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STUDY GUIDE

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

Four actors play the following characters, with an abundance of accents.

ACTOR ONE: Richard Hannay

ACTOR TWO: Doris
Julia Urquhart
Paperboy
Angus Jnr
Bi-plane Pilot
Lucy

ACTOR THREE: Walter
Paddock
The Milkman
Wallis
Inspector
Angus
Barclay
The Colonel
Sir Harry
James
Agnes

ACTOR FOUR: Marmaduke Mesmer
Franklin P. Scudder
Barnes
Policeman
The Engineer
A British Seaman (played by Stage Manager)
Gibson
Alexander Turnbull
Deacon McNaught
Twisdon
Tarquin Jopley
Lord Carmichael
Zeppelin Pilot (played by Stage Manager)

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

“I find myself at the centre of an international conspiracy to plunge Britain into war!” – Richard Hannay

The *Thirty-Nine Steps* begins as dashing rake Richard Hannay, recently returned to London from Africa for his father’s funeral, attempts to combat his crushing boredom by attending a theatre performance by the hypnotic “Mr Mesmer”.

Instead of a relaxing night of entertainment, Hannay is rapidly lured into a world of intrigue when the show is abruptly interrupted by two gunshots. Shortly afterwards Franklin P. Scudder, a mysterious American, turns up at Hannay’s London flat. Scudder has information about a vast international conspiracy and is in hiding – he plans to fake his own death and appeals to Hannay to help him go to ground. But before Scudder can reveal more, his plans to fake his own death go dramatically awry and he ends up sprawled across Hannay’s breakfast table with a knife in his back. Hannay, correctly assuming he’ll be accused of murder, flees to Scotland.

Hannay must summon his stiffest upper lip to elude and outsmart the police, a sinister one-eyed spy, scores of double-crossing secret agents and a ravishing femme fatale in a race against time to crack Scudder’s code and save the British Empire.

THEMATICALLY SPEAKING:

MAN ON THE RUN:

Hannay is a man wrongly accused of murder, on the run from the police and caught up in a situation much bigger and more complex than he can comprehend.

“They’re after me ... but, I swear I’m innocent. I have to get to Lochmaben. You have to help me.”

The “man on the run” theme is a classic of the mystery/thriller genre and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is regarded as one of the first and finest examples of this theme. It’s simple but effective: an innocent person (usually a man) finds themselves falsely accused or wrongly implicated in a crime, and flees from the scene with the police in hot pursuit. The story usually involves the hero eluding the

pursuers in creative ways before being forced to confront them in a climactic final scene.

→ **Can you think of other examples (film/television/theatre) of the “man on the run” genre?**

DECEPTION and DISGUISE:

Hannay is forced to adopt various disguises to evade his pursuers:

“I knew I could not leave this building as Richard Hannay.”

As well as this, Hannay’s unwitting involvement with an international spy ring means that many of the other characters he encounters may not be what they initially seem – as the spy trade thrives on deception and disguise. This is itself reflected in the very essence of the play, with actors constantly switching between costumes, accents and characters. No-one is ever really who they claim to be for very long, not even Hannay. Just as we know that characters in the play aren’t necessarily who they appear to be, by the end of the play, it is apparent that the information they share with each other about the vast conspiracy they are all involved in isn’t necessarily reliable either.

→ **In the film versions of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, each role in the production is played by a separate actor. What – if anything - do you think would change about the play if you take away the doubling and the rapid costume and accent changes?**

PARANOIA AND DISTRUST:

From the opening scene, paranoia plays a huge part in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

“Have you ever had the feeling there may be more to things than you imagine? Since I was a child I’ve had the notion that at times ... I am being watched”. – Richard Hannay

Richard Hannay rapidly finds himself caught up in an often confusing, dangerous conspiracy, required to trust to some degree the strangers he meets along his way.

SCUDDER I need to shelter from the storm ... and that’s where you fit in.

HANNAY Mr Scudder, excuse my caution but until I can verify your story I’m going to have to be rather rude and lock you in this room.

MYSTERY AND PUZZLES:

Part of what drives Hannay's arc in the play is that he is running away – fleeing from people who believe he is a murderer. The discovery of Scudder's notebook, and the mysterious, puzzling code written inside give Hannay another purpose: to crack the code and to find out the significance of the phrase "The Thirty-Nine Steps". He turns to a stranger – a beautiful woman he meets along the way, Julia Urquhart, for help with the task.

There is also an enduring mystery around two missing days: Richard Hannay is always 2 days behind the calendar (e.g. he thinks it's Tuesday, it's actually Thursday).

Even after Julia and Hannay crack Scudder's code, mystery remains about what it all means: what is Operation Serpent? Just what IS the international conspiracy Hannay is involved in?

