

ALFRED
HITCHCOCK'S

'THE 39 STEPS'

Adapted by PATRICK BARLOW



2024 EDUCATION PACK



fiery angel

1 - An Introduction For Teachers

This Making Theatre - Education Pack which accompanies the stage production of THE 39 STEPS, is for teachers who want to explore, within the classroom, particular aspects of the play and how theatre is created.

The information and exercises in this pack are designed to uncover the different aspects of putting on a professional play. We hope that the information contained in this pack will enhance your students' enjoyment and understanding of the play, as well as offer both teachers and pupils an insightful and fascinating glimpse in how THE 39 STEPS was produced.

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2 - Who's Who?

Here is a list of everyone involved behind the scenes in making THE 39 STEPS, and what they do.

DIRECTOR - The Director is the person in charge of the creative aspects of a play. They come up with ideas on how they want each scene and moment to look, and then directs the actors during rehearsals on how to do this best.

DESIGNER - The role of the Designer is to design the set, costumes and props, and then create them. They collaborate with the Director to decide how it will look.

PRODUCER - The producers are the people that are in charge of the whole project. They choose and hire all of the team, set the budget, and are the organisational force behind the show.

LIGHTING DESIGNER - This person is in charge of arranging and designing the lighting. They decide on the lighting cues, and what effects they wish to have in each scene.

SOUND DESIGNER - Similarly to the Lighting Designer, the Sound Designer must decide what sound effects they want to have during the play, and when. Both of these designers take into account the mood of the scene or moment when making decisions.

COMPOSER - The Composer is directly in charge of creating the score and music for the play. They may use individual instruments, or combinations of instruments, or an entire orchestra to make the music for the show.

RESIDENT DIRECTOR - As the Director is often otherwise occupied, they need an Assistant or Resident Director. For THE 39 STEPS, our Resident Director will be touring round the country with the production and putting the show into each venue on behalf of the Director.

MOVEMENT DIRECTOR - The Movement Director works with the director to create ways in which the actors move their bodies, perhaps to create a sense of moving on a train.



EXERCISE

Individual work and classroom discussion:
Before reading through the list – write down who you think might be involved in making a play. Then have a look at the list and see who you've left out.



PRODUCTION MANAGER - The Production Manager is responsible for all of the logistics of the production and tour, such as transport and the Get In/Out as well as the physical making of the set and props.

CASTING DIRECTOR - The Casting Director is in charge of making sure that the right people are seen by the Director when they are casting the roles. The Casting Director will often hold auditions with the Director to help choose the right actor for the role. They are mainly involved at the beginning of the process.

DIALECT COACH - The Dialect Coach is responsible for making sure that the cast's accents are right. Accents are different depending on where in the country or world you are, but also depending on what time period that a play is set in. For example - London in the 1930s is very different to the UK in 2024.

COSTUME SUPERVISOR - The Costume Supervisor is responsible for working with the designer to realise their vision, ensuring all costumes fit within the overall production design – with particular attention to historical detail on period dramas – and managing the Costume Department, which varies in size depending on the scale of a production.

HEAD OF WARDROBE - The Head of Wardrobe is in charge of looking after and sorting the costumes and wigs for the acting company. Keeping them safe and cleaning them, making sure they are all transported safely and always available when needed, and finally may help to dress and prepare the actors before the performance.

STAGE MANAGEMENT - The stage management team is responsible for the show when it is up and running, making sure it runs smoothly without any problems. The Company Stage Manager is in control of the company and pastoral care as well as for overall what happens on stage, the Deputy Stage Manager is in control of the prompts and cues for actors, including lighting and sound, and the Assistant Stage Managers are in charge of backstage during a performance, for example making sure all the props and set are in the right place.



EXERCISE

Individual work and classroom discussion:

What role do you think you would be good at? What different skillsets do you think you need for each role on the team?

3- Production Notes

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 both on John Buchan's book. An element fixed at this point was the idea of just 4 actors (3 men and a woman) playing all the parts.

