

PRESS RELEASE

*Before Bond there was Hannay...Richard Hannay.*

## THE 39 STEPS

on MASTERPIECE Classic

Hosted By Laura Linney

Sunday, February 28, 2010 at 9pm ET on PBS

A man on the run. An imminent disaster. Murder. Betrayal. And a secret code that explains it all. Sound familiar? That's because countless authors know a good thing when they see it and have lifted the plot of the granddaddy of all spy thrillers, *The 39 Steps* by John Buchan—now appearing in an all-new, riveting and romantic adaptation on MASTERPIECE Classic, airing Sunday, February 28, 2010, 9 to 10:30pm on PBS (check local listings).

Rupert Penry-Jones (*Persuasion*) stars as the suave, relentlessly-pursued Richard Hannay, an ex-spy trying to mind his own business in the tense weeks before the outbreak of World War I. His only problem: the British police want to hang him for a murder he didn't commit, and German agents aim to shoot him first.

*The Daily Record* (Scotland) called Penry-Jones's cool but kinetic performance "as good an audition as you are ever likely to see for an actor with ambitions to play James Bond."

Other UK critics were equally spellbound, praising the film as "a bracing thriller" (*Independent*) and "a rip-roaring yarn, packed with an obligatory German castle and even a U-boat surfacing in a loch" (*Leicester Mercury*).

Penry-Jones is joined by Lydia Leonard (*Rome*) as suffragette Victoria Sinclair, Hannay's unlikely accomplice in a frantic quest to piece together a plot revealed by a spy (Eddie Marsan, *Little Dorrit*) who drops dead in Hannay's apartment after he hands over a coded notebook holding a dark secret.

Also appearing are David Haig (*My Boy Jack*) as Victoria's uncle, British defense advisor Sir George Sinclair, and Patrick Malahide (*Brideshead Revisited*) as the sinister Professor Fisher, who in a typical exchange threatens to pull out Victoria's fingernails one by one.

Hannay and Victoria meet in Scotland, when he stumbles in front of her car while fleeing from bloodhounds and a murderous biplane. In a classic scene of mistaken identity, she and her brother (Patrick Kennedy, *Bleak House*) take him for a visiting politician they are on their way to pick up. They transport him to a rally where he gives the speech of his life.

And things only get more complicated from there...

Written in the depth of World War I by British public servant John Buchan (later to become Governor General of Canada), *The 39 Steps* was eagerly read by soldiers in the trenches, and since then has been adapted several times for screen, most famously by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935. (A stage adaptation of Hitchcock's *39 Steps* is currently on Broadway).

Hitchcock added several plot devices not in the book, notably scenes with "Mr. Memory," and he went on to recycle elements of Buchan's story in *North by Northwest*, such as the pursuit of the hero by a low-flying airplane. The Master of Suspense also translated *The 39 Steps* from its anxious summer-of-1914 setting to the more vaguely threatening 1930s.

But MASTERPIECE Classic restores *The 39 Steps* to its uniquely menacing backdrop involving the run-up to World War I, with German spies operating in Britain and the country's survival at stake. Hannay, too, has been recast to fit Buchan's original mold of a former intelligence operative from the colonies, detached from life and at loose ends, until an extraordinary sequence of events takes control.

In this gripping new adaptation—called "the closest to the original and by far and away the most convincing" by the London *Times*—all that's been added are a few classy props, a feisty love interest, and a certain double "007" ambience.

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*The 39 Steps* was produced by the BBC and is presented on PBS by WGBH Boston. The director is James Hawes (*Doctor Who*). The producer is Lynn Horsford. The screenplay is by Lizzie Mickery from the book by John Buchan.

MASTERPIECE is presented on PBS by WGBH Boston. Rebecca Eaton is executive producer. Funding for the series is provided by public television viewers. Laura Linney is the host of MASTERPIECE Classic.

For a limited time beginning March 1, 2010 *The 39 Steps* will be available to view online at [pbs.org/masterpiece](http://pbs.org/masterpiece).

[pbs.org/masterpiece](http://pbs.org/masterpiece)

Online press materials available at [pbs.org/pressroom](http://pbs.org/pressroom) and [pressroom.wgbh.org](http://pressroom.wgbh.org)

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