

ARTS · Theatre October 28th, 2014

By Eric McMillan

The four steps to a hilarious evening

Audience is in on the joke with 39 Steps production



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NICKED: Espionage agents posing as police (Daryn DeWalt, left, and Jacob Hogan) drive their temporary prisoners (Stephen Carrette and Kristie Paille) in a makeshift car in the rollicking 39 Steps, playing at The Papermill Theatre.

REVIEW

***The 39 Steps*, by Patrick Barlow, directed by Randy Pryce, The Papermill Theatre at Todmorden Mills, running to Nov. 8.**

I first saw *The 39 Steps*, the play by Patrick Barlow – based on the 1935 movie by Alfred Hitchcock, based on the 1915 novel by future Canadian Governor General John Buchan – on Broadway a few years ago.

Of all the versions I've viewed and read, I have to say I most enjoyed the play now running at The Papermill Theatre.

It may not be the slickest production but it does what the best community theatre does: it provides professional quality material that connects with its local audience on their own level.

Despite the original novel and movie adaptation being early suspense thrillers, the play of *The 39 Steps* is a popular piece of comedic art. And this production plays its comedy more broadly than ever.

It's obviously a small production, with four actors taking seemingly dozens of parts and with simple props being recycled creatively for different scenes. But the cast and crew make the best of small resources, letting the audience in on the joke – such as when the hero of the piece is caught up in a marching parade of Scottish Highlanders, created from a couple of actors carrying paper figures on poles. Or when an air attack is effectively portrayed by shadows on the curtain of model planes, wielded by obvious sticks from the sidelines.

The versatility of the cast is most on display with the antics of roly-poly, veteran local actor Daryn DeWalt (credited as Clown #1) and tall, thin student actor Jacob Hogan (Clown #2), who team up like Laurel and Hardy (Mutt and Jeff? any vaudeville or cartoon team you can think of?) to handle almost all the secondary roles, as well as the stage performances of Mr. Memory, essential to the espionage narrative.

Keeping up with them, wearing almost as many hats, is Kristie Paille, a young comic actor who ranges from the femme fatale (and her fatality early in the play really is comic) to the ingenue who gets caught up in the intrigues that ensnare the lead character Richard Hannay.

Playing the only half-way serious character, Stephen Carrette is almost to be pitied, surrounded by such crowd-pleasing cut-ups. But he handles it brilliantly, quickly engaging the audience as the Hannay character they can identify with – and slipping smoothly into the funny business with the others whenever it's called for.

It's a sign of success on opening night that when the odd prop failed to function as required, the cast handled the glitch with assurance and humour that further engaged the audience. We felt we were in safe and professional hands.

And admittedly silly hands. But being so silly without seeming to work at it is hard work.

And makes for a ridiculously enjoyable evening's entertainment.

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One thought on “The four steps to a hilarious evening”



Ann Garnett

October 31, 2014 at 3:43 pm

I agree whole heartedly with this review. The production was so witty and ingenious.....I laughed so much but now I realise I should have laughed louder to encourage the cast!!! Just the dose of humour that one needs on a cold November night . Ann Garnett