

39 STEPS TO AN UNFORGETTABLE NIGHT

Kevin Gover has a wonderful Burns Night in West Meon - unexpected events and all

THE 39 STEPS

West Meon Theatre - Village Hall
25 January 2019

AHA! Burns Night! What an apt evening then to be whisked off to the Highlands in this comedy version of the Hitchcock film/John Buchan novel.

Murder, attempted murder, alleged spies, laughs galore – and even an unexpected appearance from the South Central Ambulance Service all played a part in this splendid evening.

As you will know from one of my reviews a few years ago, the Cheriton Players are ever so slightly bonkers. But team up a couple of their leading lights with those of the West Meon Theatre and they're all absolutely barking mad.

The Director Helena Gomm told me that those who live outside the Village Hall had never heard such raucous laughter from there before.

This boy-meets-girl-is-he-a-spy-or-not story has plenty of dark and poignant moments. But there are plenty of laughs every minute too as our hero/villain Richard Hannay (Charlie Hellard) goes on the run to Scotland after being accused of murder in Portland Place.

I loved 'Mr Memory' – thank youooooooo. I loved how the men (David Craddock, Stuart Forsyth and Glynn Williams) went in and out of 50 characters in as many minutes.

There were also very strong performances from Fi Beresford and Becky James who are both well-known to West Meon audiences.

I also loved the scenes on the 'train' – do you remember how the old compartments were so small that you were in everyone's face the moment you all stood up? Superb!

There were running jokes throughout, particularly with the street light (below), escaping through window panes, and even a ventriloquist's dummy (David Craddock) which had us all laughing our backsides off.



Splendid: The cast creating laughs galore, and (right) Director Helena Gomm celebrates
Images: Craig Robertson

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Everyone carried on, picking up from the moment the show stopped

It's amazing what you can do with a ladder – how you can even make it look like the front end of a biplane.

We had back projected images of the police chase... and four chairs became a car... and a sheep. All very inventive.

Then we had an unexpected scenario where a member of the audience became ill and the whole thing ground to a halt for 40 minutes.

It was certainly the first "Is there a doctor in the house?" moment for many of us there, and everyone acted calm and professionally. For those of you who were understandably worried, the director Helena Gomm reported: "Last night's casualty was monitored in the ambulance for several hours and then discharged. He spent the night with his family and went home this morning. I went round to see his daughter and she says he is fine and she will pass on everyone's best wishes."

I'm sure that everyone there will applaud the speed with which the South Central Ambulance Service got there and then set up a mini-hospital in the car park.

How everyone carried on (to huge applause) to finish, picking up from the moment the show stopped was incredible.

A great show – which did go on!
Thank youooooooo...

BEHIND THE SCENES

Bringing ideas to the stage, and how the show must go on!

AND so it did - you'll read above about how the production of *The 39 Steps* at West Meon Village Hall unexpectedly ground to a halt due to illness.

It could happen to anyone, and professional help was soon on hand. But what's it like when something like that happens? Director Helena Gomm talks about how everyone tried to pick themselves up and carry on.

Helena: I thought the actors were really professional, in a way that they were able to pick it up from where they left off and just keep going with the same energy and commitment that they'd shown in the first half. So I was absolutely thrilled. They are super, super professionals.

Kevin: Up until that happened, it was so funny, I was laughing my backside off! What makes the play so funny, do you think?

Helena: I think it's a kind of conspiracy between the audience and the actors on stage, that none of this should really be possible. There's the Forth Bridge, a train chase, a plane crash, there's yomping across the Moors being chased by blood hounds. All of which you'd be hard pushed to do on the London stage,



let alone in a small Hampshire village hall. So I think it's a collusion, between the actors and the audience. We're all in on the joke! And so, okay, how are they going to pull this off? How are they going to do that? And by doing that, the audience has been very supportive. They've been pushing us along the way, and I think that really... they come prepared to laugh.

Some of the front of house staff said they'd never heard so much laughter coming out of the hall. They couldn't wait to see what it is that's making the audience laugh. They haven't been sneaking in the back, they don't know what's going on.

Kevin: And it's simple things, isn't it? Like ladders being held horizontally.

Helena: Yes! You can do so much with ladders. All sorts of things. I like to add little props – did you notice the Sheriff's tea cosy? And tartan bagpipes. It took a while to knit that! But I think it's worth it, even for a 30 second gag. I think that's what my policy throughout was. Yeah, it's only a 30 second gag but it's worth doing. And because they are a really good acting team, you can have fun. With people who are slow to learn

their lines or just don't get it, you're right up until the dress rehearsal, you're just labouring the lines and you're trying to get them to get it. But when they get it from the word go and they know what you're aiming at, then you can have a lot of fun because you can start introducing extra bits for them to deal with, and say it'll be nice if you did this.

I have to say that they have come up with a lot of ideas themselves. They are very inventive, they ask if we can try doing this. I say, if it works it works. Or "can I wear this?", yeah if you can get it off in time to get the next costume on, I hadn't thought about that. They have contributed an awful lot themselves.

Kevin: You bought Cheriton and West Meon actors together...

Helena: I did.

Kevin: Did you deliberately want to do that? How did this work?

Helena: I did, yes. It worked very well. Three of them act regularly on the Cheriton stage. Of those, one of them actually lives in West Meon. He acts for everyone! I think it's nice to cross pollinate occasionally. I think it was nice

for the Cheriton people to see a different way of doing it and have a bigger stage and to have better access.

I often think in Cheriton productions, the sofa is actually one of the characters! On our set, you'll notice it was all furniture on castors which got wheeled in and wheeled off. I like the fact you could use the same piece several times. Hannay's chair at the beginning is also the chair he sleeps in at the crofter's cottage, and it's also the chair that the professor comes in on. The hotel reception desk was also the lectern for the political rally. It's actually quite a challenge and quite a joy to find multiple uses for all of the bits of kit we've got. And we have got some things which we don't need, we could have something smaller here or some things aren't actually adding anything except an enormous trial for the wonderful backstage people to get it on and off, so we'll axe that and get something else. It's been quite experimental!

Kevin: Well done anyway!

Helena: thank you!

Kevin: I've not laughed at anything for quite some time, you know?

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I was absolutely thrilled. They are super, super professionals