→ **What other examples of mysteries and puzzles can you think of in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*? Was everything explained? Why do you think this was the case?**

DID YOU KNOW?

There have been multiple adaptations of John Buchan's novel in radio, theatre and film (most famously a 1935 film version directed by Alfred Hitchcock). In each version, the significance and meaning of "The Thirty-Nine Steps" is different.

GOOD VERSUS EVIL:

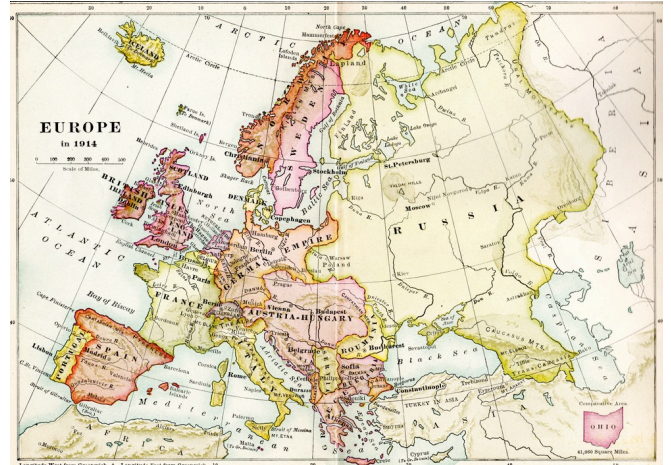
One of the grand universal themes, good versus evil is naturally present in a play based on a book that was written as the world was entering into the first war fought on a global scale. Fittingly though, it's hard to always tell exactly who is "good" and who is "evil". Just like in an argument, or in a war, everyone believes themselves to be on the "right" side.

"Mr Hannay all I have to do is snap my fingers and you'll have no choice. Join us Mr Hannay. Be on the winning side for ONCE". – The Colonel

WHERE IS THE PLAY SET?

The Thirty-Nine Steps opens in London, where Richard Hannay has recently returned from a sojourn in Africa. The action rapidly shifts as Hannay goes on the run, boarding a train for his homeland, Scotland...before a plot twist takes Hannay racing back towards London!

Behind the scenes, beyond Hannay's initial comprehension, the action of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* takes place on an international level – implicating all of Europe and bringing Britain to the brink of involvement in a world war:



HANNAY I had to come here. I had no choice. I believe Scudder had uncovered a plot to assassinate the Greek premier Karolides.

COLONEL Have you seen today's paper?

HANNAY I expect I'm all the way through it.

COLONEL Yes, you are rather. But, have a look at this.

The Colonel hands Hannay the newspaper

HANNAY “Constantine Karolides assassinated in Serbia”. So, they've gone and done it. Karolides is dead. He was the one barrier between Europe and Armageddon.

COLONEL The paper agrees with you.

Hannay examines the page

HANNAY “Europe on the brink”.

WHEN IS THE PLAY SET?

John Buchan began writing the novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in 1914, as the spectre of impending war loomed large over Europe.

The causes of what would come to be known as World War I or “The Great War” are complex and historians still sometimes disagree over specifics – but four decades of international conflicts and hostilities played a part, as did tensions over imperialist policies of the Great Powers of Europe (The German Empire, The Austro-Hungarian Empire, The Ottoman Empire, The Russian Empire, The British Empire, France and Italy) and a global arms race.

SCUDDER Tell me Mr Hannay, how strong is a chain?

HANNAY Do I know you?

SCUDDER I'll tell you ... as strong as its weakest link ... and, if you consider continental Europe as a chain ... a chain that has been stretched to near breaking point. Well ... (*Scudder clicks his fingers.*)

HANNAY I'm sorry?

SCUDDER May I?

Scudder picks up a silver tray replete with tea service etc

HANNAY I say, do be careful...

SCUDDER What am I holding here?

HANNAY A sterling silver tea service?

SCUDDER No ... it's an emblem of the European arms race.

HANNAY Clearly. Silly me.

SCUDDER What allows me to balance this tray, Mr Hannay?

HANNAY Well, obviously ... the cream jug and the sugar bowl and the fine bone china inlaid cup and saucer off-set the tea pot.

SCUDDER And if I were to remove the tea pot?

HANNAY Calamity. Please don't.

SCUDDER Or if we discovered that the teapot was empty?

HANNAY What the blazes are you on about?

SCUDDER The empty teapot that is the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

HANNAY Ah. I'm sorry?

SCUDDER As the great powers of Europe have built up massive military might ... Austria has lagged behind. It has intent but lacks capacity ... and it finds itself adjacent to the Balkans; the fulcrum on the continental see-saw. The powder keg is next door to the tinderbox.

