



By Patrick Barlow
(from the novel by John Buchan
and the film by Alfred Hitchcock)

A PLAYGOER'S COMPANION

The playwright



Patrick Barlow was born in 1947. He 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, on television and on radio. Barlow is the scriptwriter, as well as lead performer, in many National Theatre of Brent productions, in particular *All the World's a Globe* (1987), *Desmond Olivier Dingle's Compleat Life and Works of William Shakespeare* (1995) and *The Arts and How They Was Done* (2007). [adapted from wikipedia]

The film director

"Unquestionably the greatest filmmaker to emerge from these islands, Hitchcock did more than any director to shape modern cinema, which would be utterly different without him. His flair was for narrative, cruelly withholding crucial information (from his characters and from us) and engaging the emotions of the audience like no one else." [Daily Telegraph, 2007 poll of film critics]



The novelist



John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, born in Scotland in 1875, was Governor General of Canada between 1935 and 1940. Buchan published six books of fiction, poetry and history while an Oxford undergraduate. He was briefly an administrator in South Africa, a political journalist, a tax lawyer and a chief literary adviser (later director) of publisher Thomas Nelson and Son. This, and the books that he produced at a prodigious rate all his life, including historical biographies, such as *Lord Minto* (1924), and fast-paced thrillers such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), gave him a creative outlet and a comfortable income. [adapted from the *Canadian Encyclopedia* online]

What exactly is *The 39 Steps*?

According to the his son, the title originated when the author's daughter was counting the stairs at a nursing home where Buchan was convalescing. "There was a wooden staircase leading down to the beach. My sister, who was about six, and who had just learnt to count properly, went down them and gleefully announced: "there are 39 steps." What it means is an issue which runs through the story.

"Adapted by Patrick Barlow from both the classic spy movie and the John Buchan novel of 1915, this fast, frothy exercise in legerdemain is throwaway theater at its finest. And that's no backhanded compliment." – Ben Bentley, *The New York Times*

"Most of the scenes are those from the film but I have expanded them, twisted them, added new lines, jokes, so while everything might appear the same as the film, if people look closer, they'll see there are a few new layers." – Patrick Barlow

"Patrick Barlow's adaptation bears the hallmarks of his work with the National Theatre of Brent, in that it tells an epic tale while comically accentuating theatre's unsuitability for the task. It's very easy to enjoy the creaky jokes, quick costume changes and lo-fi coups de theatre that result." – Brian Logan, *The Guardian*

What happens in the play?

"There's a dastardly villain, gunshots galore, but at the same time it's a romantic love story with a handsome hero and no less than three beautiful heroines. It's a rom-com thriller. It has it all." – Patrick Barlow

The play's concept calls for the entirety of the 1935 adventure film *The 39 Steps* to be performed with a cast of only four. One actor plays the hero, Richard Hannay, another plays the three women with whom he has romantic entanglements, and two others play every other character in the show: heroes, villains, men, women, children and even the occasional inanimate object. The script is full of allusions to (and puns on the titles of) other Hitchcock films, including *Rear Window*, *Psycho*, *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*. [adapted from wikipedia]

Some stage history

Buchan's novel has been adapted for film at least four times – by Hitchcock, in 1935, in a 1959 colour remake, a 1978 version, and a 2008 version for British television. Barlow's play premiered in June 2005 at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. The revised production had its London premiere at the Tricycle Theatre on 10 August 2006, titled *John Buchan's The 39 Steps*. The production transferred to the Criterion Theatre in London's West End in September 2006. On August 27, 2008 a Spanish production opened at Maravillas Theatre in Madrid.

The play had its U.S. premiere at the Huntington Theater Company in Boston, on September 19, 2007. Now billed as *Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps*, it opened on Broadway in a Roundabout Theatre production at the American Airlines Theatre January 15, 2008. The initial run concluded on March 29, 2008, and transferred to the Cort Theatre on April 29, 2008 and then to the Helen Hayes Theatre on January 21, 2009.

Wikipedia lists over 30 productions, around the world, in 2011 alone.

"The thrills may be meagre in this murder mystery, but the theatrical tomfoolery is to die for." – Brian Logan, *The Guardian*

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