KATS, Kingsbridge
***The 39 Steps* (Patrick Barlow Adaptation)**
Marlborough Village Hall
Director: Jill Brock

I thought KATS' production of *Come From Away* was their finest moment, and that they could not possibly improve upon that wonderful achievement. How wrong I was, because this production of *The 39 Steps* completely blew me away.

I have to admit to being a *39 Steps* virgin, having never seen this inventive play before. The original spy thriller was written in 1915, and Alfred Hitchcock directed a highly successful film version in 1935. Three further film adaptations followed, the most recent in 2008. A stage version was first created in 1995 and was later adapted by Patrick Barlow into the comedy spy thriller we know today. This is the version that KATS presented. The story follows an ordinary man plunged into extraordinary circumstances. Richard Hannay begins as a somewhat bored gentleman living a routine London life, but through a series of events finds himself caught up in espionage, murder accusations and a conspiracy that threatens the nation.

This particular version describes each scene in the script, but not necessarily how to create it. That is where KATS' imagination and creativity came into play. The premise of Patrick Barlow's adaptation is that a small group of talented actors are attempting to stage an entire Hitchcock film. Four performers play more than one hundred different roles, involving countless quick changes and a remarkable variety of accents and characterisations.

The central themes are both dramatic and comedic, encompassing identity, heroism, patriotism, love, trust, loneliness, duty and survival. Layered over these are theatricality, character transformation, performance itself and a delightful parody of British manners and melodrama. The play celebrates the joy of live theatre, with actors becoming storytellers, and revels in resourcefulness and the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief.

This is where the director's creativity really came into play, because KATS expanded on the traditional four-person cast by introducing two Foley artists and a young maestro of proceedings. There were also two puppeteers on stage. I absolutely loved these additions.

The Foley artists occupied a side-stage platform filled with sound-making paraphernalia. They were always visible and created some wonderfully funny moments without ever overshadowing the onstage action. The young maestro, seated at the piano, introduced the acts and provided incidental music throughout, greatly enhancing the atmosphere. These three performers became very much part of the production and were almost as essential as the four principal cast members. The struggle of the Foley artists to locate the correct instruments at precisely the right moment was amusing and entertaining, and even when unlit they remained in character, often appearing slightly bored by the proceedings around them. The same was true of the young maestro at the keyboard.

The script lists the four principal characters as Richard Hannay, who remains the central protagonist throughout; a female performer who plays Annabella Schmidt, Margaret and Pamela; and two actors identified simply as Clown 1 and Clown 2, who portray virtually everyone else, often at breakneck speed.

Part of the madcap nature of the story is that nearly every character adopts a disguise, pretends to be someone else or is mistaken for somebody else. Hannay becomes a fugitive, Mr Memory conceals vital information and secret agents operate under false identities. This constantly prompts the audience to ask, "Who is really who?" and becomes both a dramatic and comedic engine for the piece.

Barlow parodies the classic Hitchcock hero. Hannay wants desperately to be heroic, but often finds himself completely out of his depth. The audience takes great pleasure in watching someone struggle to maintain dignity while everything around him disintegrates into chaos.

This adaptation brilliantly satirises stiff-upper-lip behaviour, public-school confidence, social hierarchy and middle-class manners. Characters remain impressively polite while surrounded by complete absurdity. The comedy works because it is played absolutely straight.

The play's biggest theme, however, is theatre itself. The audience is constantly reminded that they are watching actors tell a story. There was enormous creativity on display here, which I absolutely adored. The clue, of course, is that less is more. The play deliberately avoids realism, and the biggest mistake any amateur production could make would be to overbuild the show. Thankfully, this production completely avoided that trap. There is no need for realistic trains, elaborate houses or detailed locations. Most of the required imagery can be created using chairs, furniture and imagination. The sequence that really sticks in my memory is the train sequence where characters were juddering and moving as though on a rattly train. It was highly amusing and great to watch.

Despite the chaotic situations through which the characters move, nothing should ever feel accidental. A successful production of *The 39 Steps* requires military precision, particularly regarding props, entrances, exits, costume changes and sound cues, many of which here were provided by the Foley artists. Everything must be meticulously rehearsed, and this company had clearly been drilled with extraordinary precision. Much of the comedy came from perfect timing. The biggest laughs resulted from delayed reactions, visual reveals, failed attempts at dignity and wonderfully awkward physical situations.

The addition of the young maestro also helped the show embrace the audience. I assume that was his raison d'être in being added to the cast, because he immediately drew us into the world of the production.

The creativity on display, particularly during the train journey, the Forth Bridge sequence, the plane chase and the London Palladium finale, was incredible. Any of the common pitfalls one might expect from an amateur production of such a demanding piece were completely avoided. Nothing was overplayed, the comedy was delivered at exactly the right tempo and the pace was absolutely breakneck.

Richard Hannay

Richard Hannay is the straight man of the piece. He needs to be self-assured and reserved, yet also brave and resourceful, and all of this came across beautifully. There was great humour in the performance because it was delivered with such subtlety and nuance. He was on stage for much of the show and must surely have been exhausted by the end.

Annabella Schmidt, Pamela and Margaret

Annabella Schmidt is the catalyst for the entire story. She is mysterious, intelligent and dramatic, and the sense that she was genuinely dangerous and secretive was captured expertly. However, this performer was not limited to a single role. She also portrayed Pamela, the romantic antagonist, and Margaret. All three women develop a relationship with Richard Hannay, and all three are entirely different characters. The actress was absolutely brilliant in creating such distinct personalities for each of them.

Clown 1 and Clown 2

The two clowns portray an astonishing range of characters, including Mr Memory, the tragic figure concealed within the comedy who carries the central secret, and Professor Jordan, the archetypal

Hitchcock villain, charming yet ruthless. Alongside these are scores upon scores of other characters who create the environments, generate the physical comedy and drive the relentless pace of the piece. These two actors were simply brilliant. How they learned all of this material, and managed to differentiate so many characters so effectively, is beyond me.

This play should leave an audience saying, "We can't believe four actors made all that happen." That is exactly what we said, although in this case it was actually seven performers plus two puppeteers.

I simply do not have enough superlatives to describe this production. It is, without doubt, the finest amateur comedy play I have seen in a very long time.