The long-simmering tensions turned into war with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb nationalist, in Sarajevo. Franz Ferdinand was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and his assassination sparked what is now known as "The July Crisis" in July 1914. A series of diplomatic maneuverings were triggered throughout Europe as the Great Powers scrambled to invoke the various alliances that had been made in previous years and ultimatums were issued. On the 28th of July, 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. By August 1914, the rest of the Great Powers of Europe were involved in the war, and within weeks, the war had become global through the involvement of their colonies.

"The death of Karolides has set Europe on the irreversible path to war. All the principal European powers are mobilising their forces" - The Colonel

Timeline of events leading up to the outbreak of WWI:

- 1882** Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy signed the Triple Alliance (May)
- 1883** Romania and Austria-Hungary signed a secret alliance, to which Germany adhered (October)
- 1890** Germany allowed the Reinsurance Treaty signed with Russia to lapse (June)
- 1894** France and Russia signed a defensive alliance (January)
- 1896** William II of Germany sent a telegram to Kruger (President of the Transvaal Republic) congratulating him on repulsing a raid on the Transvaal. This provoked public disapproval in Britain (January)
- 1898** Germany introduced its first Naval Law (March)
Talks between Germany and Britain on how to best resist Russian expansion in the Far East broke down. (March-April)
- 1899** First Hague Peace Conference failed to get agreement on disarmament. (May-June)
- 1900** Germany introduced its second Naval Law. (June)
- 1901** Failure of talks/negotiations between Germany and Britain over an alliance. (March-May)
- 1902** Britain and Japan signed a defensive alliance. (January)
- 1904** Britain and France signed the 'Entente Cordiale' after settling colonial differences. (April)
- 1905** The Schlieffen Plan was drawn up for an attack on France via Belgium. (December)
- 1906** The Algeciras Conference settled the first Morocco Crisis; during the crisis Britain and France held military talks and Britain considered sending an expeditionary force to the continent. (January-April)
- 1907** At the second Hague Peace Conference, Germany rejected any scheme for disarmament. (June-October)
- The Triple Alliance was renewed for a further six years. (July)
- Russia and Britain signed a convention that, with France, led to the Triple Entente. (July)

- 1908** Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina ended the gentleman's agreement between Austria-Hungary and Russia that both would maintain the status quo in the Balkans. The annexation greatly inflamed Serbian nationalism. (October)
- 1911** The Agadir Crisis was peacefully resolved between France and Germany - though during it Britain made preparations for war. (June-November)
- 1912** Haldane went to Berlin in an effort to get an end to the naval race between Britain and Germany - he failed. (February)
- Germany introduced its third Naval Law. (March)
- The first Balkan War led to Russia and Austria-Hungary mobilising but the crisis subsided when Russia withdrew its support for Serbian territorial claims. (October)
- 1913** Germany introduced a special tax that would finance the doubling of its army's strength. (June)
- Military service in France was increased from 2 to 3 years. (August)
- The Second Balkan War was ended by the Treaty of Constantinople. (September)
- 1914** **Franz Ferdinand assassinated in Sarajevo. (June 28th)**
- Austria-Hungary sent Serbia an ultimatum. (July 23rd)
- The Russians decided to defend Serbia against Austria-Hungary. (July 24th)
- Austria-Hungary assured Russia that no Serbian land would be annexed; Austria-Hungary did not accept the Serbian reply to its ultimatum and ordered mobilisation against Serbia. (July 25th)
- Germany and Austria-Hungary rejected Grey's suggestion for an international conference to settle the Austro-Serbian dispute. (July 26th)
- Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. (July 28th)**
- Russia began a general mobilisation. (July 30th)
- Germany sent an ultimatum to Russia that Russia should stop movement of all military on the Russian-German border. (July 31st)

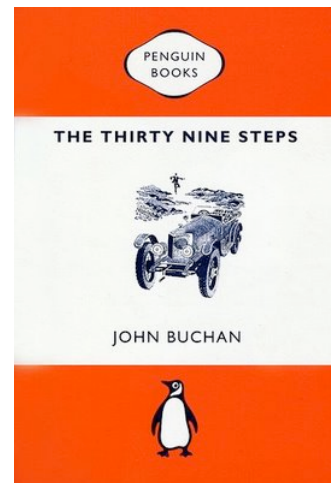
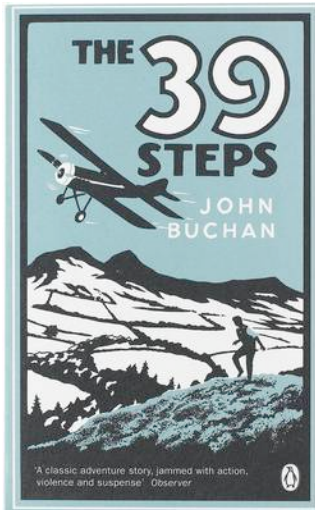
Germany declared war on Russia having received no reply from Russia regarding her ultimatum. (August 1st)