Edward Snape, of production company Fiery Angel, then asked Patrick Barlow to adapt the script. Barlow decided that this adaptation would be more firmly based on the highly reputed 1935 Alfred Hitchcock film version (which had major departures from the original novel) rather than the book, as the film more inherently lends itself to dramatic interpretation. (Hitchcock was open about how much he changed the source material for his film version. "Though I could still see the reason for my first enthusiasm – the book was full of action – I found that the story as it stood was not in the least suitable for screening." – Alfred Hitchcock, *Film Weekly* 1936.) This new version was produced at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds to great acclaim in June 2005, directed by Fiona Buffini. After a tour, the show came to the Tricycle Theatre in London (directed by Maria Aiken) in August 2006 and was so successful it gained an immediate transfer to the West End, where it stayed until September 2015. On closing in London, THE 39 STEPS has now begun another tour, this time of larger venues.

Patrick Barlow's influence on the play is evident to anyone who knows of his work since 1980 with his own company, The National Theatre of Brent. The brilliance of his shows is often in the creation of a lot from very little. With minimal set or costume (or indeed cast), complex or even epic stories can be both hilariously and movingly told. His approach is one of fearless engagement with the audience and a full embracing of theatricality. Throughout THE 39 STEPS and many of Barlow's other pieces, things often go deliberately wrong and actors come out of role momentarily to give the audience or another performer a look that acknowledges the structure in which they exist. 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 shall we?" This has strong roots in theatrical tradition, from the comic asides of pantomime to Victorian melodrama and Elizabethan drama, through to the recent success of shows such as *The Play That Goes Wrong* and the classic play *Noises Off*. Breaking the fourth wall and allowing the audience in on the joke is a technique that has been exploited almost as long as there has been theatre. The fourth wall is the invisible, imaginary wall that separates actors from the audience (while the audience can see through this 'wall', the convention dictates that the actors act as if they cannot).

What we get from this stage adaptation 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 onto the stage. The film contains set pieces that are iconic to anyone who has seen it: the train top chase, the Forth Bridge escape, and Mr Memory at the Palladium. These scenes are then recreated through the physicality and vocal talent of the 4 performers, bringing audience members who have seen them before and newcomers into the joke together. And at its centre, juxtaposed with the comedy, is Hitchcock's concocted love story. It is an evocative tribute to a 1930s Britain of cold mists (haze is liberally utilised), steam engines, and a clearly demarcated social system where people know their place.

It bears mentioning that the tone of the show is very different from its precursors. Neither the book nor the film contain the absolute lightness of tone or comedic elements that abound in the current production. This difference could be one of the elements that has contributed to the show's lasting success with audiences of all ages – whether or not they are familiar with the book or film before attending.

4 - Synopsis of the Plot

The plot of the novel and the movie vary greatly. In its original form, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* by John Buchan lacks the female characters that are intrinsically linked to the plot in both the film and the stage adaptation. Other significant differences lie in the resolution of the plot and the incidents that kick off the action itself. Here we look at the synopsis of the stage show itself.

Richard Hannay is home from his travels across the world and is bored. He visits a London theatre, attending a demonstration of the remarkable "Mr. Memory", a man with a photographic memory, when a fight breaks out and shots are fired. In the ensuing panic, he finds himself in the company of a frightened Annabella Schmidt, who talks him into taking her back to his flat in Portland Place. There, she tells him that she is being chased by assassins because she has uncovered a plot to steal vital British military secrets. The group responsible are an organisation called the "39 Steps", whose leader is a man with the top joint missing from one of his fingers. She tells him he is to travel to Scotland and find a place called Alt-na-Shell-Ach.

During the night, Hannay wakes to find Annabella has been stabbed with his bread knife. In her final moments she gives him a map of Scotland and yells the place name "Altnashellach". He flees to Scotland, in an attempt to find the man who is leaking national secrets. On the train, he encounters two travelling salesmen who discuss the murder of a young woman in Portland Place, London, and mention that police are searching for a man who matches Hannay's description. Hannay escapes the men but, in doing so, see the police on his trail. In desperation, he enters a compartment and kisses the sole occupant, 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.

