

THE 39 STEPS

A Guide to *The 39 Steps*

Adapted by Patrick Barlow

From the novel by John Buchan

From the movie by Alfred Hitchcock

Licensed by ITV Global Entertainment Limited

An original concept by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon

Written and Compiled by Sarah J Baker for

OpenStage Theatre & Company



What's the Story of *The 39 Steps*

A Hitchcock masterpiece. A juicy spy novel. A colossal dash of Monty Python. Shake it all up... It's *The 39 Steps*! In 1930s London, the dashing Richard Hannay begins his evening at the theatre, and leaves a fugitive on the run. Caught in a maze of espionage, near-death escapes, and flirtatious entanglements, our hero careens from a London music hall to Scotland's most remote highlands in search of a plausible alibi and the true identity of the killer. Will our debonair hero solve the mystery and save Britain from a den of devious spies?!? A cast of 4 actors plays over 150 characters in this Tony award-winning, laugh-out-loud, lightning-paced whodunit!



Origins of *The 39 Steps* Play

In 1996 the first full-stage version of *The 39 Steps*, written by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon, premiered in Richmond, North Yorkshire at the Georgian Theatre Royal for a crowd of 90 theatergoers. The production then toured around Northern England. The play was written to only use four actors, which was a deviation from past iterations of *The 39 Steps*. A €1,000 Yorkshire Arts grant funded this production, which was created in three weeks of writing, improvising, and working with actors.



The play did two more tours around England in early and late 1997. A producer from Perth Repertory Theatre in Scotland saw *The 39 Steps* and decided to mount a production at Perth Repertory. In January of 1998, Corble brought the play to the London Fringe. London producer Charles Vance purchased the rights and began tours of British Repertory Theatres.

Patrick Barlow, co-founder of the National Theatre of Brent, was then asked to look at the script for *The 39 Steps* and play the role of Richard Hannay. In 2004, Barlow rewrote the script. Barlow changed the story to be more like the 1935 film, but still kept many aspects of the original play. In 2005, Barlow's

adaptation premiered at The West Yorkshire Playhouse, and eventually the production performed at the Tricycle Theatre in London. The production transferred to the West End's Criterion Theatre, opening in September 2006. In 2007 *The 39 Steps* won the Olivier Award for Best New Comedy. The West End production closed on September 5th, 2015. The nine-year run made *The 39 Steps* the fifth longest running West End play.



Now titled *Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps*, the play opens in a Roundabout Theatre production on Broadway's American Airlines Theatre on January 15th, 2008. The show closed on March 29th, 2008. It was shortly after transferred to the Cort Theatre (now the James Earl Jones Theatre) and then to The Helen Hayes Theatre on January 21st, 2009. The Broadway production kept past director Maria Aitkin, designer Peter McKintosh, and Charles Edward in the role of Richard Hannay, all originally from UK productions. The rest of the Broadway



cast was made up of Jennifer Ferrin, Arnie Burton, and Cliff Saunders. Eventually, actor Sam Robards replaced Charles Edward as Richard Hannay. The play closed on Broadway on January 10th, 2010. *The 39 Steps* then transferred to an Off-Broadway venue on

March 25th, 2010. The play has since been performed all over the world in various regional and community productions.

The 2008 Broadway production won numerous awards. *The 39 Steps* took home Tony award wins for Best Sound Design in a Play (Mic Pool), and Best Lighting Design in a Play (Kevin Adams). It was nominated for four other Tonys: Best Direction of a Play (Maria Aitken), Best Costume Design of a Play (Peter McKintosh), Best Scenic Design of a Play (Peter McKintosh), and Best Play. It won the Drama Desk Award for Unique Theatrical Experience and Outstanding Lighting Design (Kevin Adams), and was nominated for Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Sound Design (Mic Pool).



