



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Amateur Players of Sherborne
Name of Production: The 39 Steps
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Date: 3 June 2025
Adjudicator: Chris Howland-Harris

A RIPPING YARN THAT COULD CHALLENGE THE *GOES WRONG* SERIES

The 39 Steps might be a “smash hit Olivier and Tony Award Winning Comedy”, but script alone is not a guarantee of success. Comedy hits are not always so without a huge amount of work by director, cast and crew, and this production of The 39 Steps cried out with effort and enthusiasm from the whole company.

STAGING AND DIRECTION

I’m used to seeing large productions on an expansive stage packed with players, but rarely to see a large production in so small studio theatre as inhabited by the Amateur Players of Sherborne (APS). The Studio Theatre behind scenes is better made for a game of sardines than scenery, props and 68 costume changes, so with four actors and eight stagehands this must have been a show with one of the highest backstage population densities. Huge credit then to Director Jane McKenna and Stage Manager Robert Yeo and his team for pulling it off with so few hiccups.

There was a good start even upon arrival, as several of the supporting backstage crew appeared in costume and character to interact with those

queuing to enter the Studio Theatre. This meant that by the time we entered the audience were already warmed up for an evening's fun and entertainment. The stage was set and the first of many clever nods to Hitchcock and his works was a poster on the wall stage left for the 1935 Robert Donat and Madelaine Carroll film *The 39 Steps*. Bang on 7.30pm, and I'm always pleased by a prompt start, we were called to order by a Station Master followed by CLOWN 1 Freddie Wopat who gave the house welcome in his inimitable comic style.

From the beginning we were introduced to an excellent musical selection of the era to set us firmly in the 1930s, so credit to Mark Lambert and Director Jane for all of these choices. Music and sound effects were used well and to good effect, both to allow cover of scene changes and to Evoke the feel of that interwar period. Sound balance, as always for APS, was just right being clear and at a correct volume. Lighting also used extremely well, even if the two small footlights had me anxious all night about trip potential, though cast and crew did well to avoid this.

Costumes were first-rate and historically appropriate, with excellent touches from Hannay's spectator shoes to Professor Jordan's smoking cap and brocade jacket that gave the latter a wonderfully louche appearance. Given the number of changes, almost 70, the cast and crew did an excellent job to have everybody dressed appropriately without missing such comic touches such as the Sheriff of the County's sock suspenders.

It was clear that Director Jane had thought for a long time about this production and how it might be achieved within the confines of the Studio Theatre. The action takes place in many locations that include Hannay's apartment, a musical hall theatre, railway carriages and station, the Forth Bridge, a crofter's cottage, across the moorlands, Alt-na-Shellach House, a car journey, an hotel and, finally, the London Palladium. While the transport was represented by the ephemera of set dressing including stools, wheeled luggage trunks and a couple of lights, the most clever and effective were the locations built with upright A-frame constructions that held a functioning door or window. This device was employed extremely well, perhaps because of its simplicity, facilitating a quick and flowing change to staging and allowing the audience to paint the scene in their mind. Other effects such as the train of suitcases with illuminated carriage windows were very inventive yet went a little away from the less-is-more construction, and while the back projection was a very clever and effective way to provide a cut scene to the pursuit over

the moors with its *North by Northwest* biplane chase, it would have been even more impactful had it been shorter and done away with the aerial crash and subsequent parachutists.

