

REVIEW: Wild, wacky fun at Denver Center's 'The 39 Steps' September 17th, 2010, 3:01 pm · by Todd Wallinger

“THE 39 STEPS”

When: 6:30p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 7:30p.m. Fridays, 1:30p.m. and 7:30p.m. Saturdays, 1:30p.m. and 6:30p.m. Sundays through Nov. 14 (Sundays from Oct. 24)

Where: Ricketson Theatre at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, 1245 Champa St., Denver

Tickets: \$57.00-\$67.00; www.denvercenter.org, 1-800-641-1222

Grade: A

Some films should never be made into plays. At least that's what the critics say.

But don't tell Patrick Barlow that.

In adapting Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 film noir classic "The 39 Steps" for the stage, the British playwright and cameo actor refused to be intimidated by the story's high-flying hijinks, including a shootout in a music hall, a thrilling escape in which a man drops from the underside of a railway bridge and—most famously—an extended chase scene carried out rooftop-to-rooftop of a speeding train.

The result? A quick change, laugh-a-minute farce that will leave you as breathless as the actors bringing this craziness to life.

The original West End production became a long-running hit when it transferred to Broadway, so much so that the producers recently launched a national tour of that production—a rarity for a non-musical play.

It must have taken a certain amount of insanity for the Denver Center Theatre Company to decide to mount their own production. After all, the play involves literally hundreds of props and set pieces, many of them specially designed for the production, integrates numerous film clips into the unfolding of the drama and a "cast" of 50.

The 50 characters are actually covered by just four actors, a character switch being indicated by the swap of a hat, a behind-a-counter costume change or, in one hilarious instance, the simple pivoting of an actor clad in a costume which is tuxedo on one side, trench coat on the other.

It takes an impossibly energetic and talented cast to pull something like this off, but director Art Manke just so happened to achieve the impossible with his four actors here.

Sam Gregory is the stable rock of the production as Richard Hannay, the oh-so-roper Canadian gentleman bored with life in pre-war London who gets sucked into an international espionage caper when a mysterious German woman gets murdered in his flat.

Victoria Mack demonstrates a wonderful comic charm as that femme fatale, as an oversexed farmer's wife and makes the perfect foil for Hannay as the standoffish Englishwoman who inadvertantly gets handcuffed to Hannay just before they have to flee across the Scottish moors.

The burly Rob Nagle is hilarious as a dizzying array of characters ranging from a Scotland Yard detective to a frumpy female hotel clerk to an annoyingly high-voiced newspaper boy. And the cast is rounded out by the equally hilarious, rubber-faced Larry Paulsen, who seems to get all the weirdo characters, including a popeyed memory expert who is much more than he at first seems.

Adding to the humor are the frequent references to other Hitchcock's films, which, even if you're not up on the master's entire oeuvre, you can't help but catch due to the winking delivery by the actors and unfailing explosion of laughs from the audience. The play is only 90 minutes in length, with one 15-minute intermission. But trust me. You wouldn't want it any longer. You'd only end up dying from laughter.