THE 39 STEPS
adapted by Patrick Barlow
directed by Nathan Keepers

Aug. 30–Sept. 18 2016
502.584.1205 actorstheatre.org
ABOUT THIS PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts, and to encourage essential questions that lead to an enduring understanding of the play’s meaning and relevance. Inside you will find information about the plot and characters within the play, as well as articles that contextualize the play and its production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions, analyze key ideas, and relate them to their personal experiences and the world around them. These prompts can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way that best fits the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website at actorstheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

THE 39 STEPS STUDENT MATINEES AND THIS PLAY GUIDE ADDRESS SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.
TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.
TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Jane B. Jones, Education Director, at 502.584.1265 x3045.
THE 39 STEPS PLOT SUMMARY

Four brilliant comic actors. Dozens of characters. One thrilling, hilarious noir adventure. Inspired by Hitchcock’s iconic film and the classic spy novel, this Broadway hit plunges you into the world of Richard Hannay, an ordinary man forced to go on the run after aiding a mysterious woman. From the shadowy streets of 1930s London to the wild moors of Scotland and beyond, *The 39 Steps* traces Richard’s madcap quest to keep government secrets out of the wrong hands.
THE CHARACTERS

This spy-caper spoof utilizes just four actors who transform using costumes, accents, and physicality into over 30 distinct characters.

**ACTOR #1 PLAYS:**

**RICHARD HANNAY:** The hero of our story. Hannay, 37, is recently back in London and finds himself bored with his life. His adventure begins when he meets Annabella Schmidt at a theatre performance, and must go on the run when he is accused of her murder.

**ACTOR #2 PLAYS:**

**ANNABELLA SCHMIDT:** A “beautiful, mysterious” secret agent. Hannay helps her escape from a gunfight at the theatre. When she is murdered at his London flat, Hannay becomes the primary suspect. Annabella involves Hannay in the mystery of The 39 Steps, and in her dying breath, she begs Hannay to help keep confidential information about British air defense out of the hands of a dangerous man missing his little finger.

**PAMELA:** A stranger on the Highland Express. When Hannay kisses her aboard the train to avoid detection by the police, she recognizes him from wanted posters in the paper and attempts to turn him in. When Hannay runs into her again at a political rally, she is once again pulled into the spy plot.

**MARGARET:** A Scottish woman Hannay meets while he’s on the run. Hannay takes shelter at her house, disguised as an itinerant laborer. After Hannay tells Margaret his identity, she helps him escape when her husband, the Crofter, calls the police.

**ACTORS #3 AND #4 PLAY**

**THE CLOWNS:** These two versatile performers play dozens of characters. Here are a few of their major roles in The 39 Steps.

**MR. MEMORY:** A performer who wows the audience at the London Palladium with his powers of recall.

**CROFTER:** Margaret’s husband. A crofter is a tenant farmer who rents land from a landlord. He is suspicious of Hannay’s intentions with his wife, Margaret, and turns Hannay into the police when he discovers that Hannay is wanted for murder.

**MRS. JORDAN:** Wife of Professor Jordan. She is the proprietor of Alt-na-Shellach.

**PROFESSOR JORDAN:** The mysterious resident of Alt-na-Shellach. Annabella Schmidt tells Hannay he must visit Professor Jordan to prevent British secrets from leaving the country.

**THE HEAVIES:** Two thugs who arrest Hannay and Pamela while disguised as police officers.

**SHERIFF:** A Scottish police officer and friend of Professor Jordan.

**DUNWOODY:** The master of ceremonies at a political rally. He mistakes Hannay for the guest speaker at the event and forces Hannay to give an impromptu speech.

**MR. AND MRS. McGARRIGLE:** An old couple that runs The McGarrigle Hotel, where Hannay and Pamela take shelter from the Heavies.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The story of *The 39 Steps* has taken a long, winding journey from its emergence as a book in 1915 to its transformation to a stage play in 2005. Learn about the artists who created this spy tale and shaped it into the play you’ll see at Actors Theatre.

