

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

FIRST 39 STEPS OF THE SEASON

PHOTOS COURTESY MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE
 Richard Nguyen Sloniker and Margaret Ivey perform in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's 2022-23 season-opening production of 'The 39 Steps.'



MRT launches season with 'The 39 Steps' adaptation

By Prudence Brighton
Correspondent

LOWELL » Combine a fast-paced spy thriller with surreal, physical and almost slapstick comedy, and you have the season-opening production at Merrimack Repertory Theatre.

"The 39 Steps" play adaptation by Patrick Barlow is based on one of Alfred Hitchcock's earliest talkies, which in turn was based on a 1915 novel by Scottish writer John Buchan, and follows the travails of Richard Hannay on the run from London to the Scottish Highlands.

Scotland Yard is in pursuit of Hannay, a mild-mannered Canadian, for the murder of a glam-

orous counterspy whose body is found in his London flat. Before she dies, she tells him he must save the United Kingdom from a spy ring based in Scotland, which is set on taking a dangerous secret to an enemy nation.

Hannay's adventure brings him into contact with a variety of characters, including fellow passengers on the train, a Scottish farm couple, spies, police officers, hotel staff, a flock of sheep and others. Just two actors play all these characters, except the Scottish farmer's wife, in fast-change scenes that keep the audience laughing.

Hannay also encounters a young woman named Pamela on

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From left, Richard Nguyen Sloniker, Ken Robinson and Tom Coiner perform in 'The 39 Steps.' To the left, from left, Ken Robinson, Tom Coiner, Margaret Ivey and Sloniker act in a scene together.



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the train. She pops up again as police officers try to take Hannay off to jail, and she helps him discover the dangerous secret.

Actor Richard Nguyen Sloniker makes his MRT debut as Hannay, a man caught up in events for which he is ill-prepared. He is the only actor with a single role. Margaret Ivey plays the glamorous spy Annabella, Pamela and Margaret, the Scottish farmer's wife.

Tom Coiner and Ken Robinson return to the MRT stage as Clown 1 and Clown 2, whose characters include such oddities as a flock of sheep.

The energetic quality of the play demands agility and grace from the actors, but particularly from

the two clowns. The choreography superbly highlights the comedic elements of the play, and Sloniker, as Hannay, deftly manages to avoid catastrophe while trying to hide from his pursuers.

In one scene, Hannay tries to hide his mustache and "piercing brown eyes" by squeezing and turning between two other passengers on the train with all the force of a Monty Python sketch. And one of the clowns is as inarticulate as Rowan Atkinson in "Mr. Bean."

A rotating platform and a translucent curtain behind it have important roles, too. In one scene, as Hannay flees, the rotating device displays Scottish scenery and icons in absurdly small proportion to everything else, highlighting the strange quality of what is happening. Shadows appear against the curtain to show

other events.

Once again, MRT displays its gifts in staging, lighting and costuming in this production.

The artistic voices at work in the script are all British: Buchan was a Scot, Hitchcock was English and Barlow is English. And, of course, Monty Python and Mr. Bean are well known examples of British comedy.

The British style may not appeal to all, but "The 39 Steps" is an engaging start to the 2022-2023 season. It is a must-see production for the quality of acting and staging alone.

The play runs through Oct. 2. A reminder to attendees: masks are still required to keep the actors and MRT staff healthy.

For more information and to buy tickets, visit mrt.org/39Steps or call the Enterprise Bank Box Office at 978-654-4678.



PHOTOS COURTESY MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

Richard Nguyen Sloniker and Margaret Ivey perform in 'The 39 Steps,' also seen above.