

# A Teaching Resource Pack

Devised and written by Dick Johns to support the 2006 production at the Criterion Theatre, Piccadilly

Updated in March 2009 to coincide with the 1000<sup>th</sup> performance

Commissioned and produced by Mousetrap Theatre Projects



This pack is downloadable from [www.love39steps.com](http://www.love39steps.com)

Production photography by Tristram Kenton

## Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	3
Production Notes	4
Synopsis of the Production	5
Plot Synopsis	6 – 7
Profile of John Buchan	8
Profile of Alfred Hitchcock	9
A note from the adaptor	10 - 11
Interview with Patrick Barlow, adaptor	13 – 14
Interview with Rupert Degas, actor	15
Interview with Tessa Churchard, actor	16 - 17
Interview with Alan Perrin, actor	18
Interview with Jasper Fox, Company Stage Manager	19
Interview with Peter McKintosh, Designer	20
Interview with Mic Pool, Sound Designer	21
Interview with John Manning, Casting Director	22-23
Interview with Toby Sedgwick, Movement Director	24-25
Practical Classroom Work	26 - 34
National press reviews	35 - 40
Poster artwork	41
Costume designs	42 - 43
Bibliography and Links	44
Information about Mousetrap Theatre Projects	45-46

## Introduction

This pack has been produced to support learning for students at KS3 and KS4 who either have seen or are about to see the production of *The 39 Steps* at the Criterion Theatre in London's West End. It includes background notes on the production itself, details of the plot and interviews with several people who played key roles in the creative process. It also contains bespoke materials for work related to the show in the classroom or drama studio.

This pack is commissioned and produced by Mousetrap Theatre Projects, which is committed to increasing access for young people to the best of live theatre in London and to enabling them to engage creatively with that experience. For more information go to [www.mousetrap.org.uk](http://www.mousetrap.org.uk)



## Production Notes

This particular production has had a long and fairly complex gestation prior to arriving on the West End stage. Back in 1995 two writers based in the North of England, Nobby Dimon and Simon Corble came up with a version of *The 39 Steps* which toured with great success to small venues (village halls and small theatres). This version was based primarily on John Buchan's book. An element fixed at this point was the idea of just 4 actors playing all the parts: 3 men and a woman.

Edward Snape of production company Fiery Angel saw the production, liked the concept but felt the text needed a fresh eye, so he asked Patrick Barlow to adapt the script. Patrick decided that his adaptation would be based on the film rather than the book, as the film is more inherently dramatic. After a production at West Yorkshire Playhouse followed by a four week tour in 2005, the show came to the Tricycle Theatre in London in August 2006 and gained an immediate transfer to the West End, where it has been running since. The current production is directed by Maria Aitken.

The show is very characteristic of the work of Patrick Barlow, who is greatly respected in theatre for his work with his own company, The National Theatre of Brent. The brilliance of National Theatre of Brent shows is often in the creation of a lot from very little, so that with minimal set or costume (or indeed cast), complex or even epic stories can be both hilariously and movingly told. This is achieved through fearless engagement with the audience and a full embracing of theatricality. Often things go deliberately wrong and actors come out of role momentarily. This is a knowing, self-reflexive approach to theatre that says "look, we know we're in a theatre, and we know you're there, so let's just have a good time." This has strong roots in the theatrical tradition, from the comic asides of pantomime, Victorian melodrama and Elizabethan drama, through to the more recent success of the staged version of the TV skit *Acorn Antiques*, penned by Victoria Wood. In this last production the audience were complicit in a complex joke about bad TV.

## Synopsis of the Production

What we get is an incredibly fast-paced romp through the story of Hitchcock's film. It is a pastiche, an affectionate and very funny transposition of the film on to the stage. The film contains set pieces that are iconic: the train top chase, the Forth Bridge escape, Mr Memory at the Palladium, the stockings scene. Much of the joy of the show is in seeing these moments recreated through the physicality and vocal talent of the 4 performers.

It is also an evocative tribute to a 1930s' Britain of cold mists (dry ice is liberally utilised), steam engines and a clearly demarcated social system where people know their place. At its centre, juxtaposed with the comedy, is the story of a man's personal quest to find self-fulfilment.



## Synopsis of the Plot

(Courtesy Wikipedia)

There have been three major film versions of the book; Hitchcock's original has been the most acclaimed, and remains so today. In 1999 it came 4th in a BFI poll of British films, while in 2004 *Total Film* named it the 21st greatest British movie of all time.

The story is a classic portrayal of one man's flight from wrong accusation through a series of improbable adventures as he is pursued by the authorities. Romance comes from him being handcuffed to a woman, with whom he ultimately falls in love. Finally the true villains are exposed and our hero is vindicated.

## Plot



Richard Hannay is at a London theatre, attending a demonstration of the remarkable powers of "Mr. Memory", a man with a photographic memory, when a fight breaks out and shots are fired. In the ensuing panic, he finds himself holding a frightened Annabella Schmidt, who talks him into taking her back to his flat. There, she tells him that she is a spy, being chased by assassins out

to kill her. She claims to have uncovered a plot to steal vital British military secrets, implemented by a man with the top joint missing from one of his fingers, head of an espionage organisation called the "39 Steps".

The next day, Hannay wakes up to find her dead, stabbed with his bread knife. He sneaks out of the flat disguised as a milkman and takes a train to Scotland, where she had told him she was going to find the man. On the train, he sees the police on his trail. In desperation, he enters a compartment and kisses the sole occupant, the attractive Pamela, in an attempt to escape detection. She however manages to free herself from his unwanted embrace and betrays him to the law. He jumps from the train onto the Forth Rail Bridge and escapes.

He stays the night with a poor older farmer and his young wife who flirts with Hannay. The next morning, he leaves in the farmer's Sunday coat, and calls at the house the woman had told him of. There he finds the man with the missing finger-joint, the seemingly respectable Professor Jordan, who shoots him after a brief conversation and leaves him for dead. Luckily, the bullet fails to penetrate the farmer's prayer-book, left in a coat pocket, and Hannay flees once more.

He goes to the police, but they refuse to accept his story, since they know Jordan well. Hannay jumps through a window and escapes into the crowd. He tries to hide himself in a political meeting, but is mistaken for the keynote speaker; he gives a rousing impromptu speech (without knowing a thing about the candidate he is introducing), but is recognised by Pamela, who gives him up once more. They are handcuffed together and taken away by "policemen". Hannay eventually realises they are agents of the conspiracy when they bypass the nearest police station. When the car is forced to stop, he escapes, dragging an unwilling Pamela along.

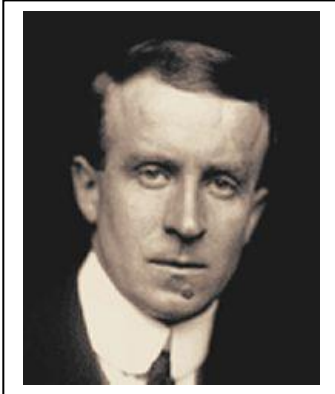
They travel cross country, and stay the night at an inn, the girl still not believing Hannay's



story. While he sleeps, she slips out of the handcuffs, but then eavesdrops on one of the fake policemen on the telephone downstairs; the conversation confirms Hannay's assertions. She returns to the room and sleeps on a sofa. Next morning, she tells him what she heard, and is sent to London to pass it on to the police. No secrets have been reported missing however, so they do

nothing to help. Instead, they follow her to get to Hannay.

She leads them to Mr. Memory's show at the London Palladium, where the police close in on the fugitive. When the performer is introduced, Hannay recognises his theme music - it's the annoyingly catchy tune he hasn't been able to forget for days. Hannay puts two and two together and realises that Mr. Memory is how the spies are smuggling the secrets out: he has them memorised. As the police take him into custody, he shouts out a question about the 39 Steps. When Mr. Memory compulsively begins to answer, Jordan shoots him and tries to flee, but is apprehended. The dying Mr. Memory recites the information stored in his brain, a design for silent aircraft, and Hannay and the girl stroll off, hand in hand.



### Profile-John Buchan

The writer John Buchan was born the son of a clergyman in Perth, Scotland in 1875. He attended Glasgow and Oxford Universities, and started to publish his fiction whilst there. His career was as a barrister and later a very successful Civil Servant in the diplomatic corps. He ended up living in Canada as Governor-General and was honoured with the title Baron Tweedsmuir. He wrote his stories primarily for his own entertainment and *The 39 Steps* was begun during an illness in 1914 and completed in 1915. Richard Hannay, hero of *The 39 Steps*, went on to feature in many later novels.

During WW1, and therefore at the time of this novel's genesis, Buchan was a skilled propagandist for the British government. He will have been acutely aware of the atmosphere of mistrust and double-crossing pervasive during the period. The spy novel is the perfect way to express such fears of infiltration by the enemy, a key tool in the propagandist armory. In this context, one where the old world order is collapsing and where central Europe is fighting the Allied powers, the novel *The 39 Steps* can be seen as a straightforward battle between good (the allies as represented by Hannay) and evil (Germany and the Ottoman Empire as represented by professor Jordan).

