

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: 'The 39 Steps' steps lively in Door County Peninsula Players Theatre

By Warren Gerds | warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com Published 09/08 2016 11:02AM Updated 09/08 2016 11:02AM

FISH CREEK, Wis.

Things that I like in Peninsula Players Theatre's top-flight professional production of "The 39 Steps":

Tricks. Early on, two ever-present goofy guys flip hats back and forth in a flashy fashion like you might see clowns do at a circus. Later, one of the goofy guys comes out on a unicycle with a moveable puppet on his back and wheels around the stage in a far-out imitation of an airplane – another circus-like bit. Along the way, the two goofy guys are cops in pursuit of the hero across the top of moving railroad cars, jiggling their coats as make-believe wind – another clownish thingie. Now... director Karen Sheridan's background includes teaching at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College, so such tight-knit humor is in her bailiwick. Humor in general is her directorial forte.

Action. "The 39 Steps" is an adventure. The hero, bored, goes to a theater in London and catches a gimmick act, Mr. Memory, and ends up with a body in his lap and the bump rap that he is the killer. The previously alive body had told him of a devious plot that now he is driven to expose to save the nation (England of the plot-laden days before World War II). The map in the hand of the previously alive body leads the dashing hero by train into the arms of a lovely woman and quickly out again as he travels to Scotland and its bogs, brogue, a farm with coos (cows) and a mean farmer with a lovely wife (more kissing) and on to a mansion where there is a party going on in the room next to where he stands facing the gun-toting host, who shoots him. End of Act I. The fast-moving play (once it gets going) is the entire 1935 Alfred Hitchcock film done by four actors. The run down: one hero played by one actor, three heroines (etc.) played by one actor and dozens of good guys, bad guys, good and bad gals (excuse me, the show is light) played in myriad funny ways by two actors. In order, they are Neil Brookshire, Erica Elam and Kevin McKillip and Joe Foust – rousing performers all.

Visuals. The basic set is that of the Palladium, a theater from early in the past century. Aqua is the dominant color. The stage area has footlights, sconces on walls and a proscenium arch outfitted with lights. On either side is a balcony box-seat area. Some action takes place on the second level. Peninsula Players Theatre goes to the length of creating a back wall of the theater of the play. The exposed brick, second-story windows and steam-heat radiator seem like they could be the real deal. A doorway is real. But the huge wall is fake. Now, that is taking theatricality seriously. Visuals carry through to costuming. The costumes, wigs, hats and shoes help the actors become characters, particularly McKillip and Foust and their array of spies, cops, doddering old Scottish fools, husbands and wives, an airplane pilot, vaudevillians, a newsboy, a train conductor, etc. Visuals carry through to sight gags, which can be clothing or mannerisms or timing shtick. It could be a routine with a woman taking off her nylon stockings while being handcuffed to a man or a mannequin dressed like a character going kerplow on the stage floor from a balcony or a couple of ancient guys as they maneuver around the podium of a political rally or one spy loading up another spy with chairs to haul away or four people in an automobile swaying through turns and bouncing over bumps in synchronized moves and ... and the list goes on.

Accents. There are many shadings from the various levels of the United Kingdom society. Some are deliberately indecipherable as McKillip and Foust make their way through the Scottish thicket, though there are translations. Foust has two prime language scenes, first as the Bible-thumping Scottish farmer and then as the fact-spewing, puddly-tat-tongued Mr. Memory.



Starring in the Peninsula Players Theatre production of "The 39 Steps" are, from left, Neil Brookshire, Kevin McKillip, Joe Foust and Erica Elam/Peninsula Players Theatre.

Cast: Richard Hannay – Neil Brookshire; Anabella Schmidt/Pamela/Margaret – Erica Elam; Clown #1 – Kevin McKillip; Clown #2 – Joe Foust

Running time: Two hours, 20 minutes

Remaining performances: Through Oct. 16: 7 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays

Info: peninsulaplayers.com

Changes. McKillip and Foust have a bundle of costume changes. Some take time and are meant to savor – like Foust coming out as a charwoman who discovers the body or becoming the elegantly dressed villain’s wife. Some are meant to dazzle with their speed – like McKillip and Foust flip-flopping between being the Scottish farm couple and the spies in a matter of seconds.

In the whole thing, playwright Patrick Barlow, director Karen Sheridan and the cast create a sense of improvisational theater and its spontaneity. Along with the style’s sight gags is word play, as in rapid-fire lines or the hero’s playfulness in his responses.

Opening night Wednesday had a few missed sound cues early on, but otherwise things clicked for a frisky, laugh-filled burst of entertainment.

Now, this is just me: In watching the play, I flashed on what was happening in Europe in the mid-1930s. The story is about deadly intrigue surrounding military secrets, with the culprits being Germans. In a way, the play makes it seem like Alfred Hitchcock and the British had the goods on some of what was happening on the continent years before the outbreak of the war. The reality was quite sinister. This is not to say the play is a heap of fun.

Creative: *Playwright – Patrick Barlow, from the novel by John Buchan, from the movie by Alfred Hitchcock; director – Karen Sheridan; scenic designer – J Branson; costume designer – Karin Simonson Kopischke; properties designers – Wendy A. Huber, Pauline Olesky; lighting designer – Stephen Roy White; wig designer – Kyle Pingel; scenic artist – Pauline Olesky; stage manager – Alden Vasquez; sound designer – Christopher Kriz; production manager – Laura Eilers; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey*

THE VENUE: The location of Peninsula Players Theatre’s Theatre in a Garden is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. Flowers and other decorative foliage grace footpaths that weave through the grounds. Driving along Peninsula Players Road and passing farms and trees, the thought may occur: “This theater is in an unusual place.” The 621-seat theater house features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wooden slats of the side walls are rolled open to the outside. For cool fall nights, the theater floor is equipped with radiant heating for comfort. While the company dates back 81 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure, which got wobbly with age. The location on the shores of Green Bay provides playgoers with pre-show picnicking and viewing the sunset. Here’s a theatrical rarity: The Players’ website provides sunset times.

Contact me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air Critic at Large editions on WFRV at 6:20 a.m. Sundays.

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