

INGA R. WILSON AND TOM WILSON IN OCT'S *THE 39 STEPS*



Dial M for Mayhem

OCT'S *THE 39 STEPS* PLAYS FAST AND LOOSE WITH ALFRED HITCHCOCK

BY RICK LEVIN

What makes Hitchcock Hitchcock? Or, put more fancifully, what do we mean when we call something Hitchcockian?

Certainly the British director of such classics of psychological suspense as *Vertigo* and *Psycho* was a master formalist — a tyrannical perfectionist in terms of framing, technique and narrative thrust.

But, more than that, Hitchcock was the great voyeur of human foibles and failures — an observer of nervous tics, libidinal confusion and full-blown psychic collapse who presided over the neurotic chaos of his stories like a portly and salacious superego. Along with Fritz Lang, Hitchcock is cinema's foremost Freudian, a purveyor of subliminal shocks that are tense and tragicomic.

Or, perhaps, simply comic.

Oregon Contemporary Theatre's current production is a boisterous and loving spoof on all things Hitchcock — a rapid-fire lark of a play that celebrates the mistaken-identity shenanigans that fueled so much of the master's oeuvre. Imagine *The Man Who Knew Too Much* run through a blender on high speed, and you begin to get the idea of the heady, percolating madness of this play.

Adapted in 2005 by Patrick Barlow from Hitchcock's 1935 film (based on the 1915 novel by John Buchan), *The 39 Steps* is a gimmick inside a gimmick: A cast of four actors (Tom Wilson, Inga R. Wilson, Colin Law, Reese Madden) playing more than 30 roles among them are hurried through a tangled plot that seizes on Hitchcock's fondness for intrigue, treachery and international espionage.

The small cast is fantastic, but Wilson takes the cake as Hannay, a British citizen who, out of a boredom bordering on disgust, decides to go to the theater, where he becomes entangled in a ridiculously labyrinthine conspiracy involving the hijacking of military secrets. The complicated (actually, deliciously overcomplicated) plot moves at breakneck speed, and one of its pleasures is beholding the mash-up of classic Hitchcock moments: the Salvador Dali-inspired hallucinations, the airplane scene from *North by Northwest*, *The Rear Window* reference, the bumpy and sinister car rides through the countryside.

The real joy of this production, however, is watching the talented cast negotiate the play's crazy plot, which calls for a level of comic chops, physical agility and sheer speediness that is athletic in scope. On a skeletal set with just a handful of props (a chair, a riser, some old luggage trunks), the actors recreate a variety of settings which often ranges outward into the audience itself.

John Schmor's direction is tight and sure, which is no easy feat; the play calls for the kind of risky, rambunctious choreography that recalls the best of traditional slapstick (several times I was reminded of Chaplin). Oftentimes, costume changes take place right on stage, and at one point Law and Madden switch characters madly, all within a single chase scene that reaches a hilarious pique of absurdity. This is what theater was made for.

With an endearing and knowing wink toward the audience, *The 39 Steps* revels in its own inspired campiness; it is less frivolous than playful, a light-hearted and silly-smart spoof that is perpetually tipping its cap to the movie-loving public. Part roast and part sentimental journey, the play honors Hitchcock by poking fun at his most Hitchcockian traits, and the results are — as Hitch himself might say — marvelous.

The 39 Steps runs through Feb. 4 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$28, visit octheatre.org or call 541-465-6988.



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