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## SpooF Rises Again To Heights of Absurdity

Silliness, it would appear, has been gravely undervalued as a survival strategy. How else to explain the unquenchable life — or rather lives, for there have been many — of Richard Hannay, the charmingly fatuous fop who keeps defying death all over the world and has now returned to fight bad guys with bad accents in New York at the Union Square Theater?

**BEN  
BRANTLEY**  
THEATER  
REVIEW

That is where “39 Steps,” the larky play in which Hannay appears, opened on Monday night. And, yes, those of you with eagle eyes and sharp memories, that is the correct title.

Never mind that when Hannay appeared on Broadway in 2008, saying and doing almost exactly the same thing as now, it was under the rubric of “Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps*.” Or that when he showed up in 2006 in London’s West End — where he continues to wreak merry havoc in a production that picked up the Olivier Award for best comedy — the show was called “John Buchan’s *The 39 Steps*.”

Like a proper British acquaintance who finally feels you’ve known him long enough to call him by an abbreviated form of his full name, “39 Steps” has shed even its “the” for this reincarnation. If it has also shed a little of the freshness of its first youth, it remains indomitably funny.

This century’s most tireless and high-profile example of the little show that could, “39 Steps” was (according to the official

credits) adapted from Buchan’s 1915 novel about dastardly espionage in a sleeping Britain. But in its shape, characters and dialogue, it is far closer to Hitchcock’s wonderful 1935 film version, which took more liberties with Buchan than a sailor on shore leave with his one-night stand.

Anyway, the “39 Steps” now on view in New York is the one that Patrick Barlow whipped up around 2005, reworking an earlier version by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon from the mid-1990s that had been touring the provinces in Britain. The show has retained an impression of seat-of-the-pants, frantic improvisation, such as one associates with local shoestring entertainments.

But under the guidance of its original London director, Maria Aitken, this bare-bones production is as disciplined and as precise in its footwork as a “Firebird” from the Bolshoi Ballet. Featuring a cast of four portraying too many characters to count, “39 Steps” remains a gallant and giggly ode to make-do resourcefulness, to the air of spinning illusions out of nothing but a clown’s talents.

In this sense, the show reflects the enterprising spirit of Hannay, portrayed here by a blithely stolid Robert Petkoff, who has appeared on Broadway in revivals of “Fiddler on the Roof” and “Ragtime.” When first seen, looking restlessly sedentary in an armchair in his London flat, Hannay is a man of too much leisure in search of excitement.



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Robert Petkoff’s silhouette pursued by crop dusters in “39 Steps” at the Union Square Theater.

He finds it in short order when he goes to the theater and meets a glamorous foreign woman in black (Brittany Vicars). His brief encounter with her leads to a series of adventures that find him on the lam from the police in Scotland, where he crosses moors, fords streams, dangles from bridges, assumes false identities and meets a prototypical Hitchcock blonde (also Ms. Vicars).

Constables, spies, rustics, traveling salesmen, innkeepers, newsboys and railroad porters are all played by Arnie Burton (who appeared in the original Broadway production) and Billy Carter. These metamorphoses are achieved via instant costume changes, including one breath-

less sequence involving flying headgear. (The bargain-basement special effects are achieved with strategic use of Peter McKintosh’s costumes and elemental set, Kevin Adams’s lighting and Mic Pool’s Bernard Herrmann-score-quoting sound scheme.)

Mr. Burton and Mr. Carter also show up as inconvenient features of the Scottish landscape (brier bushes, lochs, bogs, etc.), which impede our hero’s progress. Hannay is also required to deal with attacking crop dusters, in a blissful shadow-puppet sequence, and what looks like a knife-wielding maniac lurking behind a shower curtain.

You’re right, those particular menaces were not part of Hitch-

cock’s film of “*The 39 Steps*,” belonging instead to “*North by Northwest*” and “*Psycho*.” This show delights in groaning references to all things Hitchcock, with name-checking puns, verbal and visual, to his movies and general style.

It is in this production’s knowing riffs on the Hitchcock sensibility that theatergoers looking for substance amid the inanity can find it, if they squint. Much of the slyest humor here — including the sexual frisson elicited by handcuffing our adversarial hero and heroine to each other — comes directly from Hitchcock’s movie.

We are also reminded of how much of that cinematic master’s work involved putting average

### 39 Steps

Adapted by Patrick Barlow, based on an original concept by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon, and the book by John Buchan; directed by Maria Aitken; sets and costumes by Peter McKintosh; lighting by Kevin Adams; sound by Mic Pool; original movement created by Toby Sedgewick; movement staged for this production by Christopher Bayes; dialect coach, Stephen Gabis; production manager, Aurora Productions; production stage manager, Rosy Garner; general manager, Daniel Kuney/Roy Gabay Productions. Presented by Douglas Denoff, Bruce Robert Harris and Jack W. Bateman, Mark Leonard, Neal Rubinstein, Hues Productions, Terrence Cranert, Neil Gooding Productions, J. M. Allain, Patrick Blake and Albert and Trudy Kallis, in association with Fiery Angel, London. At the Union Square Theater, 100 East 17th Street, Manhattan; 877-250-2929, ticketmaster.com. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

WITH: Arnie Burton (Clown 2), Billy Carter (Clown 1), Robert Petkoff (Richard Hannay) and Brittany Vicars (Annabella Schmidt/Pamela/Margaret).

Joel in extreme circumstances, and how fine the line is in Hitchcock between suspense and comedy, between high anxiety and low farce. In crossing that line, “39 Steps” is as much a celebration of a moviemaker’s wit as it is a parody pastiche.

The cast members are as crude and as refined as they need to be, though a few bits of physical comedy are stretched past the breaking point. And they definitely earn their paychecks, with their sustained gymnastic performance.

The Union Square Theater is giving out bulbous red noses to audience members before the show, suggesting that anyone can be a clown. Don’t believe it. The kind of virtuosic clowning that “39 Steps” requires is anything but easy.