For more information on WW1 go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/world-war-one>

For more on spy fiction go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spy-fiction>





### Profile – Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock was and remains the consummate director of the thriller genre. His films (*The Birds*, *Dial M for Murder*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, *Psycho*) are enduring classics of world cinema. His career spanned from the inception of talking pictures in the late '20s to the golden age of stars and studios in the '50s and '60s. His rotund, thick lipped appearance became as iconic an image as the films themselves, in which he often made a cameo appearance. (It is in tribute to this that he appears in silhouette as a puppet in the current production.) He was born in East London in 1899 and died in LA in 1980. He was in his lifetime generally known as “The Master of Suspense”.

For more information on the spy film genre and its lineage from Hitchcock through to the modern James Bond, go to:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/spy-films>



## A NOTE FROM PATRICK BARLOW, ADAPTOR

It all began on a street corner in Soho. Must have been three years ago. Four maybe. I bumped into Edward Snape, the producer, in Great Newport Street. Or was it Little? Anyway he said he had an interesting script. A stage version of *The 39 Steps* for three men and a woman. Anything minimal is interesting to me, so I had a look. In my National Theatre of Brent, we only have two actors, so four felt positively luxurious!

The script by two guys called Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon was fun and the central idea brilliant—i.e. the four person thing—but I felt they'd missed a trick. They'd based it mostly on the Buchan novel, whereas I thought *The 39 Steps* everyone knows is the movie. The novel is actually quite boring and fairly bizarre. Hannay's on the run in the Highlands for a murder he didn't commit but that's about the only similarity to the film. He spends most of his time meeting young Scottish men and putting on increasingly unlikely disguises. There's no Forth Bridge, no Mr. Memory, no train, no honeymoon hotel, not a woman in sight. So I said to Edward I would like to work on it but only if we could make the movie our inspiration.

One of my earliest movie memories was being taken to the Essoldo Cinema in Granby Street, Leicester by my big brother Jeremy. I was a very young 12 and we went together to the last performance which was a thrilling thing in itself and the movie was the Kenneth More version of *The 39 Steps*, and I was instantly captivated and fell completely in love with movies as a result. (The actress Taina Elg played the Madeleine Carroll part as an Austrian for some reason. Her stocking removal scene was without doubt the most thrilling thing I'd seen in my life ever. Leicester is a very dull place.) The More version is based on the Hitchcock, even has many of the same lines. It pales in comparison, of course, but I wasn't to know that then, obviously. Anyway, it has stayed with me, like early movie experiences do. And the title alone has always had a special magic. A rather wicked resonance. Something about being out with my glamorous brother at a grown-up movie. The knife in the back, the girl on the train, the Forth Bridge, the missing finger. Oh yes, and the stockings gliding down the leg...

As soon as Edward agreed, I went off and watched the Hitchcock version which of course is utterly brilliant, dangerous and light at the same time, beautifully structured, witty, thrilling and very sexy. I had *The 39 Steps* experience all over again.

Apparently Hitchcock and his writer Charles Bennett spent six weeks in a boat going up and down the Thames to get the screenplay right. They smoked cigarettes and acted it out and ate heaps of smoked salmon and drank bottles of champagne. I suggested this to Edward who asked us to go easy on the smoked salmon.

In the meantime he'd asked Emil Wolk to direct our theatre version and Emil asked Ultz to design it. We were completely collaborative. We decided to have one actor playing Hannay throughout, our actress playing Pamela (Madeleine Carroll), Annabella (Lucie Mannheim) and Margaret the Crofter's wife (Peggy Ashcroft) and the remaining two actors playing all the other parts, the villain, Mr. Memory,

policemen, railway porters etc. Emil, with his background in physical theatre, had the brilliant idea of making these two into clowns—a sort of double-act—continually playing off each other. Occasionally losing their grip when the stress of playing over a hundred parts got too much.

It was after I'd written the first draft that something happened that affected everything. The three of us were sitting in a cafe in Notting Hill, eating a huge cake I remember, and we were all saying it couldn't just be a '30s pastiche and wondering what it could be. Ultz was looking at the opening speech I'd written for Hannay, sitting alone and square-jawed in his grim, grey West End flat with a bottle of Scotch. Suddenly Ultz said rather quietly "He's actually suicidal, Hannay, isn't he?" And just that gave us the whole thing. The whole germ of the plot. That it wasn't just a pastiche. But a story about a man on the verge of killing himself. Who decides—or is forced—to save his own life. He starts out selfish and heartless and narcissistic but is sent on a journey that changes him into another kind of person altogether. He finds love. And through love, he finds he cares. He hates people at the start. But loves them by the end. It's a proper story I hope. Like a fairy story. Someone lacks something. They go on a journey. They find it. They are healed. End. It's also very fast and madcap and funny. Or it better be.

Sadly that first collaboration ended. A West End theatre fell through. Everything stopped. Emil went to Australia. A year went by. Then last year, the West Yorkshire Playhouse got involved. Fiona Buffini directed a great production. This was very different—very pure and stripped-back. Maria Aitken is directing this time. With Toby Sedgwick who recently worked on the brilliant production of *Tintin* at the Barbican doing the movement. Maria and Toby are like a double act. They shout "Good!" and "No!" and "Better!" at absolutely the same time. It's quite scary. I've just come from a run-through of Act One. Ten days to go and there's definitely madcap and there's definitely moving and there's Catherine McCormack.

There's a moment when she kisses Hannay (Charles Edwards) for the first time in the roaring Highland express. The rehearsal room definitely stopped for a moment. A memory stirred. From the dark and smoky recesses of the Essoldo Cinema, Granby Street, in the very boring city of Leicester. Last performance.

Written in July 2006

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### Interviews with Some Key Players

The following interviews were conducted to give an overview into some of the creative processes involved in producing a piece of theatre of this type. As well as the insight into the making of the production it is anticipated that these transcripts might provide a useful précis of what it is to work in the theatre, be it as writer/adaptor, performer or stage manager. There is clearly a PSHE (careers) application here. One unanimous observation volunteered by all participants was that this show is very well received by young people, irrespective of their familiarity or otherwise with the texts that inform it. It will be particularly useful to refer to these materials when conducting the lesson plans in the latter part of this pack. For ease of copying, I've started each on a new page.





PATRICK BARLOW - Writer/adaptor  
(interviewed in December 2006)

*Were you adapting the film or the book in this piece?*  
It's the film. Definitely the film. It's the film and me and a tiny bit from the opening of the book.

*Do you have any comments to make about genre with regard to the piece?*  
Well the film is comedy thriller I suppose.

*Talk us through the adaptation process from film to stage version.*

Well there is no published screenplay so I watched the film lots of times and scribbled it down. That was a blueprint but I gave myself lots of liberty to change it. So I just took the film and then added things that make me laugh. So the stockings scene is the same but I added in the sandwich and a mad argument between Hannay and Pamela. That relationship fascinated me, between Pamela and Hannay. The repression of it. Repression is very interesting for a writer to look at. It's very like *Brief Encounter*, it's that world. The Hitchcock film treats the relationship quite lightly, so I added a lot to it.

*And what are the things you add to make it funny or to make it pastiche?*

Well doing things really fast seems to work, so the dialogue in the train with the underwear salesman would not be funny at normal pace, but really fast it works.

*And is it easier to write from scratch or to adapt?*

If it's just you involved, adapting is a joy. But generally there are others involved, producers etc., whose opinions may differ from yours, and that can be miserable. Writing your own stuff from the heart is a joy, so I guess it is easier. I mean, for anyone who wants to know about the nightmares for a writer of adaptation, there is a great book called *Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman, which says it all.

*So is this pastiche?*

It is pastiche, but it is very important that there is a real story going on. It's about a man who is lonely and lost in his heart ... really a powerful story. And emotionally there is a journey, otherwise I wouldn't be interested in doing it. I mean for Pamela, too, as well as Hannay. She's very uptight, repressed.

*Any comments on how the audience receive it.*

It's been fantastic. They get into the spirit. I couldn't ask for more. Kids love it. They haven't seen the film or read the book ... even a seven year old. They just know it's funny.

*Does anything get lost in the laughter?*

Sometimes some of the love story goes, but that is to do with the actors driving it for laughs, which they have to do.

*Any comments on linguistic choices you make in the piece... how the language of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century differs from our own?*

'Crumbs', 'crikey', 'golly', 'absolutely beastly'. You have to be really careful... all the language has to be of the period and of the genre. In fact there is a line near the end I noticed the other day. Hannay says, "Hang on, this is a hymn book"... and that 'hang on' just isn't quite right. It's more recent.

*Why do we like pastiche/spoof?*

I don't know, but there's clearly a lot of it. It's like when French and Saunders do their things. I have no idea.



