

ONSTAGE BLOG

Review: "The 39 Steps" Presented by 3P Productions

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Dashing Canadian hero, Richard Hannay, whisks us on an epic journey through an adventure-filled myriad of iconic film noir characters, accents, and scenes in hopes of revealing the meaning behind *'The 39 Steps'*. Take a 1935 Alfred Hitchcock film thriller and adapt it for the stage. Add some slapstick comedy, mix in four brilliant actors who play an array of iconic spy genre characters plus a dash of some quirky stage directions, and you've got Capitol Theatre's latest, boisterous and bona fide hit, ***The 39 Steps!***

The story weaves itself along the exploits of Hannay (Perry Mucci) who finds himself mistakenly immersed in a global spy ring where he reconciles himself to lusty femme fatale German spy Annabella Schmidt (Erin MacKinnon). Through a series of misadventures, Hannay is forced to evade the law after he is mistakenly branded a murderer. It's his escape that takes the audience on a comical journey of iconic spy thrillers with references to two of Hitchcock's film treasures *'North By Northwest'* and *'Rear Window'*.

The Capitol Theatre stage is also set for one delightfully complicated quest of scene changes for this complicated plot, but that's the delight in watching these changes occur, as we are cleverly drawn along for the ride for a terrific production. An entertaining ensemble (Sweeney MacArthur, Erin MacKinnon, and Sean Hauk) who conjure up dozens of characters between themselves in fast paced, scene stealing performances all with the quick switch of an accent, a sudden limp, or the sporting of a new hat. Mucci plays Canadian Hannay marvellously. While mastering a Canadian accent of decades past, Mucci becomes narrator by addressing the audience periodically throughout the play while plotting where we are all headed next. Mucci's Hannay is a cross of David Niven meets Inspector Clouseau, both clumsy, cute and dashing all the while keeping the audience grounded among an ensemble that play multiple roles in galloping from London to Scottish Highlands in a quest to seek truth and justice.

As any actor knows, the breaking of the fourth wall is taboo in stage performance. In Patrick Barlow's adaptation, the weaving of actors responding to odd sound cues and missed scripted entrances adds delightful comedy. This ensemble pulls off this task impeccably. The Vaudevillian environment of this show very much caters to entertaining the audience thoroughly.

It is obvious to me that a great deal of time was devoted skilfully to the physical humour, and each performer's execution of it is paced well. I felt almost as though I was the patron of a wonderful sideshow that I happened upon, and now I can't leave my seat despite the beckoning of the skilled carnival barker down yonder. Kudos to director Robert Woodcock for pacing the physical comedy so well, and in giving the audience the time to enjoy what these very skilled actors have utilized.

Erin MacKinnon sweeps with grace and simplicity, which is no easy feat, from her characterizations of femme fatale German Spy, Annabella Schmidt, shy Glaswegian farm wife, Margaret to sophisticated Brit, Pamela. She distinguishes well between three distinct ethnic characterizations and offers her own brand of subtle, yet sharp comedy.

Sweeney MacArthur as the irritable Crofter, the caricatured Scottish farmer, had me in fits of laughter. Crofter is just one of a variety of personalities he revives so incredibly well. MacArthur punches up each personality so distinctly that I never get lost in the myriad of scenes he energizes. His voices and accents had me lusting for more.

Ensemble member Sean Hauk and his performance of Professor Jordan is flawlessly intriguing and hilarious. Hauk is stellar, and his work as Jordan is only one of a variety of iconic characters he embodies. Hauk also plays an elderly gentleman whose physical and comical idiosyncrasy are so well nuanced that I was anticipating patiently the next laugh he provides. I was truly delighted with this performance of wonderful shtick.

The staging in this show appears simple but, with so many scenes, it's a complex task, which has been achieved so well. Mr. Woodcock has transformed the Capitol Theatre stage with a multitude of settings which include a music hall, Scottish Highlands, London flat and street corner. Essentially, he has incorporated cinematic wide screen adventure scenes and envisioned them for the stage in a way that suspends the audience's disbelief. And it worked marvellously. My imagination was lit afire with perilous train bridge crossings, escaping plane chases, traversing fog filled moors while wading through flocks, all with the aid of props, miming, sound effects, and sound direction. This show has every iconic element of Hitchcock, film noir, espionage thriller and the Three Stooges slapstick, blended together with a break neck style that is so entertaining and refreshing I left wanting more.

The 39 Steps continues at Port Hope's Capitol Theatre, 20 Queen Street, to July 29th, 2018. Tickets are available at capitoltheatre.com or telephone 905-885-1071.

Photo of Perry Mucci as Richard Hannay, and Erin MacKinnon as Annabella Schmidt, provided by Capitol Theatre.