

[The 39 Steps - Ups and Downs at the Criterion](#)

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by Chartreuse 24/5/2011 11.47

Having relished *Apocalypse No!* at the Trafalgar Theatre where all parts are played by four people we had every expectation of a positive experience. Seated in the stalls at the Criterion, my partner, two friends and I as well as the diverse audience around us audibly and visibly derived a hugely enjoyable evening from the trip.

Although this is a spoof, you don't have to be familiar with John Buchan's book, the film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, or the remakes. *The Thirty-nine Steps* is of the genre of the idle-but-debonair hero thrown unwillingly into the role of detective by dramatic circumstances, necessarily involving saving the country (with the spirited and independent heroine) if not the world. Set in the period where everyone who'd had a certain amount of education was imagined to speak like members of the royal family, the accent alone provides food for amusement. Ehbsolyuteleh.

The up-sides of this production are many. The book moves the reader from town to rugged country, journeying by train, car and on foot, from London flat to Scottish mansion, all inventively and entertainingly created on stage with dry ice, props and frantic enthusiasm by the gang of four. Such is the timing of the actors sharing the joke of the scrambling scene and costume changes that the audience feels in on the production.

The script mocks its own makeshift devices especially on the moor where one of the actors plays the obstacles including rocks and a ravine. Hitchcock enthusiasts can play spot-the-movie-title as well as searching for the elusive image of the great director himself. With only the occasional pause for breath the story is executed in a top hole flurry of excitement as the hero finds the top secret plans, the 39 steps, the villain and himself.

The 'downs' then? A London theatre arguably benefits from a touch of shabby charm. However the shabbiness had hit the seats in the springs and the gentle shifting in aged chairs of a packed house was at times loud enough to drown out the actors, at least for those of us in the stalls.

Consider taking hearing aids and or making a donation or fund-raising for the Criterion if you feel strongly about the issue. Other solutions might be to try the front stall or upper tier.

However, in this fest of fast-paced hilarity a few missed words are mere crumbs of dissent. Regardless of the mild sound issue I would highly recommend this production of *The 39 Steps*. If you can watch the Robert Donat/Madeleine Carroll version from 1935 so much the better but, if not, this still stands alone as a comic tour-de-force.