About the Playwrights:

Patrick Barlow

Besides his version of *Lew Wallace's Ben Hur*, Patrick Barlow's Olivier-nominated adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* has played off-Broadway and London's West End while his 4-person adaptation of *The 39 Steps* has played in over forty countries worldwide, winning Olivier, Helpmann, Moliere and Tony Awards and making Patrick the most performed playwright in America for 2012/13.



Most recently, his rewriting of *John Milton's Comus* has played to critical acclaim at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

Patrick is also celebrated in the UK for his two-man theatre company National Theatre of Brent, whose comedy epics include *Wagner's Ring Cycle*, *The Charles and Diana Story*, *The Messiah*, *The Wonder of Sex*, *The Arts and How They Was Done*, *The Black Hole of Calcutta*, *The Life and Times of the Dalai Lama* and *Zulu!* They have won two Sony Gold Awards, a Premier Ondas Award for Best European Comedy and the New York Festival Gold Award for Best Comedy.

Other screenwriting includes Van Gogh (Prix Futura Berlin Film Festival), Revolution!! (Best Comedy Jerusalem Film Festival) and the BAFTA-winning The Young Visitors. Publications include Shakespeare: The Truth! and The Complete History of the Whole World. Patrick has also appeared in Absolutely Fabulous, Shakespeare in Love, Notting Hill, Nanny McPhee and Bridget Jones's Diary. He is currently writing theatre versions of The Hound of the Baskervilles and Dracula.

Biography and photo from <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/a/1046/patrick-barlow>.

Simon Corble

Simon Corble is a professional writer with a background in theatre, both as a playwright and director. Throughout the 1990's with his company Midsommer Actors' he specialised in creating



site-specific adaptations of classic tales around dozens of open-air locations as varied as Beeston Castle, Cheshire, to the heather moorlands owned by the National Trust at Brimham Rocks, North Yorks. He won a Manchester Evening News Theatre Award in 1997 for his adaptation, *Of Mice and Men* which toured widely to old farmyards across the country. He was co-creator in 1996 of the hit comedy *The 39 Steps*, which later went on to enjoy a lengthy run in the West End, winning the Olivier award for "Best New Comedy" in 2007.

Biography and photo from <http://www.corble.co.uk/>

Nobby Dimon

[Nobby Dimon] took a degree in English & Theatre Studies at Lancaster University and a post-grad teaching course at Bretton Hall.



Founded North Country Theatre in 1995 and formally set up the company in 1996. His very popular accessible and visually inventive style & quirky humour quickly established the company in the North and Midlands as a purveyor of high quality entertainment. Much of the work he has created involves leading a team of actors through a devising process and simultaneously writing a script, sometimes in verse. As well as creating hilarious ripping yarns based on classic adventures such as *The 39 Steps*, *2001* and *The Lost World* and staging medieval mystery plays he has also created the first stage adaptation of JL Carr's *A Month in the Country*. Several of his scripts have been performed by other theatre companies in theatres from Pitlochry to Hornchurch.

Previously he had eight very successful years as Theatre in Education Director at the Harrogate Theatre. Work there included innovative week-long residencies in village primary schools, exciting participatory dramas on themes as varied as the technology of flight, war poetry and art, emigration from the dales, food adulteration, the Trojan Horse. In other words not a load

of preaching on contemporary social issues. Nobby continues to produce educational and site-specific dramas in castles stately homes unusual landscapes and the actor/teacher in role methods he has become something of an expert in, continues to excite and delight primary school children.

Earlier still he was an associate director of Durham Theatre Company where amongst many other projects he directed the award-winning *Not By Bread Alone* by Margaret Pine, a play created by and for the women of the Easington Miners Support Group during the 1984-85 Miners Strike.

For Cleveland Theatre Company he directed two large-scale Community Plays in Hartlepool created with writer John Bond which involved hundreds of people as participants and thousands as audience, an experience he has repeated in Richmond creating *The Last Dance of a Dalesman* and most recently *Blame it on Bartle*, large scale community plays for Richmondshire, the latter involving a contingent of performers from our our twin community in Norway.