However, what came over strongly was the thoughtfulness of Jane's staging. After Hannay slips out of his chair under the body of Annabella Schmidt he then pulls upon the knife in her back to release the map from her hands. The entrance of the two Clowns with an illuminating lamppost though scripted was achieved perfectly, the obviously fake plush fish served for supper by Margaret then were topped perfectly by a plush Octopus was wonderfully bizarre, that the dance at the end of Act One began with a Nazi salute as a way to join hands was inspired, all of these showed a skill and imagination and a bit of theatrical magic that Jane's notes suggested should be celebrated. Not everything worked, for example the characters that walked past holding frames at Alt-na-Shellach which I subsequently guessed were supposed to be family portraits on the wall but didn't quite hit and failed to get a response from the audience, we had an empty stage for a long time while Jeremy rushed round outside to enter from the rear of the audience, and the energy rather dropped during the hotel bedroom scene, but we needn't have worried about all that because Jane had so many jokes and comic moments to deliver that if one missed then another two came along shortly after. Such thoughtfulness had also gone into her casting as the two Clowns matched each other well in stature and nature, and both Jeremy and Hazell made use of very animated mouth shapes, so either Jane had coached them both to orally enunciate emotion or else this was further evidence of how right was her casting. There continued many nods to Hitchcock and his films, from the Donat and Carroll poster to Pamela reading a copy of *The 39 Steps* on the train to Edinburgh, and I can only apologise that the Scottish regalia led me to mistake the dummy of Hitchcock for Alex Salmond.

RICHARD HANNAY

Jeremy Small opened his performance with a very accomplished and suave received pronunciation. From the start Jeremy engendered a sense of Ripping Yarn urgency, punctuated by his long limbs and the occasional flicker of the left eyebrow, and so drew us into the devilish plot with a fervour that allowed the satirical comedy to pour off the stage. This was enhanced by his ability to express emotion through a wonderful downturn of the mouth when aghast,

and throughout both Acts Jeremy gave a wonderful representation of the English man about town thrown in to defend a particularly sticky wicket. Such a stance and presence on stage made Hannay the perfect foil to the Clowns so that even when he tried to exaggerate his role to Pamela as a bounder, he was the archetypal Boys-Own hero.

ANNABELLA SCHMIDT / PAMELA EDWARDS / MARGARET MCTYTE

I don't know how much previous acting Hazell Perrett has done, but at only 17 years of age she demonstrated an ability of a far more mature actor. Hazell appeared completely at ease on stage as her poise and delivery were relaxed and, at all times, matched that of the character she was playing opposite. You could always tell her character's emotion as clear anxiety crossed the face of Annabella Schmidt or disgust that of Pamela Edwards, and I particularly enjoyed the smile that so naturally played across Hazell's lips after Hannay's line "Ever heard of a thing called persecution mania?" Having given us the *femme fatale* that was Annabella, we then saw Hazell play the complete opposite of a gentle ingenue as Margaret, both roles equally believable and thus demonstrating her range of acting ability.

CLOWN #1

Freddie Wopat is a perfect clown, having the ability to bring laughter through both his physical and spoken acting. With a larger-than-life presence he still moved about the stage with a grace when playing the louche Professor, yet could stumble and bumble when he was a wise guy and acolyte of the 39 steps. Freddie also turned in an excellent range of Scottish accents from broad Highland to the more lilting Edinburgh, but his greatest performance came from the unspoken humour during the political rally, when with simple exertions and bodily sounds he had the house rolling with laughter.

CLOWN #2

What was most striking about Gary Brooks was his physical humour. His persona as *Mr Memory* was established by walking onstage and giving a simple nod to the audience, while his final monologue being 17 lines of technical nonsense was indeed a genuine feat of memory. Gary was a perfect partner to

Freddie, at times playing the fall guy whether as gangster or put-upon husband, and his presence on stage made him lovable to the audience who wanted him to succeed whether as milkman or as sheep wrangler, and the image of this big gentle man trying to herd animatronic sheep from the road was a great comedy moment because of Gary's timing.

CONCLUSION

This is the first production in a long time that has had me crying with laughter, and while that was much to the credit of some excellent clowning abilities it would not have come without the incredible vision that Director Jane McKenna had for this theatrical comedy. As if that wasn't enough, Jane is credited for Set Design, Puppet Creation and Costumes as well as contributing to Props and Set Realisation, all in addition to directing this great satirical farce of a show. Of course she could not have achieved this without her wonderful cast and crew, but there is no doubt that Jane did achieve what she set out to produce, and that it was worthy of the delighted applause at the close.

CHH