Germany declared war on France and initiating the Schlieffen Plan, invaded Belgium. Italy announced that she would remain neutral. (August 3rd)

Britain declared war on Germany. (August 4th)

Austria-Hungary declared war on Russia; Serbia declared war on Germany. (August 6th)

Montenegro declared war on Germany. (August 8th)



Various covers of the novel version of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. The play, though adapted from the book, differs quite significantly from the novel with the major narrative addition of a romantic interest/femme fatale character in the form of Julia Urquhart.

WHY IS THE PLAY DESCRIBED AS A COMEDY?

John Buchan's novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is a serious mystery spy thriller – as is the most famous adaptation, Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 film version.

But playwright Ross Gumbley has chosen to adapt *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as a comedy.

Instead of playing the story straight, this production of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is best described as a pastiche and a farce.

PASTICHE: (in literary terms) generally denotes a light-hearted tongue-in-cheek imitation of another's style.

FARCE: (in theatre) denotes a comedy characterized by:

- * unlikely and improbable situations
- * exaggerated characters
- * wordplay (e.g. double meanings)
- * physical humour
- * a chase scene
- * deliberate absurdity

→ Farce is sometimes described as the lighthearted companion of satire. Can you see similarities?

WHAT IS IMITATED IN *THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS*?

The Spy Thriller Genre

Features of the genre include:

- * Espionage, often involving government secrets
- * A hero who has been framed for a crime he (or she) did not commit
- * Clearly defined good guys versus bad guys (good and evil is black and white)
- * Mounting tension building towards a climax in which the hero must confront the villains

Alfred Hitchcock Films

Homage is definitely paid to the master of suspense in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

This speech from Wallis (one of the bookies Hannay meets on the train) references the plot of *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

WALLIS Funny the people you meet, by chance, isn't it? "Ships in the night" my wife calls 'em ... bless her ... just sharing the same compartment and then go our own ways ... I heard a pretty tale once, Sir ... two gentlemen, not unlike ourselves met on a train and it turns out they both decided to do away with each other's annoying spouses and nobody could prove anything against 'em, because nobody knew they had even met ... they got away with it too. *Pause* ... do you have an annoying spouse you'd like gotten rid of, Sir?

And look at these screenshots from *Vertigo* (1958):



In *Vertigo*, Jimmy Stewart's character (who is afraid of heights) is left hanging from a rooftop.

and *North by Northwest* (1959):



In *North By Northwest*, Cary Grant's character is run down by a biplane "dusting crops where there ain't no crops" – before it opens fire on him.

Did you see any similar scenes in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*?

SOME OF THE RECURRING THEMES AND DEVICES IN HITCHCOCK FILMS:

- **Birds:** Of all Hitchcock's films, one of the most famous is, of course, *The Birds* – a film about birds suddenly and mysteriously turning against humans. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the brief creepy anecdote that Deacon McNaught shares is reminiscent of this:

DEACON Percy ... was my brother Fingal's mynah bird. A sweeter songstress of the forest you were never likely to hear. He could whistle the first twelve bars of 'My Heart is in the Highlands' and never get a note wrong. He was the delight of Fingal's life.

HANNAY Charming.

DEACON Not at all. He went feral and pecked my brother's eye out.

- Suspense: Hitchcock would illustrate the difference between suspense and surprise with the following saying: "There's two people having breakfast and there's a bomb under the table. If it explodes, that's a surprise. But if it doesn't..." **Can you think of examples of suspense or surprise from *The Thirty-Nine Steps*?**
- MacGuffin: a MacGuffin is "a plot element that catches the viewer's attention or drives the plot of a work of fiction". The characters will be willing to give or do anything to get their hands on the MacGuffin, no matter what it is. As Hitchcock himself explained it: "It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers".
The secret of the MacGuffin is: IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT IT IS. The very essence of a MacGuffin is that it seems important to the characters, but actually, doesn't really matter in terms of the story. Hitchcock was the king of MacGuffins and popularized the term (itself, meaningless) after a little film he made in 1935 called *The 39 Steps*. ***The Thirty-Nine Steps'* MacGuffin is of course the answer to the question: what is the significance of the phrase "The Thirty Nine Steps"?**
- The ordinary person in an extraordinary situation
- The wrong man or wrong woman e.g. mistaken identity **or being wrongly accused**
- The likeable criminal, aka the charming sociopath: Hitchcock's villains are often suave and sophisticated, charming or sympathetic, rather than stereotypically "villainous". **See: *The Colonel***
- Staircases
- Trains
- Brandy (**sometimes known as Cognac**)
- Blonde women: Hitchcock had a well-documented preference for blondes, claiming they looked better in black and white (he filmed in black and white for many years). The women in his films tend to be cool and reserved until danger awakens the emotion inside them. **See: *Julia Urquhart***
- Silent scenes
- Falling from high places: several of Hitchcock's films (***Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Saboteur*, *Rear Window***) feature someone falling from a

great height; ***The Thirty-Nine Steps*** has Richard Hannay leaping from a train as it crosses a bridge over the River Tyne.