RUPERT DEGAS – Actor  
(interviewed in December 2006)

*Tell me about your role in the piece.*

Well we're called clowns (changed in subsequent drafts to Man 1 and 2) because what else can they call us, Simon (his co-actor Simon Gregor) and I? We play 40-50 parts between us. We are mechanicals. Our function is to assist Hannay to tell the story. We do that with our voices and

our clowning skills.

*With so many characters to play, how do you differentiate?*

Body posture, facial changes. Different voices and accents come from different places. So when I do voiceovers, the director in the booth will often tell me, "you know your face changed when you did that?" and I'm not that surprised. (Rupert here convincingly demonstrates 6 or 7 accents, his facial and neck muscles altering rapidly as he does so. The point is made.)

*Any comments on the language of the piece and how that evokes social class?*

Well there are two ways of speaking: that very terribly upper class thing, the BBC thing, and then your working class Max Miller (he does a 'cock-ern-ey' accent). And then there is a third which is the people who want to sound upper class so they put that on top of their working class accent and end up sounding very weird.

*And did all this get discussed in rehearsal with Maria (Aitken, director)?*

Oh god yes endlessly discussed. So much.

*And how is the show itself?*

We play every night. It's like kids in a sandpit. We are chucking the ball all over the place. It's a generous ensemble cast. And it's very fast, very quick changes. Velcro is everywhere.

*Do you need to have seen the film?*

You don't need to have seen it but afterwards you will want to.



TESSA CHURCHARD - Actor  
(interviewed in March 2009)

*Tell me about your characters and which one's your favourite?*

I play a German woman called Annabella Schmidt, Margaret, a crofter's wife from the Scottish Highlands and a posh blonde called Pamela. I suppose my favourite character is Pamela because I play her the most, so it's something to get your teeth into. I love them all to be honest. I love Margaret because she's so sweet and innocent and Annabella is great fun to play.

*How do you think the show appeals to schools?*

I think it works on a number of levels. It works for primary school children right up to grannies who really love it. It really does cover everything. It's very visual. I think that there will be some parts of the text that primary school children won't get but they love the visual side of it and it is the sort of thing that any school could do, put this play on. You have almost no set and you have packing cases that become the train and with a few costumes - you invent all these fantastic things - and I think that primary school children love all those visual gags and they get them very quickly.

*You play some strong characters- which of the female characters is a good role model?*

I think they all are in a way. Margaret the Scottish girl is very nervous. She does the right thing and decides that Hannay is in need of help even though her husband is angry with her. She helps him out of a tight spot believing he's not the murderer and helps him escape from the police. Annabella does what she does because she's trying to save the world and is very brave.

*How did you feel coming onto an already established show playing a role that has already been played?*

It's quite intimidating. I came to see it with the actress who played the part before me and she was fantastic - she's a dancer so she's very good at all the physical stuff. The role was at a high standard so it's quite tricky coming in and making sure that you maintain



that standard. Watching her performance gave me tips on what worked and what I could bring to the role that was different.

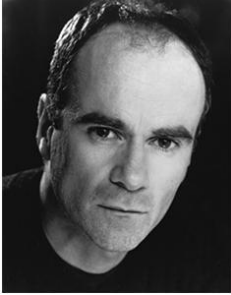
*You have to have an on-stage kiss more than once. How do you prepare for that as an actress and is it tough doing it night after night?*

Make sure you clean your teeth!! It's not so nice if the other person has a cold!

*What advice would you give to young people getting into acting?*

Get involved in as much as you can at school, join a local youth group. You've got to want to do it above anything else because it is hard and there a lot of knockbacks but persevere. There are a lot of accredited courses now at drama schools which are degree courses so it gives you an education as well as training you in your craft.





ALAN PERRIN - Actor  
(interviewed in March 2009)

*Tell me about the roles you play in the piece?*

I play a huge amount of roles but the main ones are Mr Memory, Salesman, Mrs Jordan, Mrs McGarrigle and Mr McQuarrie, the man you can't hear.

*What attracted you to the show?*

The job I did before this was similar, lots of accents, rhythms. John Manning cast me in that and also cast me in The 39 Steps.

*There is a lot of fast-paced, high speed action in the show. It's not a musical and there is no dancing but do you have to physically warm up?*

You do have to. My arm's gone now because of the show but it's tricky keeping it right. Your body gets used to doing each thing in a similar way so when a new cast member comes on board you need to make sure that both bodies physically work in the same way. The show does keep you very fit!

*How do you find working with Nigel Betts (Man 2)? Did it take a long time to click into the double act you've become?*

*(Jokingly)* I don't like working with Nigel. He doesn't know what he's doing. I keep giving him notes but he won't listen. We still haven't got it right and we've been doing it since August!!

*How do you think the show appeals to schools?*

It's quite a sophisticated show in terms of the lighting and the sound. The bare bones of it are chairs, tables and frames. They create all the spaces. It's very democratic theatre and it means the kids can go back to the classroom and do it. They can say "I know how to do a car, all you need is four chairs and a steering wheel and a bit of movement." It's not extravagance, it's just clever.

**JASPER FOX - Company Stage Manager**  
(interviewed in March 2009)

*You are the Company Stage Manager – what does that entail?*

Looking after the company with their day-to-day needs. I also represent the management, getting the figures from the box office and I draw up the payroll, look after petty cash etc. The stage manager side is looking after the day-to-day running of the show and deputising for anyone who is absent.

*Tell us about your crew – there are various roles, what are they and what do they do?*

Deputy Stage Manager (DSM) – his role is to call the show. This means that he prompts the actors to go on and cues the lighting and operates the sound. The sound is computerised and operable by one person.

Assistant Stage Manager (ASM) – on hand during the whole of the show - they help with scene changes and do cues.

Resident Master Carpenter – aside from his daily duties he also does cues on stage.

Lighting Board Operator – works in the lighting box situated Front of House and responds to cues from the Deputy Stage Manager.

Dresser and Wardrobe Mistress – Dresser helps the actors with costume changes and the Wardrobe Mistress takes care of day to day running of the show – mending costumes, getting them washed daily etc.

*Why do you think the show appeals to schools?*

I think it's an all action show. It's a show that brings the actual drama down to its basic fun process. I think it appeals to children because it's like how they play in the playground. It's a child-like process.

*How do you think the show has changed over its run?*

The aim is for it is not for it to change. Each actor brings a certain new quality to the role which allows for changes in the dynamic but no major changes. This also means the dynamic backstage changes which shakes things up again.

*What happens if an actor gets sick? Does this pose a problem when there is a cast of four?*

Well we have three understudies who are in the building and ready to go on if the cast do get sick or injured during a show. They also go on if the main cast are absent for an extended time or on holiday.

PETER MCKINTOSH – Designer  
(Interviewed in March 2009)

*You are the Designer for The 39 Steps. What is it you specifically designed?*

The set, costumes and props; everything that you see on the stage! (in conjunction with the director).  
The premise of the story is that it's told on an empty stage, with minimal props.

*Where did you get your vision from when designing the costumes?*

Well of course I started with the script. The way that the show is written (for just 4 actors) dictates, I think, that the costumes should be fun and a little silly sometimes. The 1930s period is quite prescriptive for the look of the costumes and in a few places we pay homage to the original film, but overall it is about creating *instantly* identifiable characters.

*How much of the John Buchan novel and the Alfred Hitchcock film did you draw on when it came to designing the set?*

The book not at all. The film a little bit, but principally it's a real theatre piece – we wanted it to be a unique theatrical experience, an exercise in simplicity, imagination and great storytelling.

*What can young people learn from the design of the show?*

It's really nice to see that young people enjoy the show so much and I think it's because it forces everyone to use their imaginations. You don't have to be literal or spend lots of money in order to tell epic stories, and despite its silliness it also manages, in the intimate scenes, to retain its love story and engage the viewer.

(Drawings of Peter's costume designs for the show can be seen later in this pack)

## MIC POOL – Sound Designer (interviewed in March 2009)

*You are the Sound Designer for the 39 steps. What did that entail?*

A Sound Designer is basically responsible for everything the audience hears that is not the actor's unaided voice. On *The 39 Steps* the main areas of the sound design are music research and effects design. Having assembled the music and sound effects scores I then designed the playback systems so that all the cues could be performed in the theatre to precisely follow the actors' work onstage. Finally I designed the placement of the loudspeaker and other equipment to give the audience a full surround sound experience.

*What was your inspiration for the sound design?*

In modern sound design one of the problems we have is that almost anything is possible. It is therefore very important to make some early rules as to what should be included in the sound design. For *39 Steps* the main rule was that all the music and effects should sound as if they could have been in an early Hitchcock film. Although both the music and effects come from a wide range of sources and recordings spanning 70 years, everything sounds as if it is part of the same show.

