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Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps
Adapted by Patrick Barlow
from the book by John Buchan
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The stage adaptation of *The 39 Steps*, is a fast-paced romp through the story of Alfred Hitchcock's film. The play is a pastiche, an affectionate and very funny transposition of the film on to the stage. The film contains set pieces that are iconic: the train top chase, the Forth Bridge escape, Mr. Memory at the Palladium. Much of the joy in the show is in seeing these moments recreated through the physicality and vocal talent of only 4 actors.

Richard Hannay is at a London theatre, attending a demonstration of the remarkable powers of “Mr. Memory”, a man with a photographic memory, when a fight breaks out and shots are fired. In the ensuing panic, he finds himself holding a frightened Annabella Schmitt, who talks him into taking her back to his flat. There, she tells him that she is a spy, being chased by assassins out to kill her. She claims to have uncovered a plot to steal vital British military secrets, implemented by a man with the top joint missing from one of his fingers, head of an espionage organization called the “39 Steps”.

The next day, Hannay wakes up to find her dead, stabbed with his bread knife. He sneaks out of the flat disguised as a milkman and takes a train to Scotland, where she had told him she was going to find the man. On the train, he sees the police on his trail. In desperation, he enters a compartment and kisses the sole occupant, the attractive Pamela, in an attempt to escape detection. She however manages to free herself from his unwanted embrace and betrays him to the law. He jumps from the train onto the Forth Rail Bridge and escapes.

He stays the night with a poor older farmer and his young wife who flirts with Hannay. The next morning, he leaves in the farmer’s Sunday coat, and calls at the house the woman had told him of. There he finds the man with the missing finger-joint, the seemingly respectable Professor Jordan, who shoots him after a brief conversation and leaves him for dead. Luckily, the bullet fails to penetrate the farmer’s prayer-book, left in a coat pocket, and Hannay flees once more.

He goes to the police, but they refuse to accept his story, since they know Jordan well. Hannay jumps through a window and escapes into the crowd. He tries to hide himself in a political meeting, but is mistaken for the keynote speaker; he gives a rousing impromptu speech (without knowing a thing about the candidate he is introducing), but is recognized by Pamela, who gives him up once more. They are handcuffed together and taken away by “policemen”. Hannay eventually realizes they are agents of the conspiracy when they bypass the nearest police station. When the car is forced to stop, he escapes, dragging an unwilling Pamela along.

They travel cross country, and stay the night at an inn, the girl still not believing Hannay’s story. While he sleeps, she slips out of the handcuffs, but then eavesdrops on one of the fake policemen on the telephone downstairs; the conversation confirms Hannay’s assertions. She returns to the room and sleeps on the floor. Next morning, she tells him what she heard, and is sent to London to pass it on to the police. No secrets have been reported missing however, so they do nothing to help. Instead, they follow her to get to Hannay.

She leads them to Mr. Memory’s show at the London Palladium, where the police close in on the fugitive. When the performer is introduced, Hannay recognizes his theme music - it’s the annoyingly catchy tune he hasn’t been able to forget for days. Hannay puts two and two together and realizes that Mr. Memory is how the spies are smuggling the secrets out: he has them memorized. As the police take him into custody, he shouts out a question about the 39 Steps. When Mr. Memory compulsively begins to answer, Jordan shoots him and tries to flee, but is apprehended. The dying Mr. Memory recites the information stored in his brain, a design for silent aircraft, and Hannay and the girl stroll off, hand in hand.
The Artists

Patrick Barlow is probably best known in the UK for his hilarious two-man National Theatre of Brent, which has become a legend in British theatre, television and radio. Their comedy epics include Zulu, The Charles and Diana Story, Messiah and The Wonder of Sex. 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 The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole, Christopher Columbus, Queen of the East, Van Gogh (Prix Futura Berlin Film Festival), Revolution!! (Best Comedy Jerusalem Film Festival) and the BAFTA-winning Young Visitors starring Jim Broadbent. Publications include Shakespeare: The Truth! and The Complete History of the Whole World. Screen and theatre acting credits include Wind in the Willows, “Absolutely Fabulous,” “Clutterford,” Shakespeare in Love, Notting Hill, The Diary of Bridget Jones and Nanny McPhee. The 39 Steps won Patrick an Olivier Award for Best New Comedy.

