

Review

'39 Steps' is light, fast farce for audience

By: Evans Donnell, *The Tennessean*

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Want some light entertainment to welcome spring? Then get tickets to Tennessee Repertory Theatre's *The 39 Steps*.

Director René D. Copeland's veteran cast relishes Patrick Barlow's farcical 2005 stage adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock's classic 1935 film thriller. The cast's enjoyment will become yours during the two hours this fast-paced frolic unfolds at Johnson Theater.

Barlow took Hitchcock's cinematic adventure story, which was loosely based on a 1915 novel by John Buchan, and put the entire tale in the hands of just four actors: one to play the unintentional hero Richard Hannay, a second to handle three female parts, and two additional actors listed as Clown 1 and Clown 2 to portray the remaining roles in this 150-plus character piece. *The 39 Steps* has been well-received from London to New York and beyond, with Olivier, Drama Desk and Tony awards among its many accolades.

For those unfamiliar with the plot, here's the setup: The London-based Hannay (played here by Nate Eppler) is by his own account a rather boring man leading an uninteresting life. That changes during a visit to the theater when he meets the mysterious Annabella Schmidt (Martha Wilkinson in one of the three roles she tackles). That meeting leads to murder, a chase across England and Scotland and other complications for Hannay's suddenly eventful life.

Barlow has turned a serious story into a comic one largely by severely shortening the cast list and speeding up the pace. There are other touches that make it funny, though, including allusions to other Hitchcock films and some hilarious sight gags. I'll refrain from giving details since that would spoil those moments for those who haven't seen the play.

Eppler and Wilkinson deliver tongue-in-cheek performances that stay delightfully funny throughout *The 39 Steps*. And whether he's reacting to Hannay's physical description on the radio bulletins we hear or wooing one of Wilkinson's characters, Eppler leads us through this crazy romp with a touch of class. Wilkinson shifts from the vamping Annabella to the assured Pamela and the frustrated Margaret with the confidence and believability she's acquired over many years on Nashville stages.

Peter Vann and Patrick Waller are the two clowns whose wide range of characters goes from police and villains to children and inanimate objects. It takes talent and timing to pull that off; they do so and make it look easy, although it's not. The two have worked together a great deal, and that familiarity definitely pays dividends in this show.

Gary C. Hoff's proscenium stage set reminds me of the Art Deco interior of London's Savoy Theatre; it's perfect for this story set in the 1930s. Trish Clark gets the numerous costume pieces right and Michael Barnett provides good atmospheric lighting. Paul Carrol Binkley's on-pitch sound provides wonderful effects (including some fine uncredited vocal work by Copeland's husband and Nashville Children's Theatre Producing Director Scot Copeland).

All the show's elements add up to a refreshing night at the theater. After a rough winter, *The 39 Steps* provides some welcome springtime laughs.