Whilst running across the Scottish moors, Hannay finds a poor older farmer and his young wife. He stays the night at the farmhouse however, the wife discovers that Hannay is a wanted man. The police arrive in their search for Hannay and the wife, attracted to his charms, helps him to escape with the farmer's Sunday coat. Hannay is pursued across the moors by policemen and aircraft. During the chase, he finds Alt-na-shell-ach, the home of one Professor Jordan. There he finds the seemingly respectable Professor, who is revealed as the leader with the top joint of his little finger missing. The Professor shoots Hannay after a brief conversation and leaves him for dead. Luckily, the bullet fails to penetrate the farmer's prayer-book, which had been left in the coat's pocket, and Hannay flees once more.

He goes to the local police, but they refuse to accept his story, since they know Jordan well, forcing Hannay to escape yet again if this betrayer of Britain is to be stopped. He tries to hide himself in the crowd of 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). During the speech, he is reacquainted with Pamela, the lady is met on the train. She recognises him as the wanted man and gives him up once more. Assumed to be in league with each other, they are handcuffed together and are taken away by "policemen". Hannay 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.

Together, they are pursued across the moors again, this time by the mysterious men posing as detectives. They discover a hotel run by a Scottish couple who offer the last room they have available.

Pamela refuses to believe Hannay's story and is clearly unhappy being handcuffed to him and forced to follow him. While he sleeps, she slips out of the handcuffs. But on overhearing one of the fake policemen on the telephone downstairs, Hannay's assertions are confirmed. She returns to the room and sleeps on the floor. The next morning, she tells him what she has heard and is sent to London to pass it on to the police. No secrets have been reported missing however, so the authorities do nothing to help. Instead, they follow her in an attempt to capture 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 recognizes the 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 memorized. As the police take Hannay into custody, he shouts out a question about the 39 Steps. When Mr. Memory compulsively begins to answer, Professor Jordan shoots him and tries to flee, but is in turn shot and killed. The dying Mr. Memory recites the information stored in his brain, which turns out to be a design for silent aircraft.

After the incident at the Palladium, Hannay attempts but fails to persuade Pamela to spend time with him. The final scene is back in Hannay's flat where it appears Pamela has succumbed to his charms, they are now married and with a small child. The curtain falls on a happy family Christmas scene.



5 - Biographies



John Buchan (1875-1940) was born the son of a Calvinist Presbyterian minister in eastern Scotland, and died Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General of Canada.

He was a classicist at Oxford, read for the Bar but practiced only briefly before becoming a publisher, was a government administrator in South Africa at the end of the Boer War, and was a major contributor to *The Spectator* and war correspondent for *The Times*. He was also a Member of Parliament for the Scottish Universities and was His Majesty's High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, twice and Chancellor of Edinburgh University.

He married into aristocratic society, had four children and was made a heritage peer on receiving the appointment of Governor-General of Canada in 1935. He was very popular in his Canadian service, travelling all over the country to meet the people and see the land, Arctic to US border, east to west, and made important political links with President Roosevelt of the United States. He died of a brain hemorrhage while shaving, shortly after signing Canada's entry into the Second World War.

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. He wrote his stories primarily for his own entertainment, and *The 39 Steps* was begun as a distraction during an illness in 1914 and completed 1915. Richard Hannay, hero of *The 39 Steps*, went on to feature in many later novels.



Alfred Hitchcock was born in Leytonstone, England on August 13, 1899. He was the youngest of three children born to William and Emma Jane Hitchcock.

After attending a technical school at 15, Hitchcock spent the first years of his career as a draftsman, advertising designer, and writer. An interest in photography led to him working in London's film industry, first as a title card designer for silent movies and, just five years later, as a director.

Hitchcock quickly gained notoriety as a director who delivered suspense, twist endings, and dark subject matter. His own personality and gallows humor were embedded in popular culture through interviews, film trailers, and cameo appearances in his own films. He was popular with audiences at home and abroad, and in 1939 the Hitchcock family moved to Hollywood. In the three decades that followed he would cement his legacy by directing and producing his most successful and enduring works.

Hitchcock collected many professional accolades including two Golden Globes, eight Laurel Awards, and five lifetime achievement awards. He was a five-time Academy Award nominee for Best Director and in 1940, his film *Rebecca* won the Oscar for Best Picture. In 1980, he received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II. A husband, father, director, and "the Master of Suspense", Sir Alfred Hitchcock passed away on April 29, 1980.

