

Comedic Feats in “39 Steps” at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival

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Four actors. 150 roles. Two hours.

These unwieldy theatrical ingredients are the recipe for the mad cap and rollicking production of “39 Steps,” now at the [Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival](#). The parody of Alfred Hitchcock’s film is a must-see comedy. This “third play” is a popular genre of non-Shakespearean productions showcasing the diverse and superb talents of the HVSF troupe, now a Hudson Valley institution for 26 years. Similar past productions include “Around the World in 80 Days” and “Bombitty of Errors” – all steeped in hilarity where the actors freely and gregariously engage the audience.



Wesley Mann (Clown 2), Jason O’Connell (Clown 1).

WILLIAM MARSH PHOTO

This pastiche follows the cinematic story of Richard Hannay, a Canadian visiting London who attends a live show featuring the amazing “Mr. Memory.” There he meets the mysterious Annabella Smith who is escaping from secret agents and who begs Hannay to let her hide in his apartment. He agrees and she warns him of the danger she is in, but in the morning he discovers she was murdered. Fearing he could be accused of Annabella’s murder, Hannay flees to find and expose the powerful spy ring.

Nationally known Russell Treyz makes his directorial debut at HVSF with “39 Steps.” He deftly balances comedy with improvisation, allowing the actors to veer off just enough to spontaneously embellish their characters. Richard Ercole is well cast as the innocent and somewhat repressed Richard Hannay. Ercole solidly holds the only singular role in the play and miraculously stays in character without cracking up from the constant jocularity (how does he do it?). The very gifted Gabra Zackman plays three women, all who fall for Hannay. Zackman’s Annabella Smith exquisitely offers a sultry Marlene Deitrich; as the heroine Pamela she is the demure, counterpart of Hannay who taps into his vulnerabilities.

Most notable are the very essential Stage Hands: Jack Mackie and Marianna Caldwell, two young HVSF apprentices who play living props who organically morph into (among other set pieces) squeaky doors, overstuffed couches, the glaring headlights of a fast moving train, and (ingeniously) whose hands are fast growing vines, creeping up from a watery bog and clinging to Zackman’s feet. Mackie and Caldwell personalize their Stage Hand roles with facial expressions and body language that inform us of the mounting undercurrent of insanity.

The pièce de résistance is the uber dynamic duo Jason O'Connell and Wesley Mann playing Clown 1 and Clown 2 who seamlessly assume countless roles without coming up for air. Mann, at his best and beyond goofy from crazily twitching Mr. Memory's fluttering mustache to the haughty, frumpish old lady and as the dim-witted, stodgy farmer, to name just a few. O'Connell is totally in his comedic element, slipping into a Scottish role by intoning Sean Connery, as a hotel matron who compulsively primps and fusses with 'her' bodice, then shifting adroitly to portray the more serious, evil German Professor Jordan. With superior dexterity, the full costume changes and lightning speed hat-swaps pass in a blur amidst slap-stick routines as the two unbelievably teeter between maintaining the high-speed pace of the play and soaring zaniness.

There's a lot going on. Mesmerizing and completely engaging is the clever and witty dialogue that is contrapuntal to the fast paced action. The acrobatic moves that further define the scenes are the ingenious choreography by HVSF's Lisa Rinehart. The train scene is stellar: the cast moves as one rhythmic unit, convincingly jostling about with Ercole sticking his head out the window announcing the passing towns renamed for famous English TV shows and movies including "Downton Abbey," "Brideshead," and even "Brideshead Revisited."

Throughout the play Hitchcock omnipresent: from the double entendre references to "Psycho" and "The Birds" to the celebrated director's cameo appearance (redolent of his films) where a pot bellied character waltzes across the stage masked by his thick jowled face painted on a cardboard box. Interspersed are clapperboard "takes" that keep us in the cinematic world. Most fun is the live, vocal soundtrack crooned by the actors producing percussive clicks and airy swishes. Well placed clips of filmic soundtracks are expertly chosen by Sound Design director William Neal.

Scottish author John Buchan's 1916 original story of pre-world war I espionage was adapted by Hitchcock in 1935 for his film which he updated to reflect Germany's rise to power and the threat of the Nazism. Flash forward to 2005 and a new, comedic version of the story based on the film was written by Patrick Barlow, who intentionally cast it for only four actors. "39 Steps" has played on Broadway and currently plays in major theaters worldwide. The show won the Olivier Award for Best comedy in 2007, among other awards.

"39 Steps" runs for the entire season until August 31st. The season's other productions include "Love's Labour's Lost," and "Romeo and Juliet." Performances are at the historic Boscobel House & Gardens in Garrison, New York. Tickets are available online at: www.hvshakespeare.org. Box Office: (845) 265-9575.

By Abby Luby