JOHN BUCHAN

Author John Buchan lived a colorful and exciting life; the First Baron Tweedsmuir was a politician, a diplomat, a Governor General of Canada, and, in his spare time, a novelist. Born in Scotland in 1875, he served in the British War Propaganda Bureau in France during World War I. It was during his employment at the Propaganda Bureau that Buchan wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which many believe to be the first spy thriller novel. Published in 1915, the novel introduces hero Richard Hannay, an expatriate Scotsman who returns from Africa and is pulled into an anarchist plot. In the novel, Hannay is portrayed as an “everyman,” an average guy, who pursues a deadly plot at his own peril out of his great loyalty to his country. Buchan referred to his book as a “shocker;” the events of the novel are outlandish and Hannay shouldn’t be able to survive the ordeal, yet he perseveres against incredible odds.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

Alfred Hitchcock is one of the most lauded film directors and producers of all time. Often referred to as the “Master of Suspense,” Hitchcock is known for his dark psychological thrillers. Born and raised in England, Hitchcock began his film career in 1919 working on silent, black and white films in England and Germany. His first international success was *The 39 Steps*, an adaptation of the John Buchan novel. Though the film maintained the lead character of Richard Hannay and the central conflict, Hitchcock and screenwriter Charles Bennett introduced several characters (most importantly, Annabella and Pamela) and added scenes at the music hall and on Forth Bridge. The movie includes many key elements of Hitchcock films: an innocent man on the run from the law, a cameo by the director himself, and an icy blonde woman with a mysterious past, now known as a “Hitchcock Blonde.” Following the success of *The 39 Steps*, Hitchcock moved to Hollywood, where he produced his most famous films, including *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, and many more.

PATRICK BARLOW

Patrick Barlow is an English actor, comedian and playwright famous for his play *The 39 Steps*, an award-winning theatrical adaptation of the Buchan novel and Hitchcock film of the same name. In writing his 2005 adaptation, Barlow was inspired by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon, who were the first to put the epic story of *The 39 Steps* onstage with only four actors. Barlow’s version premiered at West Yorkshire Playhouse and was transferred to the Tricycle Theatre in London in 2006. In 2007, Roundabout Theatre produced the Broadway premiere. The play was the recipient of the 2007 Olivier Award for Best Comedy and several Drama Desk and Tony Awards for design after its transfer to Broadway. *The 39 Steps* continues to be performed at theatres both large and small around the globe.
The 39 Steps is set in locations across Great Britain in 1935. The play begins in London; as Hannay tries to evade capture by the police, he travels north to Edinburgh, west across the Scottish Highlands, and finally back to London.

The play is set in 1935, during the inter-war years between World War I and World War II. An uneasy climate in Europe following Germany’s defeat in 1919 led to the establishment and growth of many secret services, including England’s Secret Intelligence Service and Germany’s Abwher, and an uptick in espionage activity. In The 39 Steps, Hannay says that the papers are “full of elections and wars and rumours of wars.” Civil wars in Russia, China, and Spain, among other conflicts, prompted many in Europe to believe that another global war was looming in the distance. In 1935, Stanley Baldwin was elected Prime Minister of England on a platform of rearmament, specifically preparing England for war with Germany. England declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, in response to Germany’s invasion of Poland.

**MOORS**: uncultivated, hilly grasslands found throughout the U.K.

**HIGHLANDS**: the scarcely populated northern half of Scotland.

**LOCH**: the Gaelic word for lake.

**GLEN**: a valley between two hills.

**FORTH BRIDGE**: a railway bridge west of downtown Edinburgh.

**EDINBURGH**: the capital city of Scotland.

**PALLADIUM**: a famous theatre in London, which houses variety shows.

**PORTLAND PLACE**: a street in the Marylebone district of central London, where Hannay lives.
GLOSSARY

BUFFET CAR: the dining car of a train.

COMMUNICATION CORD: a cord or chain on a train that can be pulled by a passenger to stop the train in case of an emergency.

CONFIDENTIAL: something intended to be kept a secret.

CONSPIRACY: a secret plan by a group to do something that is unlawful or harmful.

COPPER/CONSTABLE/INSPECTOR: slang terms for British police officers.