6 - Interviews with Some Key Players

The following interviews were conducted to give an overview of 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 someone who works backstage. It may be useful to refer to these materials when conducting the lesson plans in the latter part of this pack or when creating your own. For ease of copying, each interview starts on a new page.

PATRICK BARLOW - Writer/adaptor

(Interviewed December 2006)

Were you adapting the film or the book in this piece?

It's the film. That was decided before I'd said yes to doing it. Definitely the film. It's the film and me and a tiny bit from the opening of the book.

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. 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 the kind of mad argument between them. Because 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 salesmen 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, who may differ from you, 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 20th century differs to our own?

'Crumbs', 'crikey', 'golly', 'absolutely beastly'. You had 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.



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.

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.

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.

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.



7 - Designing THE 39 STEPS

In our Who's Who list we described the DESIGNER: The role of the designer is to design and come up with ideas for the set, costumes and props, and then create them. They collaborate with the director a lot to decide how it will look.

During the pre-production of a typical theatre show the following stages are likely to be used by the Designer and Director:

STAGE 1 – COMING UP WITH THE IDEA

The Set and Costume Designer with the Director, will read the script several times (if not more) and make notes about the number of characters, locations, and era.

STAGE 2 - WHITE CARD MODEL BOX

The Designer might make a white card model box of the set which incorporates the ideas discussed during Stage 1. This is a mini scale version of the set made out of white card. There will also be tiny card models of the characters to give the creative team an idea of the size of the set in relation to the characters. The white card model box is an opportunity for the creative team, especially the Designer and Director, to see the initial concept and experiment with different ideas. They will also look at the budget and cost of building the set.

STAGE 3 – COMPLETE MODEL BOX

With the final ideas from the agreed with the creative team the Designer will make a new model box. Members of the creative and production team [Director, Lighting Designer, Sound Designer, Movement Director, Costume Supervisor, Production Manager and Producers] meet to view the model box. This model box is more detailed than the white card model box and will include many of the actual colours and textures that the Designer would like to use. The model box will be 'to scale' and is accompanied by 'to scale' drawings of the floor plan which the Production Manager will use when liaising with the set builders.

STAGE 4 – THE REHEARSAL ROOM

On the first day of rehearsal the Designer will talk through the model box with the full company including the actors. This will be the first time that the actors see 'world' they will be performing in on stage.

The Production Manager will have shared the floor plans with the Stage Management team and a mark up will be made on the rehearsal room floor – this is often done with electrical tape which comes in a variety of colours and is easy to clean up at the end of the rehearsal period.

During the month of rehearsals the set is built in a large workshop. It is built in lots of small parts so that it can be transported and put together easily.

In the rehearsal room the Director, Stage Management and actors often use chairs, beds and door frames to help realise the action on stage.

The actors will have costume fittings throughout the rehearsal period with the Costume Supervisor and Designer in preparation for the dress rehearsal and performances. Sometimes actors will have rehearsal costumes, especially if the costume will affect the characters movement or includes any special effects such as a quick change.

STAGE 5 – GET IN AND PERFORMANCE

The Get In for a performance tends to happen the weekend before technical rehearsals commence on stage or on a Monday of each touring week that a show arrives at a new venue.

- The whole set arrives, in pieces, in a truck. The set is unpacked and loaded into a scenery dock.
- The crew begin to piece together the set on the stage. The Production Manager will coordinate this from detailed floor plans of the stage and set.
- The lighting rig and sound equipment will be placed around the theatre including the auditorium.
- When the team have made sure everything is where it should be and is safe, the cast and Director will begin technical rehearsals before a dress rehearsal and their first performances. Or if this is a move to a new venue on tour then there will be an orientation session will take place on stage before the first performance.

During the Get In and technical rehearsals the Designer will be present to make notes about the set and costumes, ensuring everything is as they have designed.

Notes and changes to the set and costume may continue right up until Press Night/Opening Night.

STAGE 6 – PRESS NIGHT/OPENING NIGHT

This is the performance that theatre critics and guests see, and is the last time any element of a show will change – the creative team and producers call this ‘locking’ the show down.