Biography and photo from <https://www.northcountrytheatre.com/About/NobbyDimon>

A Timeline from The Novel to The Play

1915

The Novel by John Buchan

The book is a thrilling spy adventure featuring Richard Hannay, a man who is caught up in a dangerous conspiracy involving espionage and political intrigue.

1935

First Film Adaptation by Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock's version of the story downplays the political themes of the novel, focusing more on the mystery and suspense, and shifts the tone slightly to include elements of humor.

1959

Second Film Adaptation

This adaptation holds more true to the novel, but still makes some updates for more modern audiences.

1978–2000s

Many TV Movie, Radio, and Television Adaptations

2005

Adaptation into a Play

Patrick Barlow's stage version of *The 39 Steps* premieres in 2005 at the Tricycle Theatre in London. This adaptation takes a highly comedic and physically inventive approach, transforming the original novel's action and suspense into a fast-paced, slapstick comedy.

2006

Stage Play Moves to The West End

The 39 Steps opens at The Criterion Theatre in London, and it's a massive hit, winning an Olivier Award.

2008

Broadway Debut

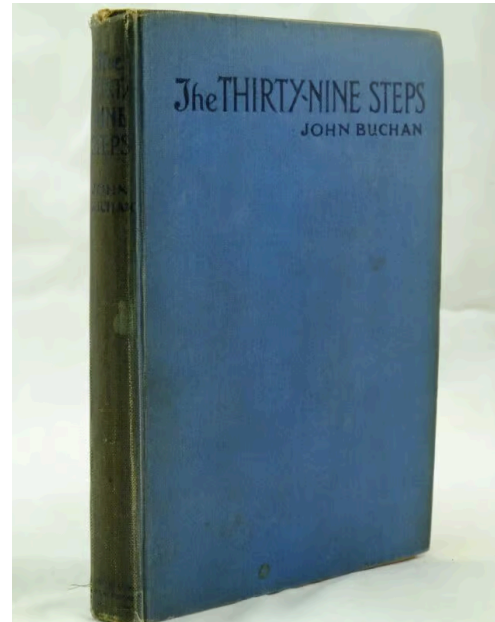
The 39 Steps opens on Broadway in New York, finding similar success to the West End production, winning two Tony Awards and a Drama Desk Award.

2007– Present

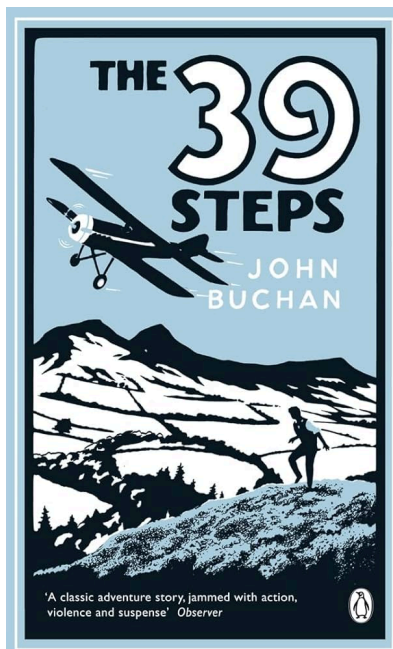
National Tours and Worldwide Productions

The Novel

Written by John Buchan, the original version of *The 39 Steps* is the 1915 Scottish adventure novel. The name of the novel originated from a memory Buchan had of his daughter counting stairsteps she walked on. It is the first installment of five John Buchan novels that center on the character Richard Hannay. Now, *The 39 Steps* is known as one of the first examples of a “man-on-the-run” type of adventure story.



Buchan worked on the novel while stuck in bed with a chronic ulcer, which he dealt with for much of his life.



The novel follows Hannay, a man who is dragged into a dangerous conspiracy after witnessing the murder of a secret agent. The agent’s dying words hint at a plot to steal British military secrets, and Hannay becomes a fugitive, trying to uncover the truth while being pursued by both the police and mysterious assassins. The novel is a tense mix of suspense, action, and espionage, with Hannay traveling across Scotland to stop the plot.

