

Spotlight on Learning Study Guide

The 39 Steps

adapted by Patrick Barlow
from the novel by John Buchan

from the movie of Alfred Hitchcock
licensed by ITV Global Entertainment Limited,
and an original concept by
Nobby Dimon and Simon Corble



stc

study guide compiled by K. Georgia Geverding

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Acknowledgements

Welcome to the 2011 - 2012 Sudbury Theatre Centre Season

“Celebrating 40 Years of Make-Believe”

Artistic director David Savoy, in his third year at STC, is pleased to present a 40th Anniversary Season of diverse plays which both celebrate the past traditions of Sudbury Theatre Centre, and look forward boldly to the future. This year, teachers will have multiple opportunities to introduce their students to a broad range of plays. The mystery genre has been a crowd-pleasing staple of this theatre, and to honour that tradition, this exciting anniversary season begins with the classic mystery-thriller titled “**The 39 Steps**”. In the months to come, STC will go on to present a diverse program which will include the always intriguing “**Waiting for Godot**”, the ‘Students On Stage’ production of the comic “**Brothers Grimm: Out of Order**”, the continuing Wingfield saga in “**Wingfield: Lost and Found**”, the hilarious examination of friendship as a relentless optimist and a confirmed pessimist find their lives intertwined in “**Lawrence and Holloman**”, and the multiple Tony award winning musical “**The Drowsy Chaperone**”.

Audiences of all ages can look forward to the Christmas season production of “**Beauty and the Beast**” and this year’s Young(ish) Company co-production of the wonderful “**Charlotte’s Web**”. Students can look forward to seeing productions which foster their imaginations, and feed their love of make-believe as audiences are invited to truly celebrate the ‘magic of make-believe’!

Few stories have evolved as dramatically as this production of “**The 39 Steps**” – from the original novel, four times adapted to film, to this adaptation by Patrick Barlow from the Alfred Hitchcock movie, and an original concept by Nobby Dimon and Simon Corble. Sit back and enjoy the creative result!

FOR THE TEACHER – a note about this guide

STC, with the support of Vale, our *Spotlight on Education* sponsor, provides a study guide for each play attended by our student audiences. The classroom teacher is encouraged to download the guides from the STC website and to make use of the background materials, notes on the play and the author, and suggestions for related research or classroom activities and assignments. The guides are intended to save the busy teacher time and augment the classroom activities connected to the class field trip to the theatre

Depending on the individual play, secondary school Drama and English teachers and also often history teachers will find something useful for their classes in the guides. And elementary teachers will be pleased to know that guides are also produced to accompany those productions aimed at young audiences. So tell your colleagues at both levels about these guides and encourage their use! Your feedback re the content and set-up of these materials is welcomed by STC!

BEFORE THE PLAY:

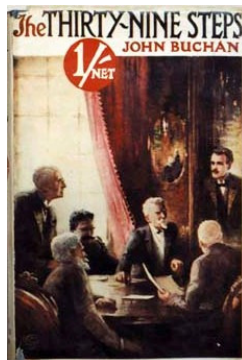
The Original Source Material: the 1915 novel The 39 Steps by John Buchan

The introduction to a 1985 edition presents this novel as “*the most famous of all thrillers*” and goes on to claim that “*although originally published [almost one hundred years ago] – and filmed four times – it remains timeless and as compulsively readable as anything written since.*”

The Original Story

In the England of 1915, with a world war already fragmenting nations, the novel’s riveting tale - of international intrigue, political assassination, a brutal murder, a trio of villains, and an unintentional hero who inherits a secret that he must reveal to those in power to save a nation - takes the reader on a chase through England by train, automobile, bicycle, and on foot. The novel is narrated in the first person by its accidental hero, Richard Hannay, a 37 year old man bored with London and, by his own admission, “*disgusted with life*”. He longs for some excitement - and his boredom is soon alleviated by a frantic month of adventure during which he will hold the fate of England in his hands.

