

The 39 Steps

Amateur Players of Sherborne

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Date seen: 2 June 2025

Director: Jane McKenna

This was a production which engaged the audience from the start and gripped us throughout; we were intrigued to see how particular set-pieces would be achieved and amazed when we saw how they were achieved; we laughed uproariously at the comedy, there was delight at the ingenuity of the staging and tension over the story, even though the latter was probably familiar to most of the audience. The thrills were not only in the plot-line, they were also in the staging which in its speed and surprises was like a rollercoaster ride. There was energy, ingenuity and pace galore and for APS to perform this play, with its wide canvas of locations and action was an especially big challenge because of the small size of the stage in the Studio Theatre. They embraced the challenge, succeeded superbly, and rather than shying away from tricky stuff they met it head-on and at times seemed, indeed, to be actively searching it out!

What was particularly impressive was the way the production managed to keep the story thrilling while blending in so much comedy, and also emotion; it wasn't just a spoof of Buchan's 1915 'ripping yarn' novel (or rather Alfred Hitchcock's film). This was partly due to the skill of Patrick Barlow's script, but mainly to the skills of the Director, actors, and the others on the production team – set, props, lights, sound etc.. Not only did all of the actors give tour-de-force performances, the whole production was a tour-de-force.

The interest, engagement and scene-setting began even before the audience had entered the theatre, with members of the production team in 1930s costume outside the entrance door, meeting and greeting the audience as they arrived. The ensemble included a particularly friendly and engaging newspaper-seller with period newspapers and inside the theatre more cast members were milling around and creating the atmosphere of being at Sherborne railway station in 1935. Patrick Barlow's adaptation follows the plot of Alfred Hitchcock's film rather than Buchan's novel and the Director had cleverly set the play in 1935, the year the film was released. There were several surreal and creative references to it – a publicity poster for the film at the side of the stage, a cameo appearance of a dummy Alfred Hitchcock– and to the novel; the woman is reading it on the train.

The 'Platform 1' sign over the door to the toilets was a nice touch, as were the two 1930s railway posters at the side of the stage, one featuring the Flying Scotsman and promoting travelling to Edinburgh by train. The set, stage furniture and array of props were absolute triumphs. The two theatre balconies on either side of the stage, with curtains and very elaborate 18th century-style paintings, were magnificent creations and the gantry at the back served very effectively in creating railway atmosphere generally and as the Forth Bridge specifically. The landscape scene painted onto the flats worked well and I particularly enjoyed carrying across the stage of a series of station signs to indicate the movement of the train. Old trunks complete with travel stickers started off as platform set-dressing and were then creatively used to represent various things including train carriages with lit-up windows, bench seats inside a carriage, and a hotel

reception desk. The falling snow effect was impressive and good use was made of stage smoke; at the railway station, for the remote Scottish croft and for the crashing of the two spotter planes. The 'soft toy' bear and reindeer hunting trophies on the wall at Alt-na-Shellach were delightful and the two little remote-controlled sheep whizzing across the stage were hilarious. Another cleverly designed prop was Professor Jordan's arm in the theatre box, moved up and down by a wire, which allowed Clown 1 to reappear as the London Palladium MC. Congratulations to the excellent and clearly very hard-working Backstage Crew who succeeded so well in managing the multitudinous stage effects. The fact that it was relatively large – seven members according to the programme – was testimony to the scale of demands needing to be met during the performance.

Huge demands were also made on the small cast of four and what they achieved during the performance was amazing and magnificent; not least in having mastered all those words, all those moves and all those varied characters. Richard Hannay (Jeremy Small) as the central character had great presence and a great voice, cutting a fine figure as the dashing 1930s adventurer and hero. He played dead-pan perfectly, the 'straight-man' foil to the over-the-top (in a good way) antics of the characters he encounters; displaying the British stiff upper-lip in the midst of madness and mayhem. He also delivered skilfully many funny moments, such as slipping from underneath the dead Annabella, slumped over him on the armchair, a wonderful slow-motion fall the train carriage roof, and, along with Annabella, some great slapstick business with the stile and handcuffs. He executed neatly his escape under the Forth Bridge, suspended from and moving along the 'monkey bars' of the gantry, and his brilliantly-delivered speech at the political rally was one of the high-points of the production; energised, earnest and emotional, with the strains of the hymn Jerusalem sounding in the background.