Opening Night is also an opportunity to celebrate all of the hard work undertaken by so many people.





8 - Practical Work

The following material has been designed for use in the classroom or Drama Studio to support the production visit, and to support studies in Drama and English at KS3 and KS4 in particular.

There are opportunities for learning across a wider age range, and these have been pointed where possible.

Preparation may include a viewing of the Hitchcock movie (1935), but this is not a prerequisite. If time is an issue then the key scenes to look at are the ones including Mr Memory, the train-top pursuit, and the Forth Rail Bridge escape.

Introduction to Drama

Curriculum Links: Drama, English



EXERCISE

Classroom activities:

The following exercises are ideal for introducing students to the idea of multi-role playing, character development and play, techniques used by the cast in the creation of the show.

- Ask the group to walk around the drama studio and think about the way they walk. Ask them to be aware of their pace, of the muscles in their legs, arms, back and stomach as they move.
- Think about walking in neutral, calmly in a relaxed style. Then ask them to change the way they walk using the following influences. In each case, explore a range of levels from 1-10, with 5 being their normal walk:
 - o Energy – walking faster or slower
 - o Weight – feel heavy or light
 - o Tension – walking relaxed or with intense muscle tension/stress
 - o With emotion, such as happy-depressed, love-hate, calm-angry
- Starting in neutral, walking in the space, give the group a series of contrasting character names, such as Mr Slob, Miss Organised, Dr Nervous, Mr Bossy, Miss Jealous, Miss Happy, Mr Caring, Dr Boring. With each character, ask students to create a walk as that character, thinking about the characters pace, body language, breathing, gestures and facial expressions.
- Pick a character to develop further. Allow them to interact with each other. What happens when a Mr Slob and Miss Organised meet – does she try to tidy him up?
- Discuss how students created each character, which characters they preferred, how they differed from themselves and from other characters created. Did different students create the same character in different ways? Which characters did they like playing the most?

Improvisation Games

These exercises are good for developing listening skills, teamwork and creativity. It will help to tell a story, establish a scene with all improvisations, focusing on the 'W's: Who, What, Where, When, Why.

What Are You Doing?

In a circle, one person enters and improvises an act, related to *The 39 Steps*, or the period in which *The 39 Steps* is set, such as dusting off a suit, hiding behind a newspaper, or grooming a horse. After a few moments, once the action is established, a second person enters and asks "What are you doing?" to which the first person answers with a different action.

For example, if grooming a horse, they could say "changing a bicycle tyre" or "playing the banjo". The second person has to establish an improvisation of that action, and so on.

Who are you? What are you doing? Where are you doing it? When (what time of day/era) are you doing it? Why? Encourage students to make decisions, to be clear about what they're doing.

Circle Story:

In groups of 6-8 people, create a story, any story. Start with one sentence at a time, moving on to the next person at the end of that sentence.

One Word Story:

As above, but this time one word at a time.

Machine:

Arrange the group in a circle. One person enters and starts an action, with a sound, as if they are a part of a machine. A second person enters and adds to the machine, with a complimentary sound. More and more people enter the space, one at a time, each adding another part of the machine, until an integrated mechanism has been created.

Changing Language

Curriculum links: English Literature, English Language, History, Drama

Resources: Dictionaries, or access to the internet. Also enough copies for one each of the Patrick Barlow interview.

This session is worth doing twice, once before and again after seeing *The 39 Steps*, noting new input to the results. Otherwise, this exercise is best delivered after the show visit.

- 1.** In pairs or small groups ask for 2 lists:
 - a. Examples of words that no-one uses any more e.g. ration book.
 - b. 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 with 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 today. 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, deadpan, clowning. All these words come from the Time Out review of the show (www.timeout.com). 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 adapter Patrick Barlow. 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.** In 4's: Write a 5 minute script for a thriller (like *The 39 Steps*) that uses language that means it can only be set in the current year.
 - a. Use the basic plot of the story, about a person falsely accused of a crime and forced to flee.
 - b. Optional exercise: Repeat but choose another decade ('80s, '50s) or set the scene in a specific geographical location to provide links to History or Geography curriculum.