His adventure begins through a less than accidental meeting with an American war correspondent named Franklin P. Scudder, who, on the night before he is murdered, tells Hannay a complex tale of political alliances made and broken, assassinations threatened, German plots in place – and an English government oblivious to it all. Only the collected information, gleaned in bits and pieces, and scratched in code in Scudder’s journal, can hold the key to unravelling the truth, routing out enemy spies, and saving the country. Falsely accused of Scudder’s murder, Hannay follows his notebook leads, donning a host of disguises to escape - and benefiting from the aid of many strangers – until he reaches his final destination: the mysterious “39 steps” of the title. Here the plot is brought to its satisfying climax, the villains defeated and England’s secrets kept safe.



The Immediate Source: The Hitchcock Film Version

The first of four films eventually made of the novel's story, Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 version remains the classic – and the major source for this theatre adaptation. Made as a thriller, Hitchcock's film is only loosely based on Buchan's novel. Of all the films versions made, Hitchcock's remains the most acclaimed. In 1999, it came fourth in a British Film Institute poll of British films, and in 2004, it was named the 21st greatest British film of all time.

Hitchcock's adaptation borrows the novel's beginning, but almost immediately departs from it. The Scudder character disappears, and two female characters – identified as Annabelle Schmidt and Pamela Edwards - appear in the early scenes. The plot details are significantly altered. But at its heart, the film is still in the 'thriller' genre.

The classic elements remain:

- an innocent man on the run from the law
- the clever use of disguise
- and the exciting chase over the English countryside .

What is added is the **faster pace** and the inherent **humour** of the situation!



FUN FACT: In Hitchcock's film, "The 39 Steps" refers to the clandestine spying operation referred to by Annabelle Schmidt, not the physical 39 steps to the sea which are so important in the novel's climactic scene.

FILM FACT: This film version of the story was first adapted as a radio play on Lux Radio Theatre in December of 1937. **In 2007, the current incarnation of the play appeared in the West End and on Broadway, its material adapted from both the John Buchan novel and the Hitchcock film.**

A Synopsis of the Play:

NOTE TO THE TEACHER: Though it begins like the novel – a bored Richard Hannay in his London flat – longing for something to shake up his life – the play very quickly alters the book’s events and its tone to something much lighter and very much more comic. In its details, it borrows liberally from the Hitchcock film.

Act 1 - scenes 1-17

The action is set in 1935. War is brewing in Europe and a mysterious woman names Annabelle Schmidt (a replacement for the ‘Scudder’ character) throws herself on the mercy of Hannay at the music hall where he has gone to relieve his boredom. The featured performer of the evening is “Mr. Memory”, a man with a photographic memory and a thousand facts at his immediate disposal. Early in the performance, a shot unexpectedly rings out and, visibly scared by something she has seen, Annabelle Schmidt begs Hannay to take her home with him. During the night that she seeks refuge in his flat, she is tracked down by ‘enemies’ to whom she has mysteriously referred, and murdered. With a dead woman in his flat, Hannay stands accused of the murder, and must flee London, armed only with the vague clues that Ms. Schmidt has left him about a secret plot and a spy organization called ***The 39 Steps***, which she fears is stealing important British military secrets. The head of this nefarious ring she identifies before she dies as a man recognizable by the amputation of a tip of one finger (a change from the “hooded eyes” description of the novel’s villain).

Now a fugitive desperate to escape his pursuers, Hannay escapes his flat in the guise of a milkman, and takes a train to Scotland, in search of the house where the dead woman told him she was going to find the head of the espionage group. But on the train, he realizes the police are already chasing him. In a quick-thinking effort to fool them, he enters the train compartment of the beautiful young woman called Pamela, and enfolds her in an embrace, hoping to throw the police off his trail. Startled as she is, she betrays him to the police – and a silly scene ensues, ending with Hannay jumping from the train on to the Forth Rail Bridge, and making a dramatic narrow escape.

He finds shelter in the home of an old Scottish crofter, whose much younger wife takes a liking to him and gives him an old jacket of her husband’s, a hymn book still in its pocket – and directs him to the house for which he is searching. At that house, he is greeted by the wife of the seemingly respectable Professor Jordan, but soon realized that the professor is the man with the missing finger-joint, who, discovered, shoots Hannay and leaves him for dead. So ends Act I of the play!

