

# Hannay get your gun

BACK in 1914 John Buchan's 39 steps led down to a German getaway boat in the English Channel. Thirty years later Hitchcock's 39 steps were revealed by Mr Memory (just before Godfrey Tearle plugged him) to be the name of a spy ring.

In Don Sharp's new film, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (Leicester Square Theatre, A) lead to the top of Big Ben, on the dial of which Richard Hannay struggles, symbolically perhaps, to hold back time. This second-hand climax recalls only too vividly the wartime comedy, *'My Learned Friend'*, where Will Hay also clung to Big Ben's minute-hand to prevent another plot to blow up Parliament.

Sharp's picture begins confidently enough with cloak-and-dagger, or rather cape-and-swordstick, stuff in a London pea-souper, as intelligence man Colonel Scudder (John Mills) evades Prussian assassins and attempts to persuade his Cabinet contacts that the Great War is about to be launched by the treacherous Boche. The fog dissipates and with it the film's tension.

The movie follows Buchan's broad outline of an innocent colonial pursued from London to Scotland and back by the cops and foreign agents, and its various Hitchcockian borrowings come from the Master's Buchanesque American thriller *'North By North West'*, not from his brilliant pre-war version of *'The 39 Steps'*. The chief heavy, David Warner, and his henchmen are modelled on James Mason and his thugs, for instance; there's an aerial attack on the hero in the deserted countryside, and an amusing scene featuring a heavily drugged Hannay in a runaway wheel-chair that recalls Cary Grant's drunk-driving sequence.

But Sharp's direction has none of Hitchcock's bravura and Michael Robson's thin script has ironed out all of Buchan's quirkiness and injected commonplace clichés like 'I can't believe this is happening to me,' 'You haven't a moment to lose' and 'You look breathtaking.' Some trouble, too, derives from the casting of the

## Cinema

### PHILIP FRENCH on the new '39 Steps.'

recent TV version of *'The Three Hostages'*.

But what this amiable, aimless picture really lacks, and the same was true of Don Sharp's pallid remake of *'The Four Feathers'* earlier this year, is any feeling for its period or any attitude towards its hero. It needed the combination of criticism and affection, together with a sure sense of style, that *Frederic Raphael*, *John Prebble* and *Tom Sharpe* brought to their television adaptations of *Geoffrey Household*, *Buchan* and *Dornford Yates*, that *Mark Shivas* produced as an informal Clubland Hero trilogy for BBC2.

*Piranha* (General Release, X) is, as *S. J. Perelman* once put it, a horse of a different choler. It's by 'Them' out of 'Jaws' and wears the bloodshot silks of *Roger Corman's* exploitation stables. The monsters that threaten the world here are shoals of man-eating piranha fish, released from a long-forgotten



Robert Powell as Hannay in *'The 39 Steps'*.

Government research station in the backwoods of Texas by a prying female and her boozey accomplice. He is played by *Bradford Dillman*, who gets the B-movie roles *Bruce Dern* is now too proud and rich to accept, and has the inevitable line: 'Let's get out of here, this place gives me the creeps.'

in an airport lounge; TV carries nothing but horror movies. His gesture towards women's lib is to provide the movie with a mad lady scientist played by horror-pic queen *Barbara Steele*.

But his real purpose is misanthropic mayhem; people are maimed and butchered in unprecedented numbers, and the picture ends with the suggestion that having gone through the rivers the piranha will the multitudinous seas incarnadine. However, the ways in which folk can perish in water, and the number of limbs they can lose, are not infinite.

Sadly the ideal circumstances for viewing *'Piranha'* are not readily available in this country—to wit, from behind a windscreen at a drive-in with one arm wrapped around a girl (or guy) and the other clutching a can of beer.

*Krzysztof Zanussi* is the *C. P. Snow* of the Eastern European cinema. His pictures are about power-seeking and professional politics among intellectuals in academic institutions, and he knows whereof he writes—he was trained as a physicist at Warsaw and a philosopher in Cracow.

His last and best movie, *'Illumination'*, about the education of a physicist, did something rare in the cinema—it conveyed the precise feeling of what it's like to be involved in complex academic study and prolonged intellectual inquiry. His new one, *Camouflage* (*Paris Pullman*, AA), is an account of the tensions between the faculty and students at a summer school in linguistics being held at a country house in the Polish provinces.

It centres on a cynical middle-aged professor educating an idealistic, slightly priggish junior colleague. While their dialogues are cleverly written, they're over-extended and rather obvious in tone, and lead to a clumsy melodramatic climax in which the older man drags the other quite literally down to his own level in the mud. The film's real interest, and it is considerable, resides in the incidental observations. There's an acid portrait of a British female student on the make, using