About the Author of the Novel: John Buchan



John Buchan (1875–1940) was a Scottish author, historian, and politician, best known for his adventure novels and thrillers. He was born in Perth, Scotland, and studied at Edinburgh Academy and later Balliol College. He then worked as a journalist as well as in the public sector and spent some time as a civil servant in the Dominion of Canada. His early work in government and law gave him experiences that would influence his later writing, providing a deep understanding of political and social dynamics. He also wrote extensively on history, especially on the First World War, and was a great contributor to the cultural and intellectual life of the British Empire.

Buchan's most famous work is *The 39 Steps*, a 1915 thriller that continues to be a landmark in the genre. The novel follows Richard Hannay, an ordinary man who becomes entangled in a deadly conspiracy involving espionage, political intrigue, and murder. Written during World War I, the novel capitalized on the public's growing interest in espionage and national security, and it quickly became popular for its pace, suspense, and a protagonist who is both relatable and resourceful. *The 39 Steps* is often considered one of the earliest examples of a modern spy novel, influencing countless writers and filmmakers in the years following. The book's success also led to several adaptations, including a famous Alfred Hitchcock film in 1935 and a popular stage play.

Buchan's works were not limited to thrillers. He wrote historical novels, poetry, and nonfiction, with a particular interest in the stories of his homeland. His political career reached its peak when he was appointed Governor General of Canada, a mostly ceremonial position he held from 1935 until his death. However, it is his adventure and espionage novels, such as *The 39 Steps*, that have solidified his place in literary history. Buchan's combination of historical knowledge, dramatic narrative, and the complex portrayal of the individual caught in a larger political web continues to captivate readers to this day.

The Movie (1935)



The movie adaptation loosely based on the John Buchan novel *The 39 Steps* was released on June 6th, 1935. Written by Charles Bennett and Ian Hay, the film starred Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll as Richard Hannay and Pamela. Alfred Hitchcock directed the British spy film, which is now considered a classic film. Many scenes were added that did not exist in the novel, as well as the addition of its two main female characters, Anabella and Pamela. *The 39 Steps* had a budget of £50,000-£60,000 and grossed \$52,623 at the box office.

The film had some classic Hitchcock elements, themes, and style. Common in Hitchcock films, *The 39 Steps* has a MacGuffin. This is an object, event, or device





in a story that is important to the plot but its details are unimportant to the overall story and to the audience. In this film, the MacGuffin is the silent airplane engine. Alfred Hitchcock himself makes two brief appearances in the background of the film, both in the first ten minutes. *The 39 Steps* is also known for creating actress Madeline Carroll as a prime example of the famous “Hitchcock Blondes”, as he was known for often featuring “icy and remote” blonde leading women. A fun fact of the production is that before filming the scene where Richard and Pamela run through the country while handcuffed, Hitchcock actually handcuffed the

actors together and pretended to have lost the key to help them understand how their characters would feel in the scene. Actress Madeline Carroll dealt with welts throughout filming due to long days of being handcuffed to Robert Donat.

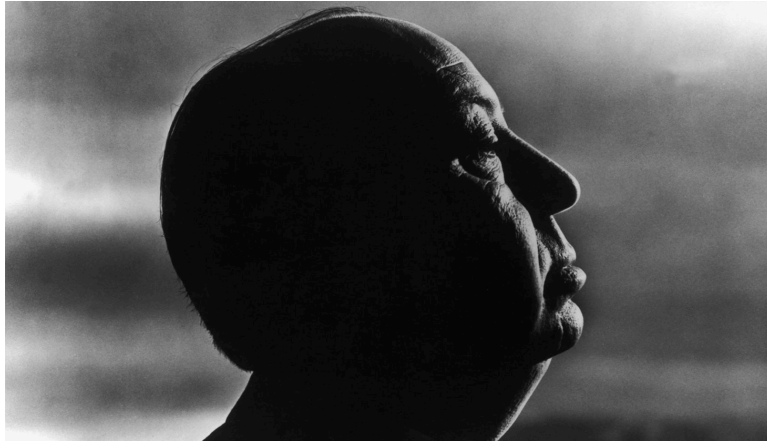
The 39 Steps was generally well received by critics and audiences alike. The film was the 17th most popular in the year it was released. It has been ranked highly over and over in the history of British films and