- The Perfect Murder: many Hitchcock characters are preoccupied with murder – with the idea that a “perfect murder” can be planned and accomplished (that is – a murder that cannot be solved and traced back to the culprit by the police). The most famous Hitchcock examples are probably ***Rope*** and ***Strangers on a Train***. In ***The Thirty-Nine Steps***, it's Scudder who is trying to plan a perfect murder of sorts: his own (faking his own death).
- Violence in a theatre: In several Hitchcock films, things come to a climactic head in a theatre when gunshots ring out. In ***The Thirty-Nine Steps***, that's how the play **STARTS**.



Ricky Dey as The One Eyed Man and Andrew Laing as Richard Hannay
Photo courtesy of The Manawatu Standard

COSTUMES

In the early planning stages of the production, there was much discussion as to how to approach dressing 30+ characters. The obvious hurdles:

- 3 actors between them play the bulk of the characters, and at several points of the play, this means actors are rapidly switching between characters mid-scene. Each character has to be easily identifiable and distinct; at the same time, the costumes have to allow for quick changes and a theatrical feel, as well as being appropriate to the setting.
- The time-period of the play: Edwardian England, 1914. The fashion of the time was visually unexciting, and it tends to be a period that isn't necessarily readily recognisable or widely recalled over other periods.



Other versions of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* have moved the setting to post-World War II - the late 1940s - a decade which has a far more distinctive style for men and women.

Heightened theatricality is created through the simple use of accessories, with the three actors differentiating between their various characters with the aid of:

- wigs,
- false mustaches,
- hats and glasses
- accessories (The Colonel's cigar; the One Eyed Man's eyepatch and telescope, Sir Harry's electoral rosette)
- the time-honoured pantomime tradition of men playing female roles

Costume designer Ian Harman had to be selective with how faithful he was to the fashion of the early 1900s – bearing in mind the requirements of a play. Costumes have to be worn 5 nights a week for 4 weeks and withstand a lot of wear and tear from actors, especially in a play like this one where actors are in and out of items of clothing in rapid quick changes. Clothing has to look good but also be practical: it has to be able to be washed easily and frequently!

Look at, for example, the striking differences between contemporary fashions for women in 1914:



You can see that Julia Urquhart's draped and polka-dotted outfit is more reminiscent of the evening wear above than the Asian-inspired fashions below.



→ The actor playing Richard Hannay is the only actor who remains in the same outfit for the entirety of the performance – though he borrows items of clothing from other characters to aid Hannay's disguises.

→ Character choices made during the rehearsal process will also influence wardrobe choices. For example – the script does not explicitly mention Paddock as having only one arm.

THE SET & PROPS



“We never question what we expect to see.”

- Richard Hannay

I thought about the story and the journey that hero Richard Hannay undertakes, and I wanted the audience to travel with him on the journey. That is why I chose suitcases [for the set].

- Set designer Daniel Williams

Close to 100 vintage suitcases went into creating the innovative and surprising set for *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. As soon as set designer Dan Williams and director Conrad Newport had agreed on the unique vision in the early stages of the production process, there were two major jobs to tackle.

1. Obtain as many era-appropriate suitcases as possible. Suitcases in the early 1900s did not have zips, so suitcases for our set had to have buckles, and at least look as if they belonged in 1914 (so, no contemporary stickers or fabrics, preferably leather or leather look in muted colours). We put up notices on Facebook and sent emails to friends of the theatre appealing to anyone who might have old suitcases they'd like to donate; Dan and our Production Manager, Brendan van den Berg, also scoured pretty much every antique store and op-shop between Wellington and Napier for hidden suitcase treasures.

In the end, the suitcases we ended up with ranged from beautiful, ancient leather antiques dating from around the early 1900s, right through to contemporary specimens. The bulk of the cases date from the 1970s, believe it or not! Thanks to a bit of design magic (a.k.a paint) to the untrained eye, it's hard to tell just which cases belong to which era.