John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir (August 26, 1875–February 11, 1940), was a Scottish novelist and politician who served as Governor General of Canada.

Born in Perth, Scotland, he was educated at Glasgow University and Brasenose College, Oxford, winning the Newdigate prize for poetry while a student at the latter. Buchan at first entered into a career in law in 1901, but almost immediately moved into politics, becoming private secretary to Alfred Milner, who was high commissioner of South Africa.

During World War I, he was a correspondent for the Times in France before becoming Director of Information under Lord Beaverbrook in 1917. After the war he began to write on historical subjects, and became president of the Scottish Historical Society. He was twice High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and in 1927 was elected a Member of Parliament. In 1935 he became Governor General of Canada and was created Baron Tweedsmuir.

His career as a novelist was by then a thriving one, and he had produced his best-known works, including Prester John (1910), The Thirty-Nine Steps (1915), and Greenmantle (1916). He moved on to write biographies of Sir Walter Scott, Caesar Augustus, Oliver Cromwell and James Graham, 1st Marquess of Montrose. His autobiography, Memory Hold-the-Door, was also written while he was Governor General.
The acknowledged master of the thriller genre he virtually invented, Alfred Hitchcock was also a brilliant technician who deftly blended sex, suspense and humor. He began his filmmaking career in 1919 illustrating title cards for silent films at Paramount's Famous Players-Lasky studio in London. There he learned scripting, editing and art direction, and rose to assistant director in 1922. That year he directed an unfinished film, No. 13 or Mrs. Peabody. His first completed film as director was The Pleasure Garden (1925), an Anglo-German production filmed in Munich. This experience, plus a stint at Germany's UFA studios as an assistant director, help account for the Expressionistic character of his films, both in their visual schemes and thematic concerns. The Lodger (1926), his breakthrough film, was a prototypical example of the classic Hitchcock plot: an innocent protagonist is falsely accused of a crime and becomes involved in a web of intrigue.

An early example of Hitchcock's technical virtuosity was his creation of "subjective sound" for Blackmail (1929), his first sound film. In this story of a woman who stabs an artist to death when he tries to seduce her, Hitchcock emphasized the young woman's anxiety by gradually distorting all but one word "knife" of a neighbor's dialogue the morning after the killing. Here and in Murder! (1930), Hitchcock first made explicit the link between sex and violence.

The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934), a commercial and critical success, established a favorite pattern: an investigation of family relationships within a suspenseful story. The 39 Steps (1935) showcases a mature Hitchcock; it is a stylish and efficiently told chase film brimming with exciting incidents and memorable characters. Despite their merits, both Secret Agent (1936) and Sabotage (1936) exhibited flaws Hitchcock later acknowledged and learned from. According to his theory, suspense is developed by providing the audience with information denied endangered characters. But to be most effective and cathartic, no harm should come to the innocent as it does in both of those films. The Lady Vanishes (1938), on the other hand, is sleek, exemplary Hitchcock: fast-paced, witty, and magnificently entertaining.

Hitchcock’s last British film, Jamaica Inn (1939), and his first Hollywood effort, Rebecca (1940), were both handsomely mounted though somewhat uncharacteristic works based on novels by Daphne du Maurier. Despite its somewhat muddled narrative, Foreign Correspondent (1940) was the first Hollywood film in his recognizable style. Suspicion (1941), the story of a woman who thinks her husband is a murderer about to make her his next victim, was an exploration of family dynamics; its introduction of evil into the domestic arena foreshadowed Shadow of a Doubt (1943), Hitchcock’s early Hollywood masterwork. One of his most disturbing films, Shadow was nominally the story of a young woman who learns that a favorite uncle is a murderer, but at heart it is a sobering look at the dark underpinnings of American middle-class life. Fully as horrifying as Uncle Charlie’s attempts to murder his niece was her mother’s tearful acknowledgment of her loss of identity in becoming a wife and mother. “You know how it is,” she says, “you sort of forget you’re you. You’re your husband’s wife.” In Hitchcock, evil manifests itself not only in acts of physical violence, but also in the form of psychological, institutionalized and systemic cruelty.