*The show has a number of different sound cues in the production, how does this help drive the narrative?*

There are an average of 3 sound cue sequences (which might consist of many different sounds) every minute of the production. In actuality it is the actors that drive the narrative. It is the job of the sound design to seamlessly support everything they do, whether it be riding in trains and cars, being chased by planes, marching with bands, addressing audiences etc. A lot of the comedy in the show is dependent on split second coordination of effects and music with the acting.

*How much have you done on the show since it has been up and running?*

I watch the show regularly to maintain standards, work with new cast members to adjust timings and integrate any of their pre-recorded voiceover cues and prepare new versions of the show for international replica productions.

*You won a Tony Award for your work on the show. How much did it mean to you to have your work acknowledged?*

I actually won the first Tony ever awarded for sound design which was a great honour. When you are creating a production nothing is further from your mind than any thought of awards. But once the show is up and running and entertaining audiences then award nominations are a real bonus. As well as winning the Tony I received another 5 nominations worldwide for *39 Steps* including an Olivier award nomination for the London production.

JOHN MANNING – Casting Director  
(Interviewed in March 2009)

*You are the Casting Director for The 39 Steps. What does that entail?*

Casting entails working with directors and identifying their needs in terms of finding suitable actors for a specific production. A lot of it is administration: contacting agents, seeing if clients are interested, setting up auditions and then putting in offers and sending out contracts. There's also a more creative side; going to theatre to see actors and suggesting them for the show if they are suitable. I draw up lists of actors who I've seen and think would be suitable for the job.

*How many times have you cast The 39 Steps?*

Well I didn't cast it originally in the West End. There was another casting director called Simone Reynolds who cast it at the Tricycle which was the first cast that did it in the West End and before that Joyce Nettles cast the tour of it from West Yorkshire Playhouse. But I have now cast it three times in the West End and once on a UK tour and I'm currently casting the West End show for a fourth time.

*There are only 4 cast members: 3 men and 1 woman, does this make it harder to cast than a bigger cast?*

Well I think each show has got its different problems. If you are casting a big show there are more people but you still want everyone to be as right in their part as they can be.

*What is your favourite part of the process of casting?*

I think the most fulfilling part is if I see an actor in something and then I suggest them, they come in and read, read well and we offer them the part. That's very fulfilling as it's something I uniquely bring to the table.

*Do you think there is a certain flair or intuition you need as a casting director?*

To some degree but I think anyone can cast on a very basic level and people do regularly suggest actors for the show but whether the people they suggest would be interested in the show you are trying to cast is a very different matter. A good casting director should be able to suggest enough people so you can cast something say ten times and still have other people to call in for audition. For me a good casting director needs an extensive knowledge base of actors.

*What advice would you give to young people about getting into the acting industry?*

It's good to get as much experience as early as you can like joining youth theatres and doing drama at school. I think it is useful to go to Drama school. If you are serious about acting then apply to RADA, Lamda, Guildhall etc who have good reputations and give good training. It gives you a launchpad into the industry when you do showcases to which members of the industry are invited, casting directors

and agents; it's a great way of getting seen by the industry. It's not essential to go to Drama school but I think it's very difficult to get that springboard unless you have been.

*What advice would you give to young people who want to get into the casting industry?*

Different casting directors have different paths. Some actors, stage managers and company managers become casting directors. My own experience comes from doing an English degree at university. I knew I wanted to work in theatre and I applied for lots of different jobs. The first job that I got was a graduate role as an Admin Assistant at a regional theatre in Salisbury and the situation there was that they didn't have a resident casting director and I ended up doing the casting purely from an administrative level and that grew. I started seeing a lot more theatre and so had a bigger input into the casting process and became their casting director. It's about finding opportunities when they arise. A lot of people work as casting assistants before they get to move up the tree. It is tricky.

*Why do you think the show appeals to schools?*

The way the show works is inventive in using 4 actors for lots of different roles and the design is simple - the cast create different environments from a basic set of kit. I think a lot of those areas are interesting for students studying Theatre Studies. They are in the core curriculum; role play, characterisation and building environments on stage.

*Can you recount any embarrassing stories or anecdotes from any casting sessions?*

I once cast a show where a woman brought her dog into the audition which was quite bizarre. It wouldn't stop yapping and she asked if the director minded it being in there. He said that it was proving quite distracting and so she quite literally threw it out of the door. For the rest of the audition we could just hear this barking dog running up and down the stairs outside. Hilarious.

TOBY SEDGWICK - Movement Director  
(interviewed March 2009)

*What does the job of a Movement Director involve?*

It's quite specific to each job. It's coming up with the movement orientated sequences, transitions in scenes or something specific within a scene. Creating a movement sequence that the director feels needs to have the moment director.

*What was your involvement in The 39 Steps specifically?*

To come up with imaginative ways of portraying things like the train sequence, someone escaping from a train at 40 mph. It had a cinematic approach to create an image that would not be possible to do on stage unless you had the physical set. There are also elements of mime. A lot of my work is working out good comedy timing and quick character changes. It's all about manipulation and change of character. A lot of The 39 Steps was to do with the comic timing of certain scenes and visual effects, the visual way of portraying a situation!

*How do you come up with your ideas?*

The ideas were stimulated by the script and what the script required. That's how the idea would start. Experimenting with the actors, trying things out and finding ultimately the best and funniest way of portraying a certain situation.

*People quite often use the term "physical theatre". What, to you, does this term mean? Would you say that The 39 Steps is "physical theatre"?*

The term physical theatre is generally an idea that's portrayed more through the physicality of a piece rather than the dialogue. The dialogue might be the starting point but a physiological change might be necessary to putting across an idea. The 39 Steps uses a lot of physical comedy and physical theatre. The outer casing of the situation can be enhanced by being physical rather than just the dialogue so the audience's imagination can be manipulated into understanding a situation better.

*How did you become a Movement Director and did you have any training?*

A lot of the way I work is still based on the ideology of the Lecoq and his pedagogy (his 2 year course). The outline exposes you to the idea of how to think about theatre and the dynamic of theatre. It is to do with much more physical theatre so that as with Mime – Marcel Marceau for instance – it would take into account a lot more than just reaction.

For more information on Lecoq then please visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques\\_Lecoq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Lecoq)



*Since The 39 Steps, you've won an Olivier Award for your work on the National Theatre's production of War Horse. What was it like working on that show and what else have you been up to recently?*

That show was extraordinary – one of the aspects of the job was to make the puppets move and act like real horses which meant choreographing like real horses. The actions and reactions would simulate a real horse. Another aspect was to create the dynamic of the first charge. It was a very watchable and tragic situation. It was like a choreographed section of a piece.

I've just finished His Dark Materials in Birmingham which will go on tour and finish at the West Yorkshire Playhouse.

## Practical Work

Note: All of the following material is designed specifically for use in the classroom or drama studio to support the production seen at The Criterion. It is designed to support the Drama and English curricula at KS3 and KS4 in particular, but there are opportunities for learning across the wider curriculum, and I have pointed these out where I can. I am sure you will identify more. I have very deliberately written each area of follow-up work into a format that works in roughly a one-hour session, since this is what most of us deal with most of the time.

There are six separate lesson plans here, but for Drama particularly the work could well be utilised over two sessions, with practical presentations included. Most sessions could happily be completed either before or subsequent to seeing the production itself. (With the exception of Session 3.)

Before I saw the show I would certainly have recommended that pre-work should include a whole-group viewing of the DVD or video of the Hitchcock movie (1935), but this is not actually a prerequisite. It is however certainly a good idea to watch it at some point, especially for the session on sources and text. If time is an issue then the key scenes to have a look at are the Mr Memory stuff at the Palladium, the train top pursuit and the Forth Rail Bridge escape. Also the Scottish B & B with the stockings scene.



## Session One Changing Language

Resources: Dictionaries, or ideally for the first section, access to the internet. Also enough copies for one each of the Patrick Barlow interview (pages 11 and 12 in this pack).

1. In pairs: Ask for 2 lists: 1. Examples of words that no-one uses any more e.g. ration book. 2. Examples of words that are so new that no-one used them even 20 years ago (lots of these will be technology - based, but there will also be slang words that are very current for them).
2. Share these words back in the larger group, scribed on board or chart. Two Lists: one headed 'obsolete', one headed 'current'. Encourage students to talk about why some words fall out of use and why new ones develop.
3. Talk about the language in *The 39 Steps*. Scribe words they recall that are less used nowadays. Use the following examples if none are forthcoming "Gosh, golly, crikey, blimey"
4. Give students the following list of words/phrases to research in Google or wikipedia or a plain old dictionary: spoof, derring-do, dry ice, steam engine, yarn, burlesque, deadpan, clowning. All these words come from the various national reviews of the show (some of which are printed below). What do they tell us about the show?
5. Writers have to pay enormous attention to the words they choose in a piece, especially if it is set in the past. Read with the class the interview with the adaptor Patrick Barlow (Pages 9 and 10 of this pack). He points out in this interview that his one regret in the current show is that someone says "Hang on" near the end, and that this is not how people spoke in the '30s.
6. TASK: In groups of 4: Write a 5 minute script for a thriller (like *The 39 Steps*) that uses language that means it can only be set in 2007. Use the basic plot of the story, about a person falsely accused of a crime and forced to flee. OPTION: Repeat but choose another decade ('80s, '50s). Clear cross-curricular connection for History here.
7. For Drama these pieces can be rehearsed and performed. For English ditto, or perhaps read out in class.