For Drama these pieces can be rehearsed and performed. For English ditto, or perhaps read out in class.

For additional inspiration, discuss how language has changed throughout time, and how words evolve. As a point of reference, think about popular plays, stories or TV programmes which are also set in the past, such as *Downton Abbey*. Shakespeare is also a great example of historic language. He invented many words and phrases, some of which are still in use today.

Genre

Curriculum Links: English Literature, Drama

Resources: Fifteen or so randomly chosen books/film posters 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 ask students for a definition, then brainstorm a spider-graph 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 film posters 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/film poster? Is it the language contained therein? The story or plot?
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.
 - a. For example, is Romeo and Juliet a romance, action adventure, a tragedy or some other genre
4. Now get students, again in fours, to pick out any two books/film posters 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 film.

OR

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 activities:

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 or small groups, students write and perform one scene adapted from the film to the stage.

Improvisation: In groups of 4-6, ask each group to devise a short scene, such as a wedding, a job interview, or visit to the doctors. Once they have devised and rehearsed the scene, ask them to improvise the scene with a range of different genres, such as murder mystery, romance, Disney cartoon, horror or comedy. Ask each group to perform their scene, then switch the genres every few lines and discuss the results.

How We Speak

Curriculum Links: Drama, English Literature, History, Geography

Use of Accents/Character

- 1.** Ask the students to think about famous people, of household names, who speak differently to them. Discuss what students think about the way they speak – how does their accent, style of speech, attitude and energy affect what we think of them? Include people such as The Royal Family, Radio DJs, singers like Ed Sheeran or Jessie J, actors like Maggie Smith, Julie Walters or Benedict Cumberbatch, and TV presenters like Claudia Winkleman and Holly Willoughby.
- 2.** 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? In particular, think about all the small characters, such as the Police Officer, the hotel owners, Ticket Inspector, etc. and how the actors made all their characters different by changing the way they spoke.
- 3.** 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?

Historically, accents would change every 6-8 miles in the UK. This is because people would be born, raised, would work, live and die within their community, so accents developed for a village or part of a town.

Once people started to move around more, around the time of WW1, accents started to get mixed and became more regional.

Dialects are not the way words are pronounced, but the local words used in every day speech. For example, is a young child a Baby, Bairne, Babby, Nipper, Nipa, Babs, or something else? In modern day, new accents are developing with new generations.

DRAMA:

- Ask the group to walk around the drama studio and think about walking in neutral. Think about the way they speak and what it says about them.
- Ask them to acknowledge each other with a nod, perhaps a “Hello” or “Hi”.
- Ask them to greet each other by shaking hands and saying “So good to see you”
- Ask them to greet each other with a Restoration style bow or courtesy and “Charmed, I’m sure”
- Ask them to greet each other with a high five and a “Yo, Dude!”
- Ask them to greet each other with a limp handshake and a false sounding “Thank you for coming” ideally with a false smile
- Discuss the exercise and what they discovered during it. Discuss how you can say the same phrase in different ways to say something else. How does the tone, energy or emotion in the voice alter the meaning behind the words we say?



ENGLISH:

- Write an essay or create a group presentation about different characters in *The 39 Steps*, and comparing different fictional characters in the past 100 or so years discussing how we imagine they spoke and how this influences the way these characters are perceived. Select characters from students English Literature study texts.

Pastiche

Curriculum Links: Drama, English Literature, Media

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. Good references are French and Saunders sketches, Family Guy and The Simpsons.

1. Ask students to define Pastiche and Parody and share with the class
2. Have a discussion about pastiche and where it is to be found. Talk about sampling in music, singers covering the songs of other artists, Lip Sync Battles and remakes; comedians, and remakes of old films and TV series.
3. Discuss whether it is good to be the subject of pastiche. Is it an a mark of respect for the work you have created, an attempt to take an idea in an exciting new direction, an insult to have your work made fun of, or a lack of original ideas resulting in revivals of old work?
4. Read the interview with Patrick Barlow in this pack with the students. He has no idea why we like pastiche. Do the students? (Is it to do with recognition?)