The three principal female parts were all played superbly by the same actor (Hazel Perrett). Annabella, the mysterious foreign spy dressed in black and with a heavy German accent, was delightfully over the top and switched neatly in the theatre box with Hannay from fearful and nervous to confident and assertive. The scene in the croft with the put-upon wife Margaret McTyte helping Hannay to escape provided a lovely ending to first half and the performance as Pamela Edwards was spot-on, particularly when finding herself drawn romantically to Hannay and then suddenly being upset by his anger and harshness on discovering that she hadn't told him about the departure from the hotel of the two spies. There was subtlety here and the real tears which she shed held the audience rapt. The portrayal of the sweet but sinister Mrs Jordan was also a gem.

All of the other parts (and there were a great many of them) were played by just two actors, a very impressive feat indeed. Clown 1 (Freddie Wopat) lit up the stage every time he appeared with his energy, stage presence and note-perfect character creations, which were many and varied and unfailingly funny. Particularly amusing were the Scottish Sheriff who played for time with Hannay, nicely over-the-top and with a great Scots accent; Professor Jordan, the smooth Bond-like villain, whose accent gradually switched to German as he talked with Hannay (I note that a dialect coach, Jilly Hudson, was used in the production) and who did a very amusing 1920s dance with Mrs Jordan; Mr Dunwoody, the Master of Ceremonies at the political rally; and Mrs McGarrigle, the endearing Scots lady who runs a Highland hotel.

Great versatility, energy and skill were also demonstrated by Clown 2 (Gary Brooks) who presented with great panache many striking and memorable characters such as the Milkman and Mr Memory, whose death scene while recounting the details of the secret new engine was superb. Another highlight was the doddery Chairman at the political rally with his brilliantly laboured and painfully slow introduction to the speaker (Hannay), which allowed Hannay and Mr McQuarrie to react in such amusing frustration. A particular strength was shown in quick-fire character swapping, employing a rapid switch of hats and/or position in order to play two characters at once, as with the Policeman swapping with the Station Guard at the railway station and the Spy/'Heavy' swapping with Mrs Jordan (on the phone) at the Highlands hotel reception desk, followed in short order by a very clever switch-around between the Spies/Heavies and the McGarrigles. He also demonstrated a fine singing voice in two songs, which provided an interesting and very enjoyable addition to the play.

The number and speed of the character, and costume, changes performed by Clowns 1 and 2 were amazing, and while keeping up a very fast pace it was, nevertheless, all very well controlled. They, the other two actors and the stage crew produced a profusion of funny moments which the audience loved. The routine of the Spies/Heavies under the lamp-post with Hannay looking out of the window of his flat at them 'down below' received was applauded with much laughter, and the speedy creation of a car using the reading stand from the rally was delightful. The whole play was very well paced, with an entertaining mixture of styles and tone: the two songs, physical comedy such as the climbing 'out' of windows business, the political speech, the various dances etc..

Contributing to the creation of the many scenes and atmospheres was a creative use of Lighting (Adrian Hole and Nick Baker) and Sound & Music (Mark Lambert and Mike Stanley); the use of bagpipe music, for example and the way the can-can music returned but in a twisted, manic way as Mr Memory was dying. A big contribution was also played by the many Costumes (Jane McKenna), which were changed with astonishing frequency, speed and precision.

These and all the other elements put into the production meant that as a whole it had a depth, a roundedness; it wasn't just an amusing but rather superficial 'spoof' in the way that this play, in other hands, has the potential to be. Many congratulations to the Director (Jane McKenna) on producing such a professional-standard show; not only in the assured direction but also for having designed the superb set, and the costume array, and created the lovely puppets. She had put her own interpretation and creative stamp on the play and added in her own creative flourishes, all of which worked well, such as the two Clowns performing the can-can dance with dummy dancers' legs strapped to them. There was an assurance and a confidence shown by everyone on stage and there was clearly a very tight and skilled Production Team and Creative Team. Well done and thank you for this show. It was, above all, very imaginative, creative and great fun.

Martin Stephen
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