Act 2 - scenes 18-33

The second act begins with Hannay trying to tell his story to a sceptical police force who side with the man they know as Professor Jordan. Once again forced to flee, Hannay escapes through a window and soon finds himself in the middle of a political meeting where he is thrust forward as the featured speaker (an echo of the original novel). As luck would have it, Pamela is in the audience, and recognizing Hannay, gives him up once more to the authorities. Taken together, they eventually realize that the 'police' who are supposedly escorting them are in fact part of the spy ring. When the car is forced to stop, Hannay runs for it, with Pamela hand-cuffed to him. Posing as a young runaway couple, they spend a night at an inn, and by morning, are united in their intent to reveal the spies.

Angry that Pamela has not at first believed him – and now, convinced, has nevertheless allowed the spies to get away – Hannay leaves her and returns to London to the same music hall he was in when the play began. Meantime, Scotland Yard has been notified of these goings-on by Pamela, but authorities have not been able to determine that any military secrets have been taken. They follow Pamela to get to Hannay, and all meet once more at Mr. Memory's show at the London Palladium. The police seem about to close in on the fugitive Hannay, when Mr. Memory arrives on the stage and Hannay suddenly recognizes his theme music as the tune which has been in his head for days.

In a sudden epiphany, he realizes that Mr. Memory is the viaduct for the nation's secrets. Catching Mr. Memory off guard, he asks him about the 39 steps -and Mr. Memory compulsively confesses the entire scheme, leaving Hannay and Pamela to unite in victory!



‘The 39 Steps’ – Broadway Review

The following is excerpted from a review by Paul Cozby appearing on the About.com Theater site, accompanied by a four star (out of five) rating.

“What you’ll like about the 39 Steps:

George Abbott said three things matter in theatre: timing, timing, and timing. If true, the creators of The 39 Steps learned this lesson well. Movies from the 1930’s, even from a master director like [Alfred] Hitchcock, are often filled with what seem like long awkward pauses to today’s film fan, but The 39 Steps gets rid of them all.

The show plays at breakneck speed and it is played for laughs all the way.

And the timing? Well, there are 150 characters in the show played by just four actors

***The 39 Steps** will keep you guessing and laughing. Little wonder that it was nominated for Best Play and Best Director Tonys.*

Buchan’s original book was an adventure story, and, in fact, was the first of the “Richard Hannay” series of the ordinary-guy-caught-in-intrigue genre. Hitchcock loved such tales, but he often added the humour that such implausible situations suggested.

*In Broadway’s **The 39 Steps**, it goes a few steps further. The show is silly, in the best sense of that word. Almost Monty Python-esque at times. I love that kind of humour, but don’t go expecting The Bourne Identity.”*



Notes From The Director – David Savoy

The fun of this production and this play lies in its creative mayhem. The ‘delight’ factor is the challenge of successfully staging a movie – but with just four actors on the stage playing all the roles, using the greatest gift that the theatre can give – imagination.

The audience too must suspend disbelief – as men play women, and actors change roles with lightning speed – and audience members must themselves imaginatively ‘fill in’ the theatre experience.

- The play version of “***The 39 Steps***” is much, much funnier than the original source material. It celebrates what the actors do to successfully put an entire movie on a stage, who through the complicated shifts of personas, allow the audience to know what originally happened.
- The play, like the novel, tells a straight-forward story, with espionage still at its centre; but it does so with a lot of comic verve – and at a breakneck pace!
- Seeing four talented and versatile actors playing multiple roles has the power to illustrate for budding student actors how to ‘invent’ many people on stage, and at one time.