## Session Two Genre

Resources: Fifteen or so randomly chosen books/DVDs of differing genre: Horror, Crime Fiction, Fantasy, Children, Action, Spy, Kung Fu, Comic, Romance, Teenage angst, Historical, War, Celebrity Biography, Autobiography etc.

1. Write 'Genre' on the board and brainstorm a spidergram of as many genres as you can with the students.
2. In groups of four get the students to identify, from a pile you give them of DVD covers and novels, which genre they fit into. Encourage debate around this. Also ask them to identify specific features that allow them to work out the genre... is it the cover of the book/DVD? Is it the language contained therein?
3. Students present their findings back to the whole group. Again encourage them to challenge each other around any grey areas. Make the point that writers have to make specific language choices to evoke genre.
4. Now get students, again in fours, to pick out any two books/DVDs and write down all the words and phrases that mark them out as being specific to a genre.
5. ENGLISH: Each student to choose a genre and write their own genre-specific piece for a new work. It can either be the first page of a novel or the blurb for a new-release DVD.

OR

5. DRAMA: Students to script the first scene of a movie, very genre-specific. They rehearse and perform and the rest of group has to identify genre.

*Suggested extension activity: look at adaptation. Students take a film they all know very well and discuss how they would stage some of the memorable moments. Encourage them to think inventively, rather than to rely on expensive sets, etc. In pairs/groups students write and perform one scene adapted from the film to the stage.*

### Session Three How Do We Speak?

1. Write the following names on the board: Preston, Chantelle, Arctic Monkeys, Kevin Pietersen, Leona Lewis, Prince Harry, Zara Phillips, Ricky Gervais, Chris Moyles, Didier Drogba, JK Rowling (or any such readily identifiable selection, the only important feature of the list being diversity of accent).
2. Go through the names one by one and get the students to tell you how these people speak. It is likely there will be disagreement, possibly vehement. Write the words they use (posh, scum, whatever) on the board. At the end ask whether or not we make judgements about people from the way they speak. If so, what are those judgements based on?
3. In pairs get them to chat to each other in their normal voices. (Half a minute each to tell the other what they had for breakfast this morning and where they were when they ate it). The subject matter is irrelevant, just get them to listen to how they speak, particularly their accents.
4. Ask students to think about the production of *The 39 Steps*. How did the characters speak? What did you find out about their background from the way they spoke? How was Britain in the 1930s different to today?
5. Read the interviews with the Creative Team (in this pack pages 10-14). Get comments on the idea expounded by Rupert Degas about there being three accents in 1930s Britain. Do people still try to 'speak posh' in order to sound upper class? Or has that gone now?
6. Get students to look again at the list you scribed at the outset. Could such a list have existed in the 1930s? If not, why not? Is it possible that our more diverse nation has led to a decrease in focus on accents as a signifier of class? Or is that wishful thinking?
7. DRAMA: IN PAIRS: ask students to practise 3 different accents with each other, at least one of which must be 'upper class'. Ask them to observe any changes in the physicality of their partner as they swap accents. They might look for increased tension in the neck and face, shape of lips, or different posture. Get them to feed these observations back to the whole group. In groups of 4 spend time developing comic scenes set in a mobile phone shop using these 3 accents. Show.
8. ENGLISH: An essay question around the debate in point 6.

NB Cross –Curricular references here to History, PSHE, Religious Studies (diversity).

## Session Four Pastiche

STARTER: Either for homework as prep for this lesson or as a starter activity if access is easy. Students should look at examples of pastiche on Youtube.com. A good one to look at is the French and Saunders Mamma Mia! sketch.

1. Write up on the board the following WIKTIONARY definition of Pastiche. "A work of drama, literature or music that imitates the work of a previous artist, often satirically". Get the students to copy it.
2. Have a discussion about pastiche and where it is to be found. This can be spidergrammed. One would expect at least the following outcomes: talk about sampling in music, singers covering the songs of other artists; comedians like the Mighty Boosh doing Boy's Own adventure stuff, French and Saunders doing film skits, The Artroom at school being full of pastiche Picasso etc, the remaking of tired TV formats in a pastiche way so that they seem suddenly vibrant (*Come Dancing* becomes *Strictly Come Dancing*; *Dr Who* in the '70s and now). So is it good to be the subject of pastiche?
3. Read the interview with Patrick Barlow in this pack with the students. He has no idea why we like pastiche. Do they? (Is it to do with recognition?)
4. Ways to make Pastiche 1
  - (A) Ask the students in pairs to come up with a short scene where there is some conflict, e.g. a person complaining to a waiter in a restaurant, or taking a faulty toaster back to a shop.
  - (B) Now ask them to practise the scene again but when they feel like it, and before they say their next line, their character can clap. This clap freezes the action. The character now turns to the audience and tells them what they are really thinking. They then clap and the scene resumes with them saying their actual line. Three or four such interjections in a one minute scene often have great comic effect. This is a game actors sometimes play in rehearsals. It is called the Clapping Game. So for example we might get a waiter saying 'God I hate this woman' to the audience before clapping and turning back to her with great politeness to say 'I'm ever so sorry Madam'. Let them practise these and then show them.
5. Ways to make Pastiche 2
 

Using similar scenes to those in exercise 1, and again in pairs, let them play with speeding up dialogue. So try it in an incremental way: x2, then x5, then x10 normal speed. What are the effects produced here? Again, rehearse, show and discuss.

6. Now get the students to script a 5-minute pastiche of either a film or a play of their choosing. Ideally this should be done in pairs. Rehearse and perform.

7. *If students have seen the play and the film:* Do they feel the play is a good pastiche? If so, what elements make it so? Get them to think about linguistic choices, the use of dry ice, the music, the way the actors created the world of the 1930s.



## Session Five Intertextuality

RESOURCES: Access to the internet for the opening part.

1. Discuss sources. What is a source in creative writing terms? Does everything have a source? Or are some things genuinely original?
2. Ask students to identify all the source material for the following: Romeo and Juliet, the Criterion production of *The 39 Steps*, the Disney film *The Jungle Book*. This can involve internet or just text-based research.
3. If things are adapted and changed, does that matter, or should people be allowed to do what they want?
4. Ask students to consider whether or not John Buchan would care that there were three film versions of his book, were he alive. Apparently he was big fan of the Hitchcock film, but this may have been coloured by the fact he made money from selling the rights to it.
5. Ask students to research copyright, which protects the rights of writers to be identified as the creators of their work. There is good information on this at [www.patent.gov.uk/copy](http://www.patent.gov.uk/copy)
6. DRAMA: A five minute piece using a page or two of John Buchan's book as a source text.
7. ENGLISH: A short story based on any one incident from the Buchan novel, maybe focussing on a minor character and inventing a more detailed life for them and looking at an event in it.
8. Students will, like those who worked on *The 39 Steps*, have produced their own work from a source text.



## **Session Six** General Physical Work.

This session is designed specifically to engage the students with some of the processes involved in the creation of physical theatre, and is ideal follow-up for Drama, after seeing the show.

Get students with shoes off if possible, and in a safe drama studio-type environment.

1. Ask students to walk around the room at a normal pace, and not to make eye contact with anyone else. Ask them to empty their minds and just focus on the way they move around the room. Which bit of their foot hits the ground first? Do they lean forward or back? Do they swing their arms? Is their chin up or down? Do not provide answers, let them feel it for themselves. Then get them to start exaggerating whatever their natural tendency is. So if they walk leading with the crotch, let them exaggerate that. Ditto the head, or the chest. They will be self conscious about this, but stay with it.
2. End the exercise and discuss in circle. How did it feel? Was it in any way comic? Explain to them that in just a walk you have the foundation of great physical comedy. Pick a couple of brave volunteers to show their funny walks.
3. Now get them back on their feet. Get them walking again and this time tell them you will shout out the names of characters from the show, and you want them to walk like that character. SO: Hannay, Pamela, Mr Memory, the policemen, the milkman, the evil Professor Jordan, the couple at the B&B.
4. Get them in groups of 4 and ask them to come up with a frozen picture or tableau featuring any four of the characters. The objective is to make these instantly recognisable. Show these tableaux and let the audience identify characters. Discuss where these characters lead from when they move, where their physical 'centre' is. This idea is vital to physical actors and clowns.
5. Bring the tableaux to life (clap and they start moving). Observe the physical distinction between characters.
6. Back in the circle explain that in a show with 150 characters and 4 actors, the type of physical work just done is fundamental.