has stood as the most popular and well-liked film version of the story to have ever been made, holding a Rotten Tomatoes score of 96%. Hitchcock himself claimed that *The 39 Steps* was one of his favorite movies. The writer of the original novel, John Buchan, enjoyed the Hitchcock film even though it departed from his original plot significantly.



About the Filmmaker: Alfred Hitchcock



Alfred Hitchcock was born in Leytonstone, England on August 13, 1899. He was the youngest of three children born to William and Emma Jane Hitchcock.

After attending a technical school at 15, Hitchcock spent the first years of his career as a draftsman, advertising designer, and writer. An interest in photography led to him working in London's film industry, first as a title card designer for silent movies and, just five years later, as a director.

In 1926, Hitchcock married his assistant director, Alma Reville, and in 1928 they had a daughter, Patricia.

Hitchcock quickly gained notoriety as a director who delivered suspense, twist endings, and dark subject matter. His own personality and gallows humor were embedded in popular culture through interviews, film trailers, and cameo appearances in his own films. He was popular

with audiences at home and abroad, and in 1939 the Hitchcock family moved to Hollywood. In the three decades that followed he would cement his legacy by directing and producing his most successful and enduring works. His television anthology, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, ran from 1955 to 1965 and made him a household name.





During his career, he created over fifty feature films in a career that saw not only the development of Hitchcock's own distinctive directorial style, but also landmark innovations in cinema. In 1929, *Blackmail* was his first feature film with sound and in 1948, his first colour film was *Rope*. Hitchcock himself has been credited with pioneering many camera and editing techniques for peers and aspiring directors to emulate.

Hitchcock collected many professional accolades including two Golden Globes, eight Laurel Awards, and five lifetime achievement awards. He was a five-time Academy Award nominee for Best Director and in 1940, his film *Rebecca* won the



Oscar for Best Picture. In 1980, he received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II.

A husband, father, director, and the Master of Suspense, Sir Alfred Hitchcock passed away on April 29, 1980.



Biography and photos from <https://www.alfredhitchcock.com>.

Discussion Questions

Before the Show

- ★ What Alfred Hitchcock movies have you seen? Did you like them? What do you know about him as a filmmaker?
- ★ *The 39 Steps* is often categorized as a comedy-thriller. How do you think humor and suspense will be balanced in the play? What kind of tone are you expecting?
- ★ This play is an adaptation of both a novel and a 1935 film. What do you think might be lost or gained in the transition from film and literature to the stage? How do you expect the characters and plot to have changed?

After the Show

- ★ Who was your favorite character, and why?
- ★ How effectively did the play balance suspense with humor? Did you find yourself more engaged by the thrilling or comedic moments? Why?
- ★ Which dialects from the show had you heard before? Which ones were you unfamiliar with, and what region do you think they might have been from?
- ★ In what ways did the dialects help shape your thoughts and opinions on the characters? What background information do you feel it lent to them?
- ★ What might you have done if you were Richard Hannay and discovered what he did at the beginning of the play?

- ★ In what ways were you surprised or excited by the creative and unexpected ways the production used its minimalist props and set pieces?
- ★ The play uses a small cast of actors to portray multiple roles. How did this affect your perception of the characters? Were any performances particularly memorable?
- ★ How did the themes of espionage, mystery, and political intrigue play out in the stage version? Were there any moments that felt particularly relevant or resonant with today's world?

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