For a director, the challenges of the play are many:

- How do you suggest a train? The wind? A flock of sheep? A bridge suspended high above water? ... without any real evidence of any of them, and with only minimal props. Again, imagination is key.
- How do you choose actors with not only the acting skill, but the physical dexterity for comedy, and a powerful sense of humour to play what the theatre does best ... to create a movie on stage ...but without any of the movie ‘tricks’ that skilful editing allows.
- How do these same actors not only handle their multiple roles, but also move scenery and props on and off stage, and still retain the validity of the play’s action? How do only four actors create dozens of characters, shifting personas multiple times in the space of minutes on the stage?

In this play, every trick of the theatre is cleverly utilized: shadow puppets; fog and wind machines; thunder boards and a multitude of theatre techniques – but always staying true to the 1930’s era technology which would have been available in the time in which the action is set.

This is a play which requires actors who are familiar with each other, who can achieve a quick level of comfort, crucial to a concentrated rehearsal schedule and the successful interaction of the actors in the play. STC has been fortunate in finding four such actors.

AT THE PLAY - The Acting Company

Stephen Sparks - familiar to Sudbury audiences from STC's production of "Moonlight and Magnolias", Stephen returns as Richard Hannay, bringing to this role the requisite physical and vocal ability to create our accidental hero.

Jacqueline Francis – previously seen in "*The Love List*", she appears in "***The 39 Steps***" as a German spy, a Scottish farm wife, a typical English lady, all of whom must be characterized differently and convincingly on the stage.

Sheldon Davies & Robert Clarke – as the two clowns, between them play over 40 roles! Theirs is a tour-de-force primer on acting as they literally shift character in the space of a line and shift back again at sometimes frenetic speed. Students can look at their performances as a primer on stage characterization and imaginative acting!

The Creative Crew

Geoffrey Dinwiddie – Set Designer

At first glimpse of the stage, we see what looks like a traditional old fashioned theatre set, with the first scene a depiction of Richard Hannay's apartment. The set is minimal, but very specific – and tricky; for example, central to the scene is a large armchair, which must be quickly and easily moved in and out – 'as if by magic' by the actors themselves.

The stage design started out very complex, but was whittled down to the point that we are left with one door that moves, a window that moves, a couple of ladders, a few trunks ... the simplicity giving the actors only the tools they need to 'create' the many scenes and props of the play.

** Note: the actors often 'comment' on what happens on the stage; for example, a deliberately delayed cue, a mis-step on the stage - commenting on what goes wrong, or is taking too long.

Charlotte Robertson – Costume Designer

Multiple roles also mean fast costume changes - in this play, sometimes even from male to female and back again in very quick succession. Sometimes a full costume may be utilized; often, just a hat, a small gesture or characteristic tone, or a shift in body language must replace a full costume change to alert the audience to which character is 'present' on the stage at any given moment in the play. This is especially true of the two clowns who change character constantly. Observing the small ways in which a bit of costuming can alter or identify character will lead students to useful exercises in how to tell a story, create a character, etc.

Travis Hatt – Lighting Designer – watch for the inventive use of lighting as it helps delineate the fast-paced action of the thirty-three scenes of the play!

Sound – there are dozens of sound cues in the play and some must be deliberately miscued (as in the late ringing of a phone). From the sound of trains to the bleating of sheep, from a music hall drum roll to the sound of gunshots, from the sound of a 30's police car to bagpipe music, sound effects are crucial!

Charlene Saroyan – brilliantly stage manages the frenetic action on the stage

DURING THE PERFORMANCE

Things to Watch and Listen For in STC's "The 39 Steps"

Music

Every scene – and there are 33 scenes in the play – will have some musical underscore ... including some 'Hitchcockian' music such as that used in the classic film "*Dial M For Murder*" and evocative of the London and New York productions of the play. Listen for specific music that backs individual scenes and try to analyze what is added or enhanced in that scene by the music chosen.

The Director's Challenge

Sudbury Theatre Centre Artistic Director – and the director of this play – David Savoy makes clear that this play is a real challenge for the director, who must work out the complex 'choreography' of the sometimes frenetic action on stage. Especially in a compressed rehearsal time, the director must plan very specifically- and ahead of time - the blocking on the stage; yet also allow for the creativity of the actors in fleshing out their roles during the rehearsal process.

