

REVIEW

'39 Steps' could pick up the pacing a bit



Michael Brosilow for the Journal Sentinel

Reese Madigan (left) plays a man who gets mixed up with a spy (Helen Anker) and worse, in the Milwaukee Rep production of "The 39 Steps."

By Graham Killeen, Special to the Journal Sentinel

Jan. 15, 2011 | (1) COMMENTS

On paper it sounds like a mathematical word problem: if a train leaves England with one falsely accused patsy, and four talented actors playing 140 kooky characters, how many laughs can "The 39 Steps" steal? On stage it all adds up to, well, a bit much actually.

The same week "The 39 Steps" closes in New York, The Milwaukee Rep opened its own production of Patrick Barlow's farcical adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock's movie, itself adapted from John Buchan's novel.

After a ravishing German femme fatale is murdered in his apartment, Richard Hannay (Reese Madigan) escapes to Scotland pursuing pilfered British military documents that prove he's not the killer. Sporting a terrifically sharp tweed suit and pencil-thin mustache, Madigan's ability to keep one gumshoe in the

moment, while never ruffling his devil-may-care charm, owes as much to Johnny Depp as it does Robert Donat, who originated the role.

Playing, count-them, 3 different leading ladies, Helen Anker (Broadway's "Promises, Promises") more than holds her own, often recalling another star of the silver screen, Katherine Hepburn.

John Pribyl and Rep resident company member Gerard Neugent are left with most of the heavily lifting, swapping hats, costumes, and accents to populate the goofball world of "The 39 Steps." Who knew two actors could belt out so many variations of Scottish brogue?

The design is top notch, with Thomas C. Hase's lighting a most stylish standout, evoking locations, period, and noir panache. Unfortunately, clever blocking notwithstanding, director J.R. Sullivan (whose previous Rep productions include "The Foreigner" and "Pride and Prejudice") can't quite keep Barlow's overlong, overly calculated pratfalls from feeling indulgently paced, something Hitch could never be accused of.

Reconstructing each thrilling beat from the movie, "The 39 Steps" hangs around at the scene of the crime, when it should be plotting its getaway.

If you go

"The 39 Steps" continues through Feb. 13 at the Quadracci Powerhouse Theater, 108 E. Wells St. For tickets, call (414) 224-9490 or visit milwaukeekeerep.com.