2. Figure out how to construct it. Dan worked closely with Centrepoint's ace builder, Harvey Taylor, in working out the technical and practical aspects of the set's many secret compartments. One aspect of a theatre set is that it should LOOK visually exciting and relate to the narrative in some sense – this is where Dan's design aesthetic came in.

But another INCREDIBLY important aspect of any set is that it must be practical and safe for the actors to use. Harvey's knowledge of building, coupled with his knowledge of theatre and vast creativity, meant that the set is both stunning and functional.

For example - many of the suitcases were cut in pieces and reinforced to enable them to bear the weight of props or actors.

Suitcases have been used in the production to create a range of different props – from the titular steps, to tables and chairs, to the most popular props in the production, the suitcase “cars”.



The other notable props in the play are:

- The painted train, battleship, zeppelin and lighthouse. (You can see the zeppelin and the lighthouse in the picture above; as well as some of the prop 'snow' that falls on Hannay and Julia in the final scene).
- Augusta: the creepy doll that Lucy talks to
- The steering wheels that go with the suitcase cars
- The silver tea service (glued to a tray) that Paddock carries one-handed
- Hannay's notebook
- Julia's vial of "sleeping draught"

→ Why do you think the choice was made to make some of the props so obviously 'props' (e.g. the black and white train; the tea service defying gravity)?

→ Do you think it is important that the set acts as a kind of puzzle, hiding secrets within it? If you had known about the surprises (e.g. the bed, the tables, the train carriage) ahead of time would your enjoyment of the play have been different?

→ Does every major character have a signature prop? If so, what is it? If not, can you think of an appropriate prop for them?

THE LIGHTING & SOUND EFFECTS

The lighting and sound in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* are very important in creating a heightened “theatrical” feeling for the production. The lighting and sound combine with several other aspects of the production in what can be termed a “Brechtian” distancing effect: a breaking down of the fourth wall.

In many other productions and the majority of films, effort is made to preserve the illusion that the text playing out in front of the audience is “real”. Naturalistic sound and lighting effects aid the illusion of ‘reality’ so that the audience feel like they are privileged spectators, voyeuristically witnessing scenes they can watch but not participate in. Hitchcock, in fact, played up to this idea of the audience as voyeur, going so far as to shoot scenes from the perspective of someone looking through a keyhole, or even shooting an entire movie (*Rear Window*) about a man voyeuristically spying on his neighbour.

In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the lighting and sound are decidedly not naturalistic. Characters have their footsteps and door knocks “dubbed” for them. Shocking or dramatic revelations are punctuated with melodramatic musical **stings** much like you would find in an old movie. Certain characters (like Paddock) have their own musical **accents** that punctuate their entry and exit in a scene. Memories and thoughts are represented as **voiceovers**: e.g. “Cognac: it’s FRENCH”.

The lighting utilises spotlights much of the time – mostly when Hannay is directly addressing the audience (another distancing effect). A spotlight is also used to cartoon effect during the car-chase, to spotlight where the One Eyed Man goes ‘splat’.

The use of spotlighting, particularly in the opening scene, is reminiscent of film noir and helps create the spy thriller atmosphere. Spotlights are also often associated with being highly theatrical and this goes along with the exaggerated style of the play.

For the most part, the lighting alternates between naturalistic and artificial. There are lights that are intended to illuminate and give the impression of ‘real’ locations, either indoors such as the train, Hannay’s flat the hotel, or the Colonel’s mansion, or outdoors such the meeting with the Scottish engineers on the moors; and there are obviously artificial and exaggerated lighting states: such as the spotlights that draw attention to the play as a ‘play’; the artificial lightning that serves as a visible “sting”.

WHODUNNIT?

The Author: John Buchan

John Buchan was born in Scotland in 1875, the first of five children. He attended Glasgow University on a scholarship to study classics and mathematics, and continued his studies at Brasenose College, Oxford University, eventually graduating with a Doctor of Laws. Though Buchan always wrote widely and had essays and stories published throughout his university career, he never regarded writing as a valid career option, though in his lifetime he would publish around 100 books (fiction and nonfiction). His ambition lay in the field of British politics. On graduating, Buchan worked as barrister, and later as private secretary to the High Commissioner for South Africa, Lord Milner, was elected into parliament and was eventually made Governor General of Canada. He was also appointed the title Baron Tweedsmuir.



Buchan worked as a war correspondent for The Times Newspaper in 1915 before joining the army, where he served as Lieutenant Colonel before being made Director of Information and later Director of Intelligence.

Buchan wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps* while he was sick in bed with a duodenal ulcer. It is said that Richard Hannay is based on a real life character Buchan encountered while he was a war reporter in 1915. The 'thirty-nine steps' of the title came from Buchan's young daughter counting the stairs of the private rest home where Buchan was recovering from his illness, according to Buchan's son William: There was a wooden staircase leading down to the beach. My sister, who was about six, and who had just learnt to count properly, went down them and gleefully announced: there are 39 steps."

