 Steps is a rattling contraption of a play, a junker bouncing along a back road that threatens to come up apart at every turn. Director Marti Maraden marshals the material handily, establishing a quick pace and never letting up, from the opening bow to the Hitchcockian happy ending. Sets and props are minimal – a few steamer trunks, a lectern, a couple of wooden frames to serve as windows and doors.

In the absence of elaborate sets we’re left to enjoy the actors, who bring an unflagging energy to the script. Some of the scenes require the actors to portray three or four characters within the space of only a few seconds, with one sequence in particular approaching virtuoso levels of timing and voice control.

The 39 Steps is excellent mainstage entertainment: funny, inventive, innocuous fare that you’ll want to see more than once, if only to catch the references you missed on the first go round. The play runs January 25-February 12. To purchase tickets and whatnot, [visit the Globe’s web site](#).

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