DRAMA

- Place students into groups and provide each group with a theme or scene inspired by The 39 Steps and ask them create an image which encapsulates that concept. This may be “A False Accusation”, “Hiding in Plain Sight”, “Failing to Keep A Secret” or “Mistaken Identity”, etc.
- Once the first image has been created, develop a before and after image to tell a story in three images. Remember, these images should show who is in the scene, where it is set, when, and what the characters are doing.
- Develop the three images further into a scene with speech and action. This will help identify what is happening, why and by whom.
- The 39 Steps has been developed as a comic pastiche of the original film. Once each group has performed, ask another group to make a pastiche of another group’s performance in a different style. They can make fun of the scene, of the characters in it, of the actors playing them, etc. A comic scene could be a silent movie, hammer horror, soap-opera/melodrama, etc.

ENGLISH

- Ask students to choose a favourite film, novel or other story. Rewrite the synopsis of the source material in a new way, as a parody of the original
 - o Alternatively, students can write a parody synopsis of *The 39 Steps*.

Intertextuality

Curriculum Links: Drama, English Literature, Media

Resources: Access to the internet for the opening part.

Discuss sources. What is a source in creative writing terms? Does everything have a source? Or are some things genuinely original?

- Ask students to identify all the source material for the following: *Romeo and Juliet*, *The 39 Steps*, the Disney film *The Jungle Book*. This can involve internet or just text-based research.
- If things are adapted and changed, does that matter, or should people be allowed to do what they want?
- Ask students to consider whether or not John Buchan would care that there were 3 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. Ask students to research copyright and Intellectual Property, which protects the rights of writers to be identified as the creators of their work.
- At what point does copyright expire? What rights do the original writers or other creators have over adaptations of an original work?
- Every character, every thing has a story. Discuss some of the smaller characters from *The 39 Steps* or other plays, films and books. In most cases we don't know these character's story, only their role in the main story being told.
- Pick a minor character from *The 39 Steps*, such as the Train Guard, Salesmen, Mr Memory or Police Officer. Discuss their role in the story.
- Discuss how the characters back story. For example, where is Mr Memory from? How did he discover his talent? Does he use this for selfish gain? Does it cause any problems in his life? Does he like the ability he has or loath it? What does his future hold?

DRAMA:

Devise a short scene about the chosen characters day, and the impact of their meeting with Hannay or another main characters has on them. Do they sell their story to the press, do they go home and tell their wife, does it traumatise them, or is it just another day at work?

ENGLISH:

Write 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.

Students will, like those who worked on *The 39 Steps*, have produced their own work from a source text.

9 - Reviews

Read the National Press Review for *The 39 Steps*.

Daily Express

Golly! Step into a joyously jokey homage to Hitch



SHERIDAN MORLEY

The 39 Steps, Criterion Theatre, London
Box Office: 0870 060 2313

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.

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

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

Sunday Times

Sugar Mummies

Royal Court ★
This is bad news. How could Anika Gupta, who wrote *The Waiting Room* and *Gladiator Games*, write such a dreary, cliché-ridden play, full of poppy 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 resenting a play and the powers that be muscling in to “develop it”, for which the lead 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 Lancunian, 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 has 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



Time Out

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 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*

The Guardian

THEATRE

The 39 Steps Criterion, 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 the theatre's unsuitability for the task. It's very easy to enjoy the creaky jokes, quick costume changes and lo-fi coups

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

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 Times

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, wobbly, craven 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 bulk

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



EXERCISE

Group work: Be the Critic

After seeing the performance, as a group respond to the following questions.

- 1 - What were your expectations before seeing the production?
- 2 - Did you enjoy watching THE 39 STEPS?
- 3 - How did the lighting, set, sound and costume help the play?
- 4 - What role did the music play within the story?
- 5 - What were the differences between the book and the play?
- 6 - Describe what you enjoyed about the play? And also discuss what you might not have enjoyed about the play.
- 7 - If you were the director, what would you have changed?

This Education Pack has been compiled as a means to prompt discussion and facilitate work in response to the touring production of THE 39 STEPS. All sources and credits regarding materials are given throughout. No part of this pack should be replicated out of context.