Extension activity:

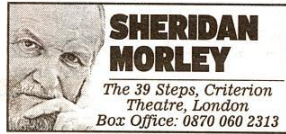
Students need a coat each, and a hat, if possible. In pairs, students work on two distinct characters each, with very different physicality and accents. The idea here is to mirror one of the techniques used in the production where performers switch very quickly between characters with minimal use of costume.

One pair of characters wears coats and hats, the other set don't. Each pair works on a scene involving an every day activity (catching a train, booking a hotel room, etc.) involving the first set of characters. Allow time for the scenes to get going for a couple of minutes, and then clap. On the clap students don their coats etc., become the other characters and continue the scene until your next clap when they remove the items again and continue in the original characters. Carry on for a few claps, encouraging the change between characters to become smoother and swifter each time. If everyone is into the activity, try joining the pairs into groups of four and continuing to see what happens.



## NATIONAL PRESS REVIEWS

# Golly! Step into a joyously jokey homage to Hitch



IT ALL began with the National Theatre of Brent and, of course, the Reduced Shakespeare Company: the idea that a handful of ill-equipped and under-funded actors could tackle vast theatrical epics which might have daunted even the National or the original RSC.

And now, one of Brent's founder-players, Patrick Barlow, has come up with another hugely inventive idea: why not stage a movie in the same conditions?

He has chosen Buchan's *The 39 Steps*, that masterpiece which has been three-times filmed – and which, incidentally, all came to different conclusions as to what the 39 Steps really were. So much for Buchan and the original novel.

The film version we remember best is the 1935 Hitchcock with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll, which stuck to the basic premise about the languid, stiff-upper-lipped English gentleman who accidentally comes across a villainous foreign spy ring and then has to escape across the Scottish moors, handcuffed to a gorgeous blonde.

The trick, and the wonder, of Maria Aitken's hugely inventive staging, is that her four actors play not just all the characters in the movie but also the bridges, trains and special effects.

At the same time a celebration and a parody, this *39 Steps* manages to recapture a whole lost world of black and white movie thrillers and English upper-class inanity: "Golly" is the hero Hannay's only reaction when a dead German woman falls on him.

To what is already a rich mix, Barlow and Aitken have added the traditions of amateur dramatics in the church hall, so that everything is somehow intentionally not quite good enough – including the acting, which sometimes goes so far over the top as to be out of sight.

Yet the whole thing comes together thanks to the versatility of the four players (Rupert Degas, Simon Gregor, Catherine McCormack and



HERO: Charles Edwards as Hannay

Charles Edwards) and to their determination to show us not just how well they know the original movie, but how much they love it.

I wondered whether this production really belongs on the stage of the National Film Theatre, but that would be to deny regular theatre-goers this joyously jokey double homage to Buchan and Hitchcock.

And if by the end you still can't work out what the *39 Steps* really were, remember that Hitchcock couldn't either. He so completely changed the plot that a line had to be added to explain them, insofar as anyone ever could. Except, of course, Buchan himself.

## DAILY EXPRESS

## ARTS/THEATRE

**Andrew Martin**  
**OTHER OPENINGS**
**The Thirty-Nine Steps**

★★★★☆

**Seven Brides for Seven Brothers**

★★★★☆

**Sugar Mummies**

★★☆☆☆

**The Thirty-Nine Steps**

At the Tricycle Theatre in north London a joyful version of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (the Hitchcock film rather than the original Buchan novel) takes aim

at the West End. The director is Maria Aitken and the adaptation is by Patrick Barlow, who is one half of the National Theatre of Brent. And, while it's played for laughs, they are subtly achieved, often by no more than a slight speeding up or slowing down of the original lines.

Between them, Simon Gregor and Rupert Degas play dozens of the smaller parts quite brilliantly. Charles Edwards is Richard Hannay, the rock-jawed fugitive, and Catherine McCormack is all of the women, including the indignant blonde who becomes handcuffed to Hannay.

The compression is part of the fun. Hannay sits in an armchair and is fast asleep in one single, sudden spasm. A shower curtain serves as a waterfall; two men in macs under a portable lamppost represent the infinite resources of the spy ring.

But the production also generates real atmosphere, and as Hannay (running on the spot) sets off for St Pancras station through swirling dry ice, and with the sound effect of a steam engine in the background, your heart is racing.

*Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn High Road, London NW6 (020 7328 1000), to September 9*

**Seven Brides for Seven Brothers**

The Theatre Royal, Haymarket offers the first chance to see *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in London since 1986.

The sheer insane zest of the 1954 film from which the musical originates distracted attention from the strangeness of the plot: in the Oregon of 1850, a band of raucous hick brothers are inspired by the story of the rape of the Sabine women to kidnap some females

with a view to marriage.

Maurice Lane's production lacks the film's sharpness. But the brothers leap enthusiastically; the leads, Dave Willetts and Shona Lindsay, deal politely but firmly with Johnny Mercer's songs, and this will generally make a pleasant spectacle for those partial to the sight of ripening corn.

*Theatre Royal Haymarket, London SW1 (0870 380 2003), to November 25*

**Sugar Mummies**

Tanika Gupta's first play for the Royal Court concerns the apparently well-established phenomenon of white women visiting Jamaica in order to have sex with the local men, to whom they grant financial favours in return.

The subject allows Gupta to engage with most of the 'isms' going, not least post-colonialism, sexism and racism.

Four single women of varying degrees of desperation and neurosis encounter four similarly assorted Jamaicans, and the game begins with a 'Psst. Hey pretty lady.' At first, things are kept light, although whether this audience would have laughed at a man saying to a woman, 'I'll teach you how to suck a mango,' if they'd encountered the dialogue in a film called, say, *Carry-On Up The Caribbean* I doubt. But this being the Royal Court, we are licensed to laugh at some fairly threadbare repartee while trusting to the author's underlying moral purpose.

This purpose is revealed in the second half, when the protagonists resort to bawling home truths at each other with all the grace of characters in *EastEnders*: 'You're nothing but a prostitute!' screams one of the women to one of the men. 'You're nothing but a client!' he yells back.

Indhu Rubasingham directs efficiently, and lighting designer Rick Fisher creates an evocative sun-dazed mood. But the main interest of the production is in seeing Lynda Bellingham – famous as the awesomely level-headed Oxo mum – frantically copulating on a beach with a supposedly 17-year-old Jamaican... Which, because she's a terrific comic actress, is a shame twice over.

*Royal Court, London SW3 (020 7565 5000), to September 2*

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

### **Sugar Mummies**

Royal Court ★

This is bad news. How could Panika Gupta, who wrote *The Waiting Room* and *Gladiator James*, write such a dreary, cliché-ridden play, full of soppy moralising and sitcom humour? How could the Royal Court, basking in its 50th-anniversary year, put it on? Or is it one of those depressing stories of a writer presenting a play and the powers that be muscling in to “develop it”, for which you read giving it a harmless, politically correct message, then developing it to death? Gupta’s story is about sex tourism. Four women come to Jamaica. Though one of them, an English girl, is in search of the Jamaican father she has never met, and another, black British, has been coming here for years to continue an affair, the other two, a Londoner and a Mancunian, want action, and there’s no shortage of willing studs. The characters, including a wise old woman and an unscrupulous pimp who is ashamed of his trade, have next to no personality; their only function is to deliver the unsurprising message that a multi-culti population is no guarantee of multi-culti happiness. JP

### **The 39 Steps**

Tricycle ★★★★★  
After nearly a century and three movie versions, John Buchan’s stiff-upper-lip thriller remains a popular classic, so if you’re going to be jokey about it, you’d better do it with some warmth. Thankfully, this clever and witty adaptation by Patrick Barlow, which owes most to Hitchcock’s 1935 film, takes our affection for the story and characters for granted. The result is a

hugely entertaining, escapist two hours that, under Maria Aitken’s direction, manages to have its fun without resorting to camp. It’s also a workout for the four actors, who play 150 roles between them. As the lantern-jawed hero, Richard Hannay, Charles Edwards — looking, appropriately enough, like a young Anthony Eden — vitally keeps a straight face throughout, while Catherine McCormack slips easily from overripe vamp to uptight love interest. Playing the supporting cast of bumbling detectives, Scottish landladies and supersmooth spies, Rupert Degas and Simon Gregor offer a virtual masterclass in comic character acting. All in all, thoroughly ripping. PW

### **Macbeth**

Hampton Court Palace and Lincoln’s Inn Fields ★★  
Chris Pickles’s Oxford Shakespeare Company production is packed with heartfelt, raw energy — so raw that it often disrupts the text. Staging *Macbeth* in Hampton Court’s Great Hall was a good idea, but playing it lengthwise in the middle, with the audience on either side, was not; it loses the advantage of the excellent acoustics. Guilt and soul-searching are among the play’s themes, and the big-volume voices, with little sense of intimacy, do not help. Max Digby’s *Macbeth* is a young man who looks forward in anger: he’s driven, but lacks the sense of being haunted. He’s a lion on the battlefield, but you can’t imagine him having visions, or much of the milk of human kindness. JP

**John Peter and  
Peter Whittle**

**SUNDAY TIMES**

## Theatre

### The 39 Steps Criterion Theatre, London ★★★★☆

It's been a classic novel and, in Hitchcock's hands, a hit film. And now, in these unpatriotic, unheroic times, John Buchan's *The 39 Steps* is a successful spoof, transferring to the West End from Kilburn's Tricycle Theatre.