FUGITIVE: a person on the run from the law after being accused of a crime.

HADDOCK: a white fish that is popular in Great Britain; served in “fish n' chips” or Scottish fish suppers.

HERRING: a small fish, often served smoked or pickled.

HYMN BOOK: a thick book containing songs used in Christian worship services.

MADAME TUSSAUDS: a famous wax museum in London featuring wax statues of cultural figures, royalty, and celebrities.

MASTER RACE: a concept in Nazi ideology in which the Nordic or Aryan races were preferred in the racial hierarchy.

OLD COUNTRY: a slang term for England. Because England was historically a colonial power, many English people live abroad in colonies or protectorates and refer to their homeland as the “old country.”

PENCIL MOUSTACHE: a thin moustache grown right along the lip line.

POUND NOTE: British currency, similar to America’s dollar.

PUB: English word for a bar, from the more formal title “Public House”.

SCOTLAND YARD: another name for the Metropolitan Police Service, the police force in London.

SHOOTING PARTY: a group of hunters who shoot for sport.

WEST END: London’s Broadway, located in the central London neighborhood of West End.
Film noir is a style of filmmaking popularized in the 1940s and 50s that featured thriller or mystery plot lines. The title film noir translates from French to mean “black film” or “dark film,” as the earliest iterations of the genre were shot in black and white. The style is characterized by its melodramatic plots, which typically focus on private eyes, corrupt cops, and hapless citizens pulled into crime, espionage, heists, or cons. Famous titles in this genre include *The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Dial M for Murder*, and *Strangers on a Train*.

Though film noir is an American invention, it borrowed many visual elements of German Expressionism, a movement in film developed before World War I and lasting into the interwar period. The films of German Expressionism, like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, and *Metropolis*, are noted for their stark, surrealist visual style, symbolism, and themes of insanity, betrayal, and horror. Many of the members of the Expressionist movement moved from Germany to America during and after World War I and brought their unique style to Hollywood. American filmmakers, enthralled by the hardboiled detective novels of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett that were popular in the 1940s, blended pulp fiction thriller plots with the visual style of German Expressionism to create a new, fully American artistic movement of film noir.

Directors and cinematographers used the visual elements of film to enrich the dramatic and dark themes of film noir. Most film noir are set in gritty, urban locations, and scenes are often shot at night or in the rain. Filmmakers favored images with strong visual contrast between light and dark elements, known as chiaroscuro. The presence of cigarette smoke is not only period appropriate, it follows a trend in film noir production of shading or obscuring characters’ faces. Voiceover narration and flashbacks are other stylistic elements often seen in noir.
THE IMPOSSIBLE MADE POSSIBLE

At first glance, the hero of The 39 Steps doesn’t seem very heroic at all. It’s August 1935, and Richard Hannay is alone and adrift in London, bored with his ordinary life. A deeply cynical man with a very silly moustache, Hannay’s biggest source of excitement is redecorating his apartment. But during a night out at the theatre, a mysterious woman asks Hannay for his help. She turns out to be a spy, and in coming to her aid, Hannay stumbles onto an outlandish plot to steal government secrets. To thwart the conspiracy, he embarks on a madcap journey across Scotland—and discovers along the way that he might just have heroic potential after all.

(Continued on next page)
However, Hannay’s quest is a dangerous one, and the odds are stacked against him from the start. Playwright Patrick Barlow wanted to up the ante even more, or, as he put it, make the odds “as impossible as possible.” And so when he adapted \textit{The 39 Steps} from John Buchan’s 1915 novel and Alfred Hitchcock’s 1935 film, he combined the high-stakes plot with a unique challenge: put Hannay’s epic adventure onstage—plane crashes and all—with only four actors and a ton of inventive stagecraft. After premiering in England in 2005, \textit{The 39 Steps} became a long-running, Tony-nominated hit on Broadway, and it has since been produced all over the world. The play’s popularity mirrors the success of its iconic source material: Buchan’s book, one of the first spy novels, was an immediate bestseller in Britain and has never been out of print, and Hitchcock’s fast-paced, slyly funny adaptation was a career-maker for the British director and is considered one of his best early films.