As David notes: "*There is a lot of traffic on stage, which must be co-ordinated with lighting and sound and all the other special theatrical techniques to ignite and excite the audience's imagination.*"

Just as film uses 'tricks' to shape its stories and reach its audiences, so too the theatre must utilize all the possibilities to maximize the impact of any production.

Patrick Barlow, who adapted the play primarily from the film, describes it this way. Asked to describe his adaptation, he says:

"It's the film. Definitely the film. It's the film and me and a tiny bit from the opening of the book It's pastiche, but it is very important that there is a real story going on. It's about a man who is lonely and lost in his heart ... really a powerful story ... and it's always driving for laughs, which you have to do."

The director must convey all of these aspects of the play, not an easy task!

About the Authors & the ‘Auteur’



John Buchan – 1st baron Tweedsmuir, was a British novelist and Unionist politician who, until his death in 1940, served as Governor-General of Canada. Born in 1875, and primarily raised and educated in Scotland, and further schooled in England, he had a brief career in law. While studying at the University of Oxford, he befriended a number of influential future writers, and began writing himself, even as he entered the political and diplomatic fields. Elected as a Member of Parliament, he devoted the majority of his time to his writing career, and became best known for his novel “***The 39 Steps***”, a Richard Hannay adventure.



Alfred Hitchcock – film director and producer, Hitchcock was born in England in 1899 and died in 1980. During a long career, he pioneered many film techniques used in the suspense and psychological thriller genres. Beginning his work in the era of silent films, he moved into talkies and came to Hollywood, becoming an American citizen in 1956, and making some of his most enduring movies. Over a long and successful career, Hitchcock developed a distinct directorial style. The use of a moving camera that mimics a person’s gaze, framing shots to maximize anxiety, fear, or empathy, and clever editing became hallmarks of his work. His films often featured fugitives on the run from the law along side female characters – the premise of “***The 39 Steps***”. With a career spanning six decades, he was thought to be the greatest British filmmaker of the century, and was credited with doing more than any other director to shape modern cinema.

FUN FACT: Hitchcock became known for always playing a cameo role in his films – and it is interesting to note that the play version of ***The 39 Steps*** in one of its lines, pays homage to the great Hitchcock film, “***North By North-West***”.



Patrick Barlow – Born in Britain in 1947, Barlow is an English actor, comedian and playwright. His comedic alter-ego, Desmond Olivier Dingle, is the founder, Artistic Director, and Chief Executive of the two-man National Theatre of Brent, which has performed on stage and on television and radio. He is a prolific performer, and has written a very successful adaptation of “***The 39 Steps***”.

AFTER THE PLAY - Ideas for discussion, writing and research

Note: the teacher may pick and choose from the following as appropriate for individual classes or programs.

Topic:

The Acting Challenges of the Play

Any successful play production demands skilled acting to make it work as the writer intends and to maintain the interest of the audience. But in “***The 39 Steps***”, the four actors, and especially the two clowns, are faced with very particular demands. The two clowns play over 40 different roles, with quick – and sometimes gender-bending – alterations in character!

With specific examples of movement, gesture, vocal tone, costume or prop change, discuss how some of these alterations allowed the audience to ‘believe’ that the actor was – at that moment – the character he portrayed.

Q. How successful were the actors in making these varied characters come alive on the stage. Which characterization was your favourite – and why?

Acting Activity: In your classroom, collect diverse objects and accessories and put them in a pile at the front of the room. Have each student choose two or three – and use those to create a brief vignette of character in a specific situation.

Topic:

Sets and Properties

Q. Debate the effectiveness of the minimalist approach to the set of the play. Would certain scenes be stronger (or weaker) dramatically if they employed more realistic props and elaborate sets? Defend your point of view.

- **Q.** There are 33 separate scenes in this play. How have some of them been indicated without elaborate sets and set changes? Choose specific scenes to illustrate your answer.
- **Q.** What most surprised you about the actual STC set?
- **Q.** What aspect of the set did you consider most clever or effective? Why?

