

THE TROUBLE WITH HANNAY

STEPPING OUT WITH ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND THE 39 STEPS

BY MARK SHANAHAN, DIRECTOR OF THE 39 STEPS

“WHAT ARE THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS?”

cries Richard Hannay as the final reel of Alfred Hitchcock’s early masterpiece unspools. The question is more loaded than Hannay might realize. *The 39 Steps* is a wonderful comedic play and it has a long and varied history.

Hitchcock’s film, which was released to great acclaim in 1935, would cement his reputation as one of Britain’s finest filmmakers. Many of the director’s favorite themes for Hitchcock aficionados can be found in this witty, suspenseful and often racy romantic spy-thriller.

In *The 39 Steps*, Hitchcock throws into his cauldron of storytelling a severe mistrust of authority, a hero wrongly accused of murder, a wild journey through dangerous landscapes, a generous helping of wry humor, an examination of the battle between the

sexes and, of course, a beautiful Hitchcock Blonde. All are signature ideas Hitchcock would return to again and again, notably in *Young and Innocent*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Saboteur*, *North By Northwest* and *Frenzy*, which owe more than their fair share to the plot machinations of *The 39 Steps*.

Based on a 1914 novel by John Buchan, Hitchcock’s picture is markedly different than its source material. Hitchcock, an avid reader, had maintained that Buchan had “always been an influence” and admired his fiction greatly. The director recalled reading the book as a young man and determining that if “I ever became a filmmaker, I would make a picture of it.”

Buchan’s Hannay, the hero of five of his novels, deals with the outbreak of World War I and the political intrigues of the day. Hitchcock’s Hannay is equally entrenched in the early days of war during the turbulent year of 1935, but the director chose to put Hannay through his own personal, Hitchcockian obstacle course.

Along with screenwriter Charles Bennett, Hitchcock would reinvent *The 39 Steps* from the ground floor up, adding such memorable characters as music hall performer Mr. Memory and the mysterious and alluring Annabella Schmidt. Most important, Hitchcock and Bennett would add a love



**STORYBOARD FORM
1935 FILM VERSION OF
THE 39 STEPS**

**MADELENE CARROLL
AND ROBERT DONAT
IN THE 39 STEPS**

interest for Hannay. As played by Madeleine Carroll, Pamela proves to be a perfect foil for Robert Donat's dashing Hannay.

Hitchcock and Bennett knew that death defying escapes and sophisticated villains were important to their film, but it is safe to say that the movie is less concerned with the politics of war than it is with Hannay and Pamela's budding romance. Though Pamela calls Hannay "horrible and heartless," and Hannay is frustrated by this "buttoned headed little idiot," it is clear from their first stolen kiss on a train what Hitchcock has in mind for them. Of course, saving England is merely a happy by-product of falling in love! The bickering couple owes much to screwball comedies like the previous year's *It Happened One Night* or the comic mystery, *The Thin Man*. In crafting his own version of Buchan's adventure, Hitchcock left nothing untouched, even the meaning of the title. In fact, in the middle of writing the screenplay, it is said that Bennett paused to ask, "Wait a minute, what ARE the 39 Steps?" Hitchcock answered, "Oh, we'll figure that out later."

"Drama," said Hitchcock, "is life with the dull bits cut out." For Richard Hannay, life is certainly dramatic and never dull. Recognizing the potential of *The 39 Steps* as a play, Patrick Barlow and his wonderful collaborators have produced a script based on Hitchcock's film which is a loving and smart tribute not simply to the master director but to the world of the theatre itself. And what could be more fitting? After all, the film begins and ends in a theatre, and Hannay is the ultimate actor. Throughout his adventure, he must



constantly recreate himself, assuming a variety of identities in order to simply survive his frightening predicament. One can imagine the George Street Playhouse performers might happily identify with Hannay as they each step from the wings tonight!



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