Full of plot twists, romance, and slapstick comedy, Barlow’s stage adaptation is both hilarious and thrilling. That combination appeals to Nathan Keepers, who’s returning to Louisville to direct \textit{The 39 Steps} after performing in several Actors Theatre shows, including \textit{Peter and the Starcatcher}, \textit{Love’s Labour’s Lost}, and \textit{Noises Off}. Given his affinity for bold physical comedy, Keepers finds a lightning-fast, visceral play like \textit{The 39 Steps} to be a particularly satisfying challenge. With dozens of characters, multiple chases, and endless costume changes, staging this production is about controlling the chaos. But according to Keepers, it’s also about letting some of the chaos sneak in. “The trick with a show like this,” he explains, “is to make it your own. Very often, this type of piece can be a machine. My hope is to make something that’s more authentic or raw.”

For Keepers, part of making this production his own is ensuring that it’s fun not only for the audience, but also for the cast. His onstage experience has taught him that an actor’s joy can be contagious for audience members, and with material as beloved and well-known as \textit{The 39 Steps}, he says, “We have to make it personal. Is there opportunity that’s not on the page? That’s how I look at it, and the actors have the freedom to do that too.” It’s an approach that the playwright encourages; in the foreword to the script, Barlow writes that when it comes to staging, artists working on the play should “take what looks helpful or fun, then invent the rest.” During their three-week rehearsal period here in Louisville, Keepers and the cast will do just that as they choreograph the play’s many action sequences, including a daring escape from a moving train and a chase across the Scottish moors.

\textbf{The show’s thrill comes not only from discovering how Richard Hannay’s suspenseful story plays out, but also from watching the cast pull off the feat of telling that story live.}
alluring spy; Margaret, a shy Scottish housewife; and Pamela, the sharp-witted woman who becomes Hannay’s reluctant partner in crime. Finally, the play’s clowns, Carter Gill and Jesse J. Perez (who was previously seen at Actors in The Hard Weather Boating Party), will create unforgettable personas for the dozens of other people Hannay meets on his astonishing journey.

All in all, the four performers in The 39 Steps will play more than 35 characters, and so the show’s thrill comes not only from discovering how Richard Hannay’s suspenseful story plays out, but also from watching the cast pull off the feat of telling that story live. However, in addition to crafting a sense of excitement and intrigue, Keepers recognizes that part of his job is to acknowledge where we are—in America, in 2016—and he notes that Hannay’s despondency at the beginning of the play might feel awfully familiar to modern theatregoers exhausted by news, politics, and the status quo. Hannay’s unlikely foray into espionage is a chance for both him and the audience to escape from the everyday—to get a much-needed reminder that “life has color in it and a wide horizon,” as Hannay’s creator John Buchan once wrote. As The 39 Steps unfolds, the most cynical of men finds that even he has an idealist living inside him. And if he can be a hero, then take heart: anything is possible.

—Jessica Reese

My grandfather, John Buchan, would be amazed and delighted that a play of his novel The Thirty-Nine Steps is being published as a script nearly a century after he wrote it for his own amusement. JB was never proprietorial about his work—for example, he loved the 1935 Alfred Hitchcock film of the book—and the more people who feel they want to put on and perform what was possibly the first spy thriller, the more delighted he would be.

On a serious note, two themes JB was anxious to convey in his novels were, firstly, that the veneer of civilization is very thin, easily exposing the horrors beneath and, secondly, that evil comes in very attractive forms, making it all the harder to resist. […] Despite the deft and funny way the action in [The 39 Steps] is portrayed on stage, those themes are not lost. I think my grandfather would have been very proud.

—Deborah Buchan, Lady Stewartby
NARRATIVE: CCRA.W.3

The 39 Steps is an example of a parody: a work of art that intends to mock or poke fun at original work. In this production, the tropes of film noir, crime novels, and Hitchcock films are played for laughs in addition to their intended dramatic effect. Parodies continue to be a popular form of entertainment; examples include the music of Weird Al Yankovic, the movies of Mel Brooks, and the Pride and Prejudice and Zombies film. Write your own parody of a book, film, or TV show that puts a new spin on the original source material.