Patrick Barlow's adaptation bears the hallmarks of his work with the National Theatre of Brent, in that it tells an epic tale while comically accentuating theatre's unsuitability for the task. It's very easy to enjoy the creaky jokes, quick costume changes and lo-fi coups

de théâtre that result, even if I wished that Maria Aitken's production might eventually transcend its self-consciousness and make this thriller thrilling too.

The Boys Own-style yarn is sent up from the off, as a chisel-jawed Richard Hannay finds himself embroiled in the murder of a preposterously accented femme fatale. Taking her last words as his cue, Hannay heads to Scotland to foil a dastardly German spy and clear his name. Aitken and her four-strong cast deploy ladders to represent the Forth Bridge, leather trunks as the railway carriages across which Hannay bounds free from the police, and wobbly shadow puppetry as a crashing biplane. Our hero's death is repeatedly defied, in one instance by a bullet-proof hymnbook. "I'm not surprised," says the local sheriff. "Some of these hymns are

terrible hard to get through." If only this playful spirit could have been twinned with heartfelt storytelling. But it isn't; the story is thoroughly undermined. We're left just with laughs — albeit some very good ones.

In pencil moustache and tweeds, Charles Edwards affectionately sends up the gentlemanly Hannay, while Catherine McCormack chews up the versatile stage furniture as various damsels in distress. Most fun is had, though, by the shape-shifting Rupert Degas and particularly Simon Gregor, doffing hats and donning wigs as a dour Scots farmer and an inaudible by-election speechifier.

The thrills may be meagre in this murder mystery, but the theatrical tomfoolery is to die for.

**Brian Logan**

Until January 13. Box office: 0870 060 2313.

## THE GUARDIAN

### First night

## A dizzy theatrical game played with wit and versatility

**Theatre**  
**The 39 Steps**  
Criterion Theatre, SW1  
★★★★☆  
**Benedict Nightingale**

We've seen a super-abundance — no, a hyper-abundance — of plays based on famous films. But the difference between *The Graduate*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Billy Elliot*, *Dirty Dancing* and other long-running transmutations is that Patrick Barlow's version of *The 39 Steps* is a spoof of the original Hitchcock film — and one that's proved such a magnet at the box office that it's now replacing a key member of its cast and has

settled in for a long West End run. What's the appeal of a show that, on the face of it, is pretty pointless? The programme notes imply that it's nostalgia for an era when British heroes were courageous, enterprising and morally straight, and starched their upper lips every day. But it's surely no accident that four actors play well over 50 parts and that one of them, Rupert Degas, is a veteran of Marie Jones's equally successful *Stones in His Pockets*, where two men played more than 20 roles. Audiences love to be complicit in theatrical games-playing. The games become the more elaborate because one of the quartet, Charles Edwards, is confined to playing John Buchan's archetypal hero, Richard Hannay. He's decent, tweedy, craggy and all that's



Simon Gregor and Charles Edwards. Four actors play more than 50 parts

necessary for a chap who goes on the run after being wrongly accused of murder and, having escaped to Scotland and eluded the plods, ensures that the secrets of the nation's air defences aren't stolen by (presumably) the Hun. Meanwhile, Rachel Pickup, the newcomer to the cast, brings spirit and charm to two main characters: the exotic foreigner,

who is killed after revealing the nefarious plot to Hannay, and the girl to whom he's handcuffed as he traverses hills, glens, streams and bogs.

Both performers are excellent, but it's the two other actors who, helped by simple props, turn the show into something truly theatrical. There are dizzying moments in which bulky

Degas and spindly Simon Gregor transform themselves within a sentence from harried ticket inspectors to goofy train passengers, or from an excited detective hunting down Hannay to the manager of the London Palladium, where he's secreted. But they're also terrific as characters who include a char, a milkman, a ferocious Scots Presbyterian, a sprightly landlady and her woebegone husband, as well as (Gregor) the hilariously inarticulate constituency chairman who mistakes Hannay for his parliamentary candidate and (Degas) the cackling baddie betraying Britain to the "master race".

Yet, oddly, the result isn't what one would expect, given Barlow's reputation as that dedicated tease, the founder of the National Theatre of Brent. It's not remotely as silly as his *Charge of the Light Brigade* or as lacking in tension as his *Wonder of Sex*. Somehow Maria Aitken's production keeps us enjoying the story as well as the tricks, the humour and the send-up of tight-vowelled English derring-do. You laugh — but you also want to know what happens when Mr Memory takes the Palladium stage at the play's denouement. Box office: 0870 0602313

## THE TIMES

[ THEATRE ]

# Sharp contrast falls woefully flat

From piano pedals to moths and flames, Terry Johnson's new play draws too many allusions without conclusions

**SUSANNAH CLAPP**



**Piano/Forte**  
Royal Court, London SW1, until 14 Oct

**Cymbeline**  
Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon

**John Buchan's 'The 39 Steps'**  
Criterion, London W1, until 13 Jan

IT'S ONE hammer blow after another. In Terry Johnson's new play at the Royal Court, one sister is agoraphobic, stammering and self-mutilating; her older sib crashes the ancestral portraits over the bannisters and pokes a rifle around in the air. The girls' mother shot herself years before, and was found by one of the daughters; a stepmother has long been locked up in a mental hospital. The dad is a Tory MP who has done some unspecified dodgy thing and is about to marry a non-BMI-challenged young model brimming with trite phrases and good feeling.

Well, enough's enough. Johnson has created some of his many hits by examining movies on the stage: he picked

**Kelly Reilly springs on bare-breasted. She gangles around like a baby giraffe**

apart a director's obsessions in *Hitchcock Blonde*; in *Cleo, Camping, Emmanuelle and Dick*, he celebrated Brit flicks. He has always invited audiences to look for cinematic and other allusions; he has encouraged them to consider that something that looks like a cliché is probably intended as an irony.

He's overdone it here. *Piano/Forte* (what with *Frost/Nixon* last month, this is turning into the autumn of the theatrical forward slash) teems with know-  
ingness. The title tips you off to the idea of two kinds of disturbance: that of the loud sister who manipulates with her

violence, and that of the soft-pedaller, who controls with quietness, and who expresses herself, of course, by playing the piano. Other received notions of women being haunted and going haywire are floated. There is talk of moths and flames. When things get threatening, a flock of starlings gather, and their flight flecks the stage with shadows: it reminds me, says the model, of that film...

What Johnson offers is an accumulation of pictures, rather than an argument; a drift of notions rather than a dynamic plot. There's no one to care about in these made-for-case-notes figurines. The busy references make the play look more intellectually lively than it is. There's nothing approaching sceptical discussion.

Johnson himself directs, with flourish, rushing over the gaps in his dialogue with bad-taste brio. The first half of a play that begins by looking like a country house murder mystery (Mark Thompson's design supplies a Windsor Soup-like brown room with lowering portraits) ends with a trapeze act in which two joke Spaniards in crimson scanties hover on high and a giant dildo ejaculates over the stage. Pretty much the peak of the whole drama is a dramatic entrance by Kelly Reilly, a marvellous maenad who springs on, bare-breasted in a grunge skirt. She has come to present herself to her new stepmother and is, she snarls, 'going out of my way to be welcoming'. Reilly is extraordinary: always looking like a teenager, never ingratiating and yet totally touching; she gangles around like a feral giraffe. She has the perfect, wiped-out foil in the blanching, stunned Alicia Witt. But the play is an ungainly welter. Too much forte, too little piano.

Emma Rice, the director who has helped make the Cornish company Kneehigh into a whirlwind force, has produced a version of *Cymbeline* for the RSC. Anyone who goes expecting to see Shakespeare's play will be in for a rude shock. In traditional Kneehigh fashion – the company have previously reimagined the *The Wooden Frock* and *The Red Shoes* – it goes back to Shakespeare's fairy-tale sources and reinvents them. It squeaks into the RSC's year of Complete Works not as a performance of a written play, but as a response to it.

What you get – with the villain as a would-be hoodie, the wicked Queen as a



Sister act: Kelly Reilly (far left) and Alicia Witt in *Piano/Forte* at the Royal Court: 'The play is an ungainly welter.' Photograph by Neil Libbert

decision to slip away from Shakespeare's verse was misguided – there's a true rendering of the only passage from this seldom-performed play which most people will recognise. 'Fear no more the heat o' th' sun' is not fluted with lyrical resignation, but rasped as an angry threnody which might have been spat from the mouth of Tom Waits.