Props - an armchair, a glass of whiskey, oversize sandwiches, a pipe used as a pistol ... these are only a few of the many props needed in the play. Consider how the simplest of props contributes both to moving along the plot and to helping distinguish between/among characters.

Topic:

Noting the Passage of Time in the Play

In the original source novel, the action takes place over a period of about a month, a part of which Hannay lies ill. The play reduces that time period to just a few days. What do you think is the greatest reason for, and the greatest benefit of, compressing the action so dramatically?

Topic:

The Play as ‘Pastiche’

Pastiche: *“A work of drama, literature or music that imitates the work of a previous artist, often satirically”.*

In declaring his adaptation dependent upon the Hitchcock film, Patrick Barlow pays homage to some iconic film traditions and set pieces: e.g. the chase on the train; the escape from the bridge, the ‘prisoners’ shackled together; the vaudeville show at the Palladium; the ‘innocent fugitive on the run’; the deformed villain; and the romantic comedy type ‘happy ending’ where boy wins girl.

Q. How successfully are these incorporated into the play’s farcical tone?

Activity: have students try to find other examples from stage, film, or television that fondly satirize another source, and debate how successfully they have done so. [Note: Some examples: the Carol Burnett satire of the classic film “*Gone With The Wind*”; Saturday Night Live’s satirical rip-off of ‘*McGyver*’; “*The Simpsons*” satire of anything; John Stewart and/or Stephen Colbert in their “news” shows.

Topic:

The Evolution of Language

The original John Buchan novel contains references that would now be considered politically incorrect, but were acceptable in 1915 when the novel was first published. And the play utilizes language which now seems dated or formal; for example, words and expressions such as “conflagration” rather than “fire”, expressions such as “thanks awfully” or “jolly good”, the declaration that “everything is tickety-boo” or a character is “in a bit of a pickle”. Both these things speak to the idea that language is constantly evolving. With the era of Facebook, “friend” has evolved from a noun to a verb! The impact of the social network and the earlier space race have given us new words and phrases that did not exist only decades ago.

Activity: Have students in small groups, make notes of the outdated words or expressions they heard in the play, and to contrast these, have them list 20 words that they use frequently that would have been unknown in their parents' era. Discuss the idea of language & its influences as constantly changing!

Writing Activity: Have students in pairs take a familiar passage from a familiar source that they have studied or read at home, and have them re-write the passage in more modern vernacular. Then have them read both versions to the class and have students debate the relative merits in beauty and clarity of each.

Note: Barlow himself underlines the importance of using language appropriate to the era which it reflects. Asked to comment on the linguistic choices he makes in the adaptation of "**The 39 Steps**" and to comment on how the language of the early 20th Century differs from our own, Barlow responds:

"Crumbs", "crikey", "golly", "absolutely beastly" ... You had to be really careful ... all the language had to be of the period and of the genre. In fact, there is a line near the end I noticed the other day. Hannay says, "Hang on, this is a hymn book" ... and that 'hang on' just isn't quite right. It's more recent."



Acknowledgements

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Straughan, Judi. Education Liaison, STC, for script and related materials.

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Photo Credits

Cover of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* - 1st edition (www.collectors-club-of-great-britain.co.uk/userfiles/image/Book%20magazine/4.%20Buchan%5B1%5D.jpg)

Movie Poster - <http://www.movieposterdb.com/movie/0026029/The-39-Steps.html>

Poster for the *The 39 Steps* (West End play, 2008)

Photos from 2010 New World Stage Cast - Photo by Carol Rosegg (http://www.39stepsny.com/media_photos.html)

Photo of John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor General of Canada - Kaiden-Kazanjan Studios Inc. / Library and Archives Canada.

Photo of Alfred Hitchcock by Jack Mitchell

Photo of Patrick Barlow - <http://www.lajollaplayhouse.org/KBYG/The-39-Steps/pg4.html>

The 39 Steps, Hitchcock Meet Hilarious! - <http://www.artsclub.com/20102011/plays/the-39-steps.htm>