

Review

Rep's staging of Hitchcock send-up is a rollicking good time. Without a Hitch.

By: **Martin Brady**, *Nashville Scene*

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One of the marvelous things about Patrick Barlow's tongue-in-cheek stage adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 film *The 39 Steps* is its fidelity to the original plot. It's especially noteworthy since Barlow's treatment completely upends the spirit of a deadly serious espionage thriller and transforms it into rollicking comedy. Though Tennessee Repertory Theatre's new production showcases Barlow's ingenious sleight of hand with the script, just as noteworthy are four wildly energetic performances by a stellar cast under the direction of René Copeland.

Nate Eppler, in his Rep debut, is simply smashing as Richard Hannay, a classic Hitchcockian character: the lone man on the run, caught up in events beyond his control. With his life suddenly in turmoil — and with Gary Hoff's charming set pieces transporting us from London music hall to apartment to train to the Scottish countryside and back again — Hannay attempts to unravel the truth of a pre-World War II spy caper, foil the bad guy and woo a ravishing damsel. He does just that, in a manner of speaking, but his debonair approach leaves us none too worried about his fate, mainly because we're laughing most of the night away.

In yet another bravura performance featuring her gift for physical comedy, Martha Wilkinson portrays the ladies in Hannay's life, including the ill-fated Annabella Schmidt, who sets the adventure into motion — and whose German accent recalls Madeline Kahn's classic Lili Von Shtupp in the film *Blazing Saddles*. Wilkinson looks great in Trish Clark's period costumes, and effectively conveys the classic cinema style of the 1930s leading lady.

None of the comedy would come off so well, however, without the immense contributions of Peter Vann and Patrick Waller, who manage dozens of ancillary characterizations — salesmen, the milkman, a charwoman, porters, police, spies, farmers, politicians, etc. — and pull them off with constant vigor and wonderful bits of well-timed humor that include cross-dressing, pantomime and good old-fashioned slapstick (not to mention Waller's Sean Connery imitation).

In fact, with the sole exception of about a two-minute lag in Act 2, the entire enterprise is a slam-dunk success. Besides negotiating complex blocking and rapid-fire dialogue that must simultaneously advance the plot and evoke chuckles, Copeland's deft staging also pays gratifying tribute to Hitchcock. This comes in various ways, including occasional banks of fog, Paul Carrol Binkley's sound design (which interpolates some of composer Bernard Herrmann's familiar string motifs into the underscoring), a verbal nod to *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, plus clever silhouetted references to *North by Northwest*. And yes, the master himself puts in an "appearance," as he almost always did in his vastly entertaining flicks.

As homage, this *39 Steps* is on the money. As theater, it's precise, sharply executed, often hilarious and always rewarding.

