

# Irene Macdougall gives voice to the missing female characters of *The 39 Steps*

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Irene Macdougall discovered plenty of mystery when she read John Buchan's classic adventure novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Yet, despite the devil-may-care appeal of Buchan's ripping yarn concerning square-jawed hero Scot Richard Hannay's flight into international intrigue, the biggest mystery of all was that the book contained no female characters. Not one woman, it seemed, was worthy of Buchan's imagination to accompany Hannay, either as his partner-in-crime in assorted derring-do or else be his nemesis, sidekick or any other second fiddle position.

This was something even Alfred Hitchcock thought odd back in 1935 when he adapted the first of Buchan's five Richard Hannay novels for the big screen after reading it as a teenager 15 years earlier. Recognising the book's lack of a feminine touch, Hitchcock addressed the issue to the film's considerable benefit.

It was to Hitchcock's loose adaptation of Buchan's story that Macdougall turned to when looking at possibilities for **Dundee** Rep's community tour. As a long-standing member of the Rep's acting ensemble, Macdougall was aware more than most of the need for

something portable, but which could still employ the full range of a mixed gender ensemble.

It was then that she chanced upon American writer Joe Landry's stage version of the story, which presents it as a live 1940s style radio play, with five actors playing all the parts as well as becoming Foley artists to provide assorted sound effects. Macdougall had struck gold.

"The book is a real boy's own type of novel, with no women in it at all, but it's the Hitchcock adaptation that people largely remember," she says. "He turned one male character into a woman as well as giving Hannay a love interest, and that made for a much more interesting proposition.

"I think Hitchcock's film is very important in terms of perceptions of the story. That's the story everyone remembers, and the film with Kenneth More that came out later changed things slightly again, and then there was another film of it with Robert Powell. The only time the book's been done faithfully is on the radio, and when we first started talking about doing *The 39 Steps*, there was an element of whether we should do the book or not, but in the end the way we're doing it felt like the right way."

This isn't the first time Macdougall has directed a radio-style version of a classic. In 2012, she oversaw the Rep's production of *Whisky Galore*, Compton Mackenzie's much loved tale, which had been adapted for the stage by Paul Godfrey. As with *The 39 Steps*, the show toured community venues around Dundee.

"Our audiences tended to like that," Macdougall remembers. "We've made them sit through an awful lot of very serious stuff over the years, so it's good to go with something lighter once in a while. Having said that, *Whisky Galore* was a lot of fun, but *The 39 Steps* is a different kettle of fish entirely. Where *Whisky Galore* had a lot of different characters, *The 39 Steps* is about one man on the run and the relationship he has with this woman."

Landry's take on *The 39 Steps* originally formed part of *Vintage Hitchcock*, a triple bill of work with Buchan's story seen alongside *The Lodger* and *Sabotage*, and featuring renderings of vintage commercials to give extra added authenticity. Landry has pulled off a similar trick with several big screen classics, including *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St Louis*. He has also done a live radio version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, as well as one of H.G. Wells' classic science-fiction novel, *War of the Worlds*. This was inspired by and included the infamous 1938 radio version that sent shockwaves across America. Reimagined as if being presented during the early days of BBC **Scotland**, Macdougall's production of *The 39 Steps* is "like a little time capsule."

Landry's staging of Hitchcock's take on Buchan's story isn't the only version it's been seen in. In 1995, a four-actor version was written by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon for a production at the Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond, Yorkshire, which toured village halls in the north of England. The conceit of such a pocket-sized version was that it was played as if thrown together by a **theatre** company with no money. While such a suggestion might not have been far from the truth, the show was played as a comic pastiche.

A decade later, Patrick Barlow rewrote the script for a new production at West Yorkshire Playhouse, before one-time Citizens Theatre actress Maria Aitken directed its London premiere at the Tricycle Theatre. Aitken's production went on to become a hit in the West

End and on Broadway.

“We looked at doing Patrick Barlow’s version,” says Macdougall, “but in the end we wanted to use more actors than it allows for. The whole fun of it is that it’s played by a deliberately small cast, whereas what we’re doing is something different.”

Macdougall’s production of *The 39 Steps* hits the road just as the second season under artistic director Andrew Panton has been announced. This will open at the end of August with *The Yellow on the Broom*, Anne Downie’s adaptation of Betsy Whyte’s novel. It will be followed in October by a revival of Gregory Burke’s sensational debut play, *Gagarin Way*, in a new production by Cora Bissett.

A new version of *The Snow Queen* co-commissioned with the Citizens Theatre Glasgow and penned by Scott Gilmour and Claire McKenzie, aka Noisemaker, will form the Rep’s Christmas show. For one night only, Gilmour and McKenzie will also premiere *Hi, My Name is Ben*, a new musical developed with the Scottish Ensemble.

In 2019, former Dundee Rep artistic director Jemima Levick will return to oversee a new production of Arthur Miller’s play, *All My Sons*. There will also be a full programme by Scottish Dance Theatre, as well as a still to be announced community tour this time next year.

Beyond the ensemble company’s regular programme, the season’s potentially most intriguing proposition is *Rep Stripped*, a new platform for artists at all levels to present still developing work in a series of readings, scratch performances and other work-in-progress type displays. Whether such an initiative will have any long-term impact on Dundee Rep’s programming in a way that might filter into the community tour remains to be seen. What is certain is that the evergreen appeal of a title like *The 39 Steps* is still intact, and that seeing it done in such an intimate fashion as with Macdougall’s production should transcend the novelty value of its radio-play rendering to make for a very busy evening.

“By having the actors create all the sounds as part of the play, there’s a visual aspect to it as well,” says Macdougall. “It’s slightly less obvious than in *Whisky Galore*, but there are slamming doors, there are bells, and there are whistles.”

*The 39 Steps: A Live Radio Play*, The Crescent, Whitfield, tonight; Finmill Community Centre, tomorrow; Murthly Village Hall, Saturday; Brechin Community Campus, June 12; Ardler Community Centre, June 13; Dibble Tree Theatre, Carnoustie, June 14; Menzieshill Community Centre, June 15; Rio Community Centre, Newport, June 16; Kirriemuir Town Hall, June 19; Forfar Reid Hall, June 20; Maxwell Centre, Hilltown, June 21; Douglas Community Centre, June 22; Eassie and Nevay Hall, June 23.

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