It's an insipid sign of these theatre-isn't-just-talking-text times that the experimental Kneehigh should bob up at the RSC. As it is that Maria Aitken's spirited production of *The 39 Steps* should stroll into the West End. In a cleverly calculated mix of the commercial and the experimental, four actors – and one mystery arm – fracture themselves into 150 parts to perform John Buchan's deranged 1915 thriller.

This *39 Steps* is part spoof-spook – 'Golly!' says the pipe-smoking Richard Hannay, as a sultry siren falls into his lap with a dagger in her back – and part dead-pan clowning: the adaptation is the work of Patrick Barlow, creator of the synoptic National Theatre of Brent, which could put the Seven Pillars of Wisdom on a Post-it. It has a dash of the exquisite – a chase sequence in the Highlands is shown as a shadow play complete with lubriciously bounding stag. And it has a dash of comic mime: one character changes into his own interviewer by swapping his hat for a cap; spies rush on with their own lamp-post so that they have something underneath which they can do lurking. It's got some good 21st-century jokes: a radio presenter spics up his warning notices about Hannay with excited details of 'his very attractive pencil moustache'. It is its own strange small thing. Which could be exactly the thing the West End has been waiting for.

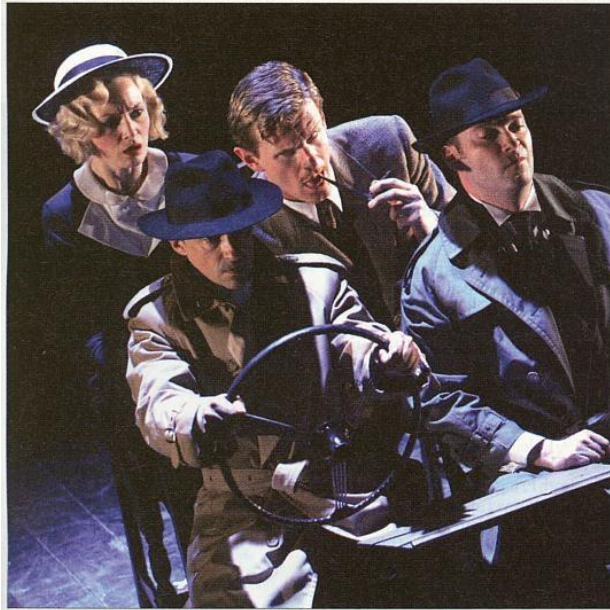
scrumptious, raunchy, syringe-wielding nurse, and the heroine played by Hayley Carmichael who looks, even when she's not in sandals, like a radiant seven-year-old – is hardly any Shakespeare (at least in terms of lines) and lots of Kneehigh. You get the company at its most forced in a strenuous pantomime-dame chorus.

And the company at its most inventive: a sea voyage is enacted in a boat which encases the actor like a crinoline, as he walks with seagulls waving on wires from his head and fishes wagging from antennae at his sides; a battle is played out on a massive games board; and – in a scene which makes you feel that the

## THE OBSERVER

## Show of the week

### The 39 Steps



**Another gag in sight** The cast of 'The 39 Steps' pursue their quarry

★★★★★

**Tricycle Theatre** O-WE

Fans of the film will love or loathe Patrick Barlow's knowing reconstruction of Hitchcock's classic movie, but the lovers will be in the right. Wholly irreverent yet entirely affectionate, faced with the impossibility of reproducing an adventure film on stage, it manages to both conjure the spirit of the original and make comedic hay from the theatre's unsuitability for the task.

The jokes come from the beginning, when we meet Charles Edwards' beautifully played Richard Hannay, his absurdly stiff upper lip matched by a slightly fazed expression that invites a titter at every turn. As he is thrust on his adventure by the arrival of a mysterious woman, he encounters any number of improbably realised stunts – a shadow bi-

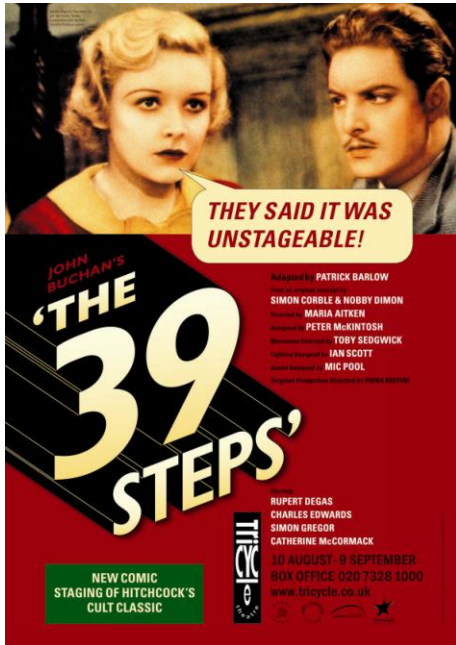
plane chase, a wholly unconvincing scaling of the Forth bridge – and even more improbably ridiculous accents.

'Dick Barton' fans will recognise the humour – the cod Englishness and tongue-packed cheeks. But 'The 39 Steps' betters even that estimable franchise in its theatrical variety and in the quality of the clowning around its chiselled lead. Rupert Degas and Simon Gregor, who between them play just under a million different policeman, spies, landladies and Scotsmen, are both fine comedians, never funnier than when required to hold conversations with themselves. Catherine McCormack as the non-transvestite woman doesn't get the same laughs, but makes the famous 'stocking scene' her own, and, as oppressed wife Margaret, even manages to conjure a hint of emotional sympathy from an audience hardened by irony. The laugh reflex does seize up from time to time – the accent jokes are done to death – but there's always a good gag around the corner, and the cast seem to be enjoying themselves so much, you can't help but be swept along. *Kieron Quirke*

## TIME OUT



**POSTER ARTWORK**  
(courtesy of Shaun Webb Design)



Tricycle Theatre image  
(film still courtesy of Rex Pictures)



Criterion Theatre image – first six months



Criterion Theatre image – second six months



Criterion Theatre and worldwide image

**COSTUME DESIGNS (by Peter McKintosh)**



Annabella Schmidt



Richard Hannay



Louisa Jordan



Pamela



Policeman



Professor Jordan



Underwear salesman



Mrs Higgins

**Websites useful in the compilation of this pack were the following:**

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)  
[www.timeout.com](http://www.timeout.com)  
[www.screenonline.co.uk](http://www.screenonline.co.uk)  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)  
[www.patent.gov.uk](http://www.patent.gov.uk)

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*The King's English* by Kingsley Amis (HarperCollins 1998)  
*IMPRO Improvisation and the Theatre* by Keith Johnstone (Methuen 1979)  
*Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman (various 1983)

### **FILM FOR CROSS-REFERENCE**

*Brief Encounter* (David Lean 1945)

### **PHYSICAL THEATRE PRACTITIONERS FOR CROSS-REFERENCE**

Theatre de Complicité ([www.complicite.org](http://www.complicite.org))  
Trestle ([www.trestle.co.uk](http://www.trestle.co.uk))  
Zygmunt Molik



**Mousetrap Theatre Projects** offers young people with limited resources and access, the opportunity to engage with the best of London's live theatre. We are an independent charity, working with theatres in the West End and across London. Since 1997, we have taken nearly 75,000 young people to the theatre.

We create innovative and exciting theatre access, education and audience development programmes. Young people take part with their school or youth group, their family or their friends.

### **Mission Statement**

We believe that all young people should have the opportunity to attend outstanding theatre, irrespective of their cultural, social or economic background. Our mission is to increase young people's access to the best of live theatre in London (particularly those young people with limited resources, opportunities or support) and to enable them to engage creatively with that experience.

As an independent charity, Mousetrap Theatre Projects is in a unique position to select the appropriate or relevant theatre productions in and beyond the West End that stimulate and inspire young people. We devise programmes that use theatre as a catalyst to explore ideas, learn new skills, develop creativity and offer new perspectives. At the heart of our education and outreach work is the desire to open doors to young people who might otherwise consider London's rich cultural heritage closed to them.

### **Areas of Endeavour**

Access: To provide young people with limited resources, support or a disability, the opportunity to attend London theatre, often as a first-time experience: **The London Theatre Challenge for Mainstream and Special Schools, All- Schools Matinees, Family First Nights and Envision**

Education: To enable young people to engage actively with their theatre experience and to use theatre as an educational resource in and out of the classroom to stimulate creative work and to develop theatre-related skills: **TheatreWorks, Play the Critic, Insight sessions, WriteThinking, TechTaster, PowerPlay and Stage Business**



Audience Development: To encourage a legacy of theatregoing among young audiences by reducing barriers and enhancing their knowledge and understanding of theatre: **C145, West End for £10 and Mousetrap Mondays.**

Creating Links: To develop collaborations with young people, schools, teachers, artists, arts organisations, youth groups, community organisations and social service agencies with the theatre industry: **Teachers' Advisory Group, Teachers Preview Club, StageXChange, Youth Forum, Family Forum and training opportunities.**

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