

# THE 39 STEPS: Rollicking Razzle-Dazzle Farce at its Most Farciest Farciouness

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Before we start the review, we need a rehearsal. I must teach you this. It goes:

dum

DUM

DUM!

Don't confused! It's not dumb, DUMB , DUMB, it's

dum

DUM

DUM!

It is the 3-tone, brass movie-music fanfare which indicates something mysterious and dangerous is associated with the name just spoken by a character. Sidney Greenstreet turns to Humphrey Bogart and says, "You know very well, sir, what it is we're after. It is, to be blunt sir, The Mall Tease Fall Comb!" dum DUM DUM!

We need this fanfare in order to proceed with the review. Get it. Got it? Good.

So let's start where no review ought to start and bow deeply to technical director/set designer/audio engineer Donald Swenson for an astonishing transformation of the space and coordination of the effects. For Mr. Swenson, this play is less 39 Steps and more 3900 Cues. Thank you first of all, Mr. Swenson, for a brilliantly fluid yet redwood sturdy staging space and then for the fifth performer in this four-actor send-up of everything Hitchcock, the audio effects.

THE 39 STEPS is the Danny Devito twin to Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 The 39 Steps, an adaptation of a torrid spy novel of the same name written in 1915 by John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, Scottish born novelist and politician. This man's supercilious, post-Victorian confidence is understood at once by a simple glance at his photograph (take a look, we'll wait) and forms the comic heart at which the lampoon of this play is aimed. Ah, the innocent seriousness of it all!

The play's concept calls for the entirety of Hitchcock's adventure film, which has 13 principle roles and countless extras, to be wholly performed by a cast of four. Let the high jinks commence.

How do four performers become scads? By having four very crafted performers, three of whom are able to be in several places at once. They're teaching that now at the finer acting schools.

Let's take the one who stays put. Well, he doesn't stay put. Everybody is constantly running everywhere and getting nowhere while set pieces whiz by on wheels. This is particularly true of John D. Smitherman as the story's hero, Richard Hannay. Mr. Smitherman, an Equity guest artist with a strong, local resume, is the solid anchor of what passes for sanity in the whizbang world of the play.

With athleticism, timing, poise and irony, he is spot on in this role. Could it be more fully realized? Only by Mr. Smitherman himself by the end of a six-month run. You do not want to miss the night he spends in a box, a brilliant comic sequence. But only one of many. It warrants notice at this point because it is one which he accomplishes alone.

The others have their full, ensemble comic thrust set on turbo afterburner fuel injection mode as Mr. Smitherman's solid anchor is growled, shot and yanked at by three decathlon actors of exquisite craft and skill who, as mentioned before, have been trained in the actors' art of being in two places at once. Go see if you don't believe me.

Carrie Share, Tim Rinehart and James Collins are all gifted, crafted and practiced performers whose skills include changing dialects and characters the way some of us change hats. The three of them provide an up-spinning whirlwind of comic flourish and flash which leaves the abdominal wall burning and the cheek muscles insensate. Eat lightly before you see this show.

Ms. Share plays all the female principles. Just to see her kick the bucket as Annabella Schmidt midway through the first act is worth the ticket price. Did you know corpses come with control levers? It turns out to be much more convenient that way. If you don't know what I mean, buy a ticket.

Mr. Rinehart and Mr. Collins are a Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of comic delivery and commitment. Which one is which? It doesn't matter in this play. They're both everybody. The invention they spin off like paint spilled on an industrial fan and the sheer, galloping pace of the antics delivers theatre at its fullest extension and grace.

I thank Mr. Rinehart, Mr. Collins, Ms. Share and Mr. Smitherman very deeply for fine performances with the bar raised to its extreme limit, delivered in seamlessly matched energy, intent and skill.

It is not a perfect production, but the flaw is quite minor. A repeated, audio joke becomes tiresome to everyone. That ought to have included the characters on stage. Mr. Smitherman was the only performer who communicated his growing annoyance with the intrusion clearly to me. To the rest of you, get sick of it, too. It is, after all, bloody annoying after a while. And the audience will be cheering for you with every pained face we see.

The complexity of the presentation and the technical deftness with which it was performed created a display of art and craft as joyous as watching a team of Olympic gymnasts on spring break. It is a testament to the assertion that theatre is the most human art of all. Theatre takes found objects and common, every day actions and turns them into high art. It takes a chair and a box and makes a modest apartment. It takes a ladder and makes a moving train.

And this production is once again proof that quality which folks routinely cross a bridge or migrate north to find is available in South Jersey at half the price and with free parking. Many thanks to Artistic Director, as well as director of the play, Marjorie Sokoloff for her talent and perseverance in bringing this level of art to South Jersey stages at STAGES in South Jersey.

See this show, and bring someone who thinks local theatre is bush league. Pay for the tickets. He'll be buying yours in thanks soon enough.

Oh, right, why did we need to learn the dum DUM DUM?

Ah, yes, quite. I cannot tell you everything, but I can tell you this: you will find the answer to the mystery you seek in Blackwood at STAGES in the 39 STEPS. dum DUM DUM!

**THE 39 STEPS**

**Adapted by Patrick Barlow**

**From an original concept by**

**Simon Corble and Nobby Diamon**

**Derived from the Alfred Hitchcock film**

**Based on the novel by John Buchan**

**Directed by Marjorie Sokoloff**

**STAGES at Camden County College**

**The Little Theatre**

**Camden County College**

**Blackwood, NJ**

**856-227-7200 x4737**

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