ARGUMENTATIVE: CCRA.W.1

Film noir first appeared in the 1930s and reached the zenith of its popularity in the 1940s. However, the plots, themes, and visual storytelling continue to appear in our media in the form of neo-noir and tech-noir. Neo-noir has modernized the style and visuals of film noir, while tech-noir explores the themes of film noir in the technological age. Popular titles of these genres include Sin City, Brick, Drive, Blade Runner, and Fargo. These films blend modern film technology with the stock characters, detective plots, and gritty visuals of the noir aesthetic. Why do you think noir is still compelling? Why are we interested in crime drama?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. The 39 Steps began its life as a spy thriller novel and was revamped as a moody film noir before becoming a wacky stage play. Why do you think Patrick Barlow, the playwright of The 39 Steps, believed this story would be well suited for a comedy? How does an artist change the genre of a story? What remains the same, and what must be changed?

2. The mystery of The 39 Steps pervades this play. What do you think The 39 Steps might be? Based on your knowledge of the setting of this play, what secret do you think Hannay is trying to prevent from leaving Great Britain?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Did the mystery of The 39 Steps resolve in the way you thought it would? Why or why not? Were you at all surprised by the ending?

2. In The 39 Steps, Richard Hannay goes on a wild, dangerous adventure he’s not prepared for and finds that even he has the potential to be a hero. Do you have what it takes to be a hero? What situations can provoke ordinary people to find the hero within?
**BRIDGework**

**At Your Desk**

1. Much of the humor of *The 39 Steps* comes from its comedic take on film noir styles, characters, and roles. Watch a film noir with your class; you can watch the original 1935 Hitchcock film *The 39 Steps*, or another classic like *Double Indemnity*, *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Big Sleep*. Make a list of the characters, themes, and plots in the film with your class. Reflect on the visuals and aesthetics of the film; how did the movie look or feel? What did you notice about the plot? After watching the film, research the influences and aesthetics of the genre: how many did you identify in the film you watched? How do you think the characteristics of film noir will be used to create a comic look at the genre in *The 39 Steps* play?

2. Film noir was inspired by the hardboiled crime novels and pulp magazines that became popular during the 1930s and 1940s, the time period when *The 39 Steps* takes place. In these novels, hardened detectives fought organized crime rings or faced off against mysterious spies. Research this period in history and the events that played a part in the world of the 1930s and 40s, paying special attention to historical events like the Great Depression, Prohibition, and the World Wars. Why do you believe this genre was so popular during this time period? How did this genre reflect the time in which it was created? Create a picture timeline that investigates the connection between the time period and the art being created and consumed. Compare the 1930s and 40s to another era. How did art change and respond to the new climate?

**Away from Your Desk**

1. Film noir relies on a stable of stock characters: gumshoe detectives, femme fatales and corrupt policemen abound in the genre. As the two clown characters in *The 39 Steps* play multiple roles, the actors portraying the clowns also rely on stock characters: stereotypical or archetypal characters readily recognizable by their physicality, behavior, or costume. In your classroom, brainstorm stock characters to improvise in a character charade. Think about the easily recognizable character types you might see in your school, community, or in the media. Write these character types on slips of paper. Form two teams and get in separate lines. The teacher should draw a slip of paper and show it to the first improviser in each line. The improvisers must act out the stock character until their team has correctly guessed. To increase the skill level of the game, limit the amount of time each performer has to act out the character. What was most successful in quickly creating a clearly defined stock character?

2. *The 39 Steps* is a fast-moving, action-packed comedy that travels from the gritty streets of London to the open moors of Scotland, and back again. Yet the set design only uses basic dressings, like chair, tables, and scaffolds. The actors transform these rudimentary set pieces into everything from a train car, to an airplane, to a fancy music hall. Using objects in your classroom, work in small groups to transform desks, chairs, and other objects into a variety of settings. What is most successful in making these transformations? How can you distill a large, intricate setting into its most basic elements, without losing the meaning of the original location?