The Playwright: Ross Gumbley



In 1985 Ross became a trainee actor at The Court Theatre in Christchurch. Since then he has appeared in over 100 productions and broadened his skills to include writing and directing.

Through the late nineties Ross held an Associate Directorship at Centrepoint Theatre. During this time he also anchored his own radio show for Classic Hits and co-wrote six plays with Alison Quigan, many of which have been staged at The Court and throughout the country.

Ross was appointed Associate Artistic Director of The Court in 2004. His first solo venture as a playwright ***Happy Coupling*** premiered at The Court in 2006, the same year that Ross became The Court Theatre's Artistic Director.

Of The Thirty-Nine Steps Ross says:

“When I read an item in the newspaper that, for ‘security reasons’, international airlines were now recording the types of meal that each passenger ordered – I knew I wanted to adapt John Buchan’s novel ***The Thirty-Nine Steps***. I felt the paranoia of our own time reflected the paranoia of Buchan’s time. ***The Thirty-Nine Steps*** was published in 1915, although begun somewhat prophetically in August 1914.

I knew that if I was going to be adapting it, it was going to be a comedy. But, I knew it would need to be ‘comedy’ that was respectful of its source and ‘comedy’ which didn’t undermine the imminent threat of the war. ‘Comedy’ has the power to corrupt; you can often hear the author’s desire to make us laugh through the voices of their characters and I wanted the audience to believe these characters were in genuine peril.

The Thirty-Nine Steps is essentially a conspiracy theory and I’ve always found that kind of quantum paranoia amusing. I liked the idea of pushing the paranoid aspects of the characters to the point where they would become comedic”.

(One of) The Actors: Patrick Davies (a.k.a “Actor Three”)

Tell us about your role in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*:

Ricky (“Actor Four”) , Renee (“Actor Two”) and I provide all the other characters for Hannay to interact with. There is also the comedy of slapstick and silliness that make sure this serious story isn’t just a drama.

With so many characters to play (Patrick plays eleven characters in total), how do you differentiate between them?

With accents and physicality, costumes and intent. Each character has a different motivation in their interaction with Hannay and so supply a different piece of the story. By making their “sound” and “look” different they each become a separate person.

Who is your favourite character to play? What do you consider to be the main contribution of your character(s) to the play?

There are two: Paddock and The Colonel.

Paddock because of the extreme physicality which is difficult to maintain but fun to do; and The Colonel because he is the villain of the piece. .

What have been the main challenges?

Ensuring the characters are all different. Having several Scotsmen and trying to find ways to do the accent differently.

Can you select a moment in the play which has some special significance for any of your characters and explain why it is significant?

The Colonel’s monologue in the final scene purely because it is the reveal of the villain’s plan and also ties up all of what has happened to Hannay. He thinks he has won....but has he?



Patrick Davies as The Colonel
(middle, in the red jacket)

REVIEWS

CLEVER DICKS IN MELODRAMATIC DERRING-DO

The Thirty-Nine Steps

Adapted by Ross Gumbley from John Buchan's novel

Directed by Conrad Newport

at Centrepoint, Palmerston North

Until 8 Oct 2011

Reviewed by Richard Mays, 12 Sep 2011 for Theatreview

Clever Dicks these theatre folk. Programming a show to have traction and audience appeal while the Rugby World Cup dominates most facets of life on this corner of the planet, must've caused a few nightmares at Centrepoint. Fortunately, they've hit on a dream prescription – a stage adaption of Edwardian novelist John Buchan's 'steam-punk' spy thriller, *The 39 Steps*.

Now this is not the *The 39 Steps* – 2007 Olivier Award-winning farce, toast of the West End and based on Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 film by Patrick Barlow. This is a New Zealand edition, with contemporary reference to 'Phonganooy' and all. It is the same spoof concept though – four actors taking multiple roles in a pell-mell style production – but this version is reinterpreted directly from Buchan's novel by Court Theatre's Ross Gumbley. Gumbley will be remembered fondly for his pioneering plays written with Alison Quigan at Centrepoint in the '90s.

'Tis once upon an early 1914, and the redoubtable Richard Hannay, suave-ish self-funded gentleman just back in Blighty from 'the Dark Continent', is so bored with life in London that even he must resort to the theatre for distraction.

The game's afoot then with an absolutely ripping yarn of mesmerism, murder, mystery, mayhem, mistrust, masquerade, motor-cars and monocularism, managed with much melodrama, merriment and mirth. Hannay the hero unwittingly finds himself embroiled in a dastardly plot to compromise British battle-plans should the world ever, perish the thought, stumble into war. Cue dramatic cliché music crescendo!