Hitchcock would return to the feminine sacrifice-of-identity theme several times, most immediately with the masterful Notorious (1946), a perverse love story about an FBI agent who must send the woman he loves into the arms of a Nazi in order to uncover an espionage ring. Other psychological...
dramas of the late 1940s were *Spellbound* (1945), *The Paradine Case* (1948), and *Under Capricorn* (1949). Both *Lifeboat* (1944) and *Rope* (1948) were interesting technical exercises: in the former, the object was to tell a film story within the confines of a small boat; in *Rope*, Hitchcock sought to make a film that appeared to be a single, unedited shot. *Rope* shared with the more effective *Strangers on a Train* (1951) a villain intent on committing the perfect murder as well as a strong homoerotic undercurrent.

During his most inspired period, from 1950 to 1960, Hitchcock produced a cycle of memorable films which included minor works such as *I Confess* (1953), the sophisticated thrillers *Dial M for Murder* (1954) and *To Catch a Thief* (1955), a remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) and the black comedy *The Trouble with Harry* (1955). He also directed several top-drawer films like *Strangers on a Train* and the troubling early docudrama (1956), a searing critique of the American justice system.

His three unalloyed masterpieces of the period were investigations into the very nature of watching cinema. *Rear Window* (1954) made viewers voyeurs, then had them pay for their pleasure. In its story of a photographer who happens to witness a murder, Hitchcock provocatively probed the relationship between the watcher and the watched, involving, by extension, the viewer of the film. *Vertigo* (1958), as haunting a movie as Hollywood has ever produced, took the lost-feminine-identity theme of *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Notorious* and identified its cause as male fetishism.

*North by Northwest* (1959) is perhaps Hitchcock’s most fully realized film. From a script by Ernest Lehman, with a score (as usual) by Bernard Herrmann, and starring Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint, this quintessential chase movie is full of all the things for which we remember Alfred Hitchcock: ingenious shots, subtle male-female relationships, dramatic score, bright technicolor, inside jokes, witty symbolism and above all masterfully orchestrated suspense.

*Psycho* (1960) is famed for its shower murder sequence a classic model of shot selection and editing which was startling for its (apparent) nudity, graphic violence and its violation of the narrative convention that makes a protagonist invulnerable. Moreover, the progressive shots of eyes, beginning with an extreme close-up of the killer’s peeping eye and ending with the open eye of the murder victim, subtly implied the presence of a third eye the viewer’s.

Later films offered intriguing amplifications of his main themes. *The Birds* (1963) presented evil as an environmental fact of life. *Marnie* (1964), a psychoanalytical thriller along the lines of *Spellbound* showed how a violent, sexually tinged childhood episode turns a woman into a thief, once again associating criminality with violence and sex. Most notable about *Torn Curtain* (1966), an espionage story played against a cold war backdrop, was its extended fight-to-the-death scene between the protagonist and a Communist agent in the kitchen of a farm house. In it Hitchcock reversed the movie convention of quick, easy deaths and showed how difficult and how momentous the act of killing really is.

Hitchcock’s disappointing *Topaz* (1969), an unwieldy, unfocused story set during the Cuban missile crisis, was devoid of his typical narrative economy and wit. He returned to England to produce *Frenzy* (1972), a tale much more in the Hitchcock vein, about an innocent man suspected of being a serial killer. His final film, *Family Plot* (1976), pitted two couples against one another: a pair of professional thieves versus a female psychic and her working-class lover. It was a fitting end to a body of work that demonstrated the eternal symmetry of good and evil.
A MacGuffin is a plot element that catches the viewers’ attention or drives the plot of a work of fiction.

