

Hilarious Hitchcock in Denver



By **Mark Collins** Camera Theater Critic
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:10/14/2010 11:52:59 PM MDT

If you go

3.5 stars

What: The Denver Center Theatre Company presents "The 39 Steps"

When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, 7:30 p.m. Fridays, 1:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays, 1:30 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 14

Where: Ricketson Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex, 13th and Curtis streets, Denver

Tickets: \$18-\$57

Info: 303-893-4100 or denvercenter.org

theatre.org

Parent's guide: Mildly sexually suggestive content

DENVER -- You don't have to be an Alfred Hitchcock buff to appreciate the Denver Center Theatre Company's "The 39 Steps." You don't even have to know who the brilliant director of suspense films was.

That's because the DCTC show reaches the kind of comic perfection that translates well beyond its source material.

British actor/writer Patrick Barlow adapted the stage play from author John Buchan's 1915 novel, and Hitchcock's 1935 film, which both bear the same name. The plot and scenes from Hitchcock's thriller remain, but Barlow lovingly explodes and reassembles them into a clever and riotous slapstick romp.

Local audiences can cheer -- and they stood and did so after last Saturday's matinee -- because DCTC director Art Manke, and his cast of four simply slay the show and turn Hitchcock into hilarity.

Movie scenes from 1930s-era black-and-whites greet audiences as they settle into the cozy Ricketson Theatre. Once the play begins, the front-stage screen opens, revealing an old-style sound stage. And we're off.

The story follows Richard Hannay (Sam Gregory, sharp as a tack), a well heeled but forlorn Brit who finds himself caught up in an international spy scheme.

Framed for a killing, Hannay escapes the law and travels to Scotland, the home of a mysterious man who's not what he seems. Along the way, Hannay crosses, and gets handcuffed to, a beautiful woman (played with comic dexterity by Victoria Mack).

Two actors, Larry Paulsen and Rob Nagle, play most of the rest of the dozens of characters, often in quick-change fashion. Both turn in exceptional performances.

The show relies on playful stagecraft and refined comic timing, and the DCTC cast and crew nail both. This is the kind of comedy that works on several levels. Clever wordplay, sight gags and wonderful physical shtick are delivered with vaudevillian verve.

Designers David Kay Mickelsen (costumes), Charles R. MacLeod (lights) and Michael C. Smith (scenic) artfully recreate the feel of a bygone era by keeping everything except the actors' faces in shades of black, gray and white. Even details like a tray of fresh sandwiches and a bloodstained handkerchief get the pre-Technicolor treatment.

The production would be better served to run without an unnecessary intermission -- it runs one hour, 45 minutes with a 15-minute break. But there's no slowing the humorous momentum in some of its scenes.

One, set on a moving train, involves so much intricate comedy, performed at such a rapid pace, it swoops us up in its energy, and soon we don't even comprehend what we're laughing at. It's a careening blast of funny.

For Hitchcock fans, references to gems like "The Birds," "Psycho," "Rear Window" or "Vertigo" are apparent.

But you don't need to have seen those thrillers to get the thrill of laughter in "The 39 Steps."

Contact Camera Theater Critic Mark Collins at BDCTheater@comcast.net.