Close your eyes during this, and you're listening to an old-style over-wrought radio play – but do keep them open because while indulging in 'theatre of the mind' you'll miss the timing, the slapstick, the visual puns and sight gags, the film noir lighting and effects, the costumed style, and a set constructed from suitcases that is probably as clever as the script.

The luggage wall hides windows and doors, a train compartment, a hotel reception, occasional furniture, a bed, and has any number of other natty nooks, while onstage, the protagonists pursue one another by dibbling around on valise vehicles.

The play even contains an echo of 1995's Gumbley/Quigan play *Biggles On Top* – even if forward firing machine-gun totin' biplanes didn't happen until 1915.

It's certainly an admirable cast. The straight man throughout, Andrew Laing plays a perturbed but doggedly determined and dashing Hannay, while Renee Sheridan, Patrick Davies and Ricky Dey inhabit 30-odd other quirky and quickly-costumed characters around him.

Davies is allowed to deliberately upstage as Paddock, Hannay's gimpy one-armed valet, and turns in a couple of well-honed tartan-clad red-headed caricatures of the Scottish persuasion. Excelling as the femme fatale, Sheridan also makes a cracker street-urchin paper-seller, while Dey has the poise and panache to pull off a gallery of accomplished cameos and accents.

A little more pace in the wordy opening scenes wouldn't go amiss, but this amusing bags-and-all production is as diverting and sparkling a piece of entertainment away from the all-pervasive rampancy of rigger, as anyone could possibly hope to enjoy.

THRILLER COMEDY BALANCE ENJOYABLY ACHIEVED

The Thirty-Nine Steps

Adapted by Ross Gumbley from John Buchan's novel

Directed by Conrad Newport

at Centrepoint, Palmerston North

Until 8 Oct 2011

Reviewed by John Ross, 12 Sep 2011 for Theatreview

It's mid-1914, with war seeming increasingly likely – but will Britain be absolutely dragged 'into the abyss'? Will the gallant Richard Hannay and his ally the elegant Mrs Urquhart thwart a fiendishly ingenious conspiracy devised by some dreaded Huns, to bring that about? You might well ask.

As the writer's programme note acknowledges, this is a thriller turned 'comedic.' It's also strongly theatrical. Entering the auditorium, we are faced with, on an initially empty stage, a massive upstage wall made up of suitcases, chests, and other luggage, end-on, much of which turns out to be not what it seemed.

The manipulations of bits of Daniel Williams' ingeniously designed set provide a vital constituent of the action as Hannay moves from a London flat, theatre, and streets, by train to the Heelands of Scartland, making his way across a moor to a castle, a hotel, and so forth, finally hustling back to London, and the final confrontation at Gravesend, in the snow. The suitcase motif extends to representations of cars, and a jigger.

One actor plays Hannay, but the other three are people of many strongly-differentiated parts, costumes and wigs. Working out the logistics of these role-changes must have called upon the exercise of great ingenuity by the writer, the director Conrad Newport, and the costume designer Ian Harman. That the action flows apparently effortlessly is highly creditable to them, as well as to the versatility of the actors. The pace is widely varied yet never entirely lost.

Hannay is by no means James Bond, yet Andrew Laing often manages to make him look like a precursor of Sean Connery's Bond, though without Bond's insouciant sangfroid; with, instead, often enough, a paranoically desperate manner (he doubtless knows that he doesn't have a stunt double). And his amorous exploits with Mrs Urquhart don't extend beyond a few good pashes and cuddles. (But thereafter? Good luck to him!) Rather, he is a pre-World War One Pommie gentleman, freshly back in London from some kind of adventuring in Africa, plucky, resourceful, and despite his paranoia and stress not deterred from intrepidly pressing onward. Laing sustains this role convincingly, and effectively, and also the action, since he seems to be onstage almost throughout.

Renée Sheridan especially plays Mrs Urquhart, a young-ish wealthy widow, with aplomb and stylishness, yet also a dowdy London theatre-goer who has a fixation with arses, and a near-

incomprehensible Scots railway-line fixer, Angus Junior. And who else?

Patrick Davies plays so many parts it would be absurd to list them, but particularly entertaining is his playing of Paddock, Hannay's one-armed man-servant, a bit eccentric, set in his ways, a tad slow but not dumb, likewise of a Scottish hotel porter, who is seriously gruff and slow. Ricky Dey also handles many roles, but his sinister and formidable "One-Eyed Man" is especially memorable.

Striking a balance between making a thriller gripping enough to be exciting, and treating it comedically, is quite a challenge, yet it is here enjoyably achieved.

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