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PERFORMING ARTS

Innovative and practical

Designers ensure '39 Steps' cast dress for successful quick changes.



PHOTO BY KEVIN BERNE

The actors in 'The 39 Steps'—Cassidy Brown, left, Ron Campbell, Annie Abrams and Lance Gardner—each play dozens of roles, and make dozens of costume changes, in the Hitchcock-inspired farce, presented by Theatre-Works Silicon Valley Aug. 21-Sept. 15 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

THEATER



PHOTO BY KEVIN BERNE

Costume designer Cathleen Edwards made paper dolls to help her create distinct looks for the dozens of comic characters played by Cassidy Brown, right, and Ron Campbell, second from left, in "The 39 Steps," presented by TheatreWorks Silicon Valley through Sept. 15 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

Change is constant for 'The 39 Steps'

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As with any play worthy of being called a farce, "The 39 Steps" relies on quick takes and physical humor for laughs. With a cast of four playing dozens of roles in the show, whose script by Patrick Barlow is based on Alfred Hitchcock's far more serious film, many of the laughs in TheatreWorks Silicon Valley's production come from the quick changes the actors must make.

These changes present a design challenge, since costumes must be easy to

throw on and off and also must adhere to the styles of 1935 Scotland, where the play is set.

"We're using every trick of the trade," says Jill Bowers, TheatreWorks costume director. "For the leading lady, who plays three different roles, we ended up making these (costumes) pretty much from scratch to get the period look with material resilient enough to hold up."

Bowers, a Sunnyvale resident, was on staff for TheatreWorks' first production of the show in 2011. The new production has a different director, Leslie Martinson, and a different

production team, including costume designer Cathleen Edwards.

"Cathleen does exquisite research and really thinks through how the action of the play relates to the costume design," Bowers says.

Edwards had to think outside the box to tackle the show's costume design. Instead of making dozens of drawings, she came up with a base costume for Cassidy Brown and Ron Campbell, who play multiple comic roles, then made paper dolls dressed in this design so she could see how other costumes fit on top of it.

"Basically, I just changed

the paper dolls' clothes until it worked," she says.

Edwards says her biggest challenge was making sure all the characters in the show have a distinct look, which was particularly difficult in sequences where the actors shift back and forth between characters in less than a minute.

"How do you come up with believable characters in so little time (between costume changes)? Sometimes it's no more than adding a coat or hat because they have seconds to do this."

This is especially true toward the end of the show, when one cast mem-

ber makes seven costume changes in about five minutes.

"There's chaos going on backstage," Edwards says. "I was very concerned with making sure this was even feasible. We actually added some costume changes, so we made it more difficult.

"It's fun but terrifying for me."

"The 39 Steps" runs through Sept. 15 at the Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. Tickets are \$30-\$100 at theatreworks.org or 650-463-1960.

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