Sometimes, the specific nature of the MacGuffin is not important to the plot such that anything that serves as a motivation serves its purpose. The MacGuffin can sometimes be ambiguous, completely undefined, generic or left open to interpretation.

The MacGuffin is common in films, especially thrillers. Commonly, though not always, the MacGuffin is the central focus of the film in the first act, and later declines in importance as the struggles and motivations of characters play out. Sometimes the MacGuffin is even forgotten by the end of the film.

The director and producer Alfred Hitchcock popularized both the term “MacGuffin” and the technique. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Hitchcock explained the term in a 1939 lecture at Columbia University: “[W]e have a name in the studio, and we call it the ‘MacGuffin.’ It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.”

Interviewed in 1966 by François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock illustrated the term “MacGuffin” with this story:

It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, ‘What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?’ And the other answers, ‘Oh that’s a McGuffin.’ The first one asks, ‘What’s a McGuffin?’ ‘Well,’ the other man says, ‘It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.’ The first man says, ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,’ and the other one answers ‘Well, then that’s no McGuffin!’ So you see, a McGuffin is nothing at all.

Hitchcock related this anecdote in a television interview for Richard Schickel’s documentary The Men Who Made the Movies. Hitchcock’s verbal delivery made it clear that the second man has thought up the MacGuffin explanation as a roundabout method of telling the first man to mind his own business.

On the commentary soundtrack to the 2004 DVD release of Star Wars, writer and director George Lucas describes R2-D2 as “the main driving force of the movie... what you say in the movie business is the MacGuffin... the object of everybody’s search.” Lucas, believes that the MacGuffin should be powerful and that “the audience should care about it almost as much as the dueling heroes and villains on-screen.”

Harrison Ford used the word “MacGuffin” on the Late Show with David Letterman to refer to the plot devices in the Indiana Jones movies, specifically citing the Sankara Stones from the second film and the Holy Grail from the third film.

In Mel Brooks’ film High Anxiety, which parodies many Hitchcock movies, a minor plot point is advanced by a mysterious phone call from a “Mr. MacGuffin”.

The term was introduced to UK TV viewers through its prolific use in the TV game show 3-2-1 in which each object was used in a comedy sketch and then associated with a cryptic clue to be solved by the contestants to lead them to a prize of holiday, car, or dustbin.

Examples of MacGuffins in Film

- The top secret plans in The 39 Steps (1935)
- The eponymous statuette in The Maltese Falcon (1941)
- The letters of transit in Casablanca (1942)
- The uranium in Notorious (1946)
- The case with glowing contents in Kiss Me Deadly (1955)
- The “government secrets” in North by Northwest (1959)
- The stolen 40,000$ in Psycho (1960).
- The stamps in Charade (1963)
- The Death Star plans in Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977)
- The Ark of the Covenant in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)
- The unknown, glowing contents of the briefcase in Pulp Fiction (1994)
- The chest in Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest (2006)
- The Allspark in Transformers (2007)
- The unobtanium in Avatar (2009)
Discussion Questions and Exploration Activities

1. In a group or individually, take a film you know well and think about how you would stage some of the memorable moments. How would you do it if money was not an issue? How would you do it with items you could find in your house, garage, and yard?

2. The definition of “pastiche” is a work of drama, literature or music that imitates the work of a previous artist, often satirically. Discuss different examples of pastiche including sampled music, singers covering songs of other artists, Saturday Night Live, movies that spoof genres such as Not Another Teen Movie, or Scary Movie, movie remakes like Charlie’s Angels, or Miami Vice. Discuss how the 39 steps might be a pastiche.

For more Discussion and Classroom Activities visit: http://www.39stepsonbroadway.com/study.html

Original Sources and Links to Further Research

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http://www.39stepsonbroadway.com/study.html
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Movie Stills