**Explain how two or more performers used performance skills to bring their characters to life on stage at particular moments in one live production that you have seen and assess their performance**

The production I am choosing to assess is The 39 Steps which I went to see on the 14th March 2013 at the Criterion theatre, written by Patrick Barlow directed by Maria Aitkin. The actors that I shall focus on are Jennifer Bryden who played the roles of Anabella Schmidt and Pamela and Adam Jackson-Smith who played the role of Richard Hannay. The Thirty Nine Steps in brief is about a man called Richard Hannay who becomes involved in some sort of national espionage/intrigue and goes on a journey to clear his name of murder. This production was done with a hint of meta-theatre about it (the actors were nearly always aware of, and involved, the audience) and I will choose to talk mainly about the farcical nature of the production, although there are elements of poor theatre and Brecthian elements included as well. The play is set in the 1930s and uses a small ensemble of four actors who play many stereotypical characters, such as Richard Hannay: the English gent, and Anabella Schmidt: the mysterious German spy.

Both actors effectively brought their characters to life in the scene in which Anabella is stabbed to death with a knife by farcically portraying her final moments with Richard Hannay. Jennifer Bryden enters with a rigid back and her body always faced toward the audience to hide the fact that she had a knife in her back. She staggered towards Hannay with a pained face with half closed eyes and teeth bared in a grimace. Because of this body language she is consequently more open to Hannay and is more accommodating to him; this then creates humour for the audience and brings Anabella to life because Hannay assumes this to be a sexual advance on Anabella’s part and then she screams and collapses on him. On the line “Alt-na-Shellac!” she begins to thrust up and down on him quickly and forcefully and makes inappropriate noises. This is the most lively point for the character of Anabella because this creates a farcical and comedic atmosphere for the audience because not only is it an inappropriate action but it plays on the audience’s expectations of what was going to happen before she fell on him. Because the nature of Anabella’s character being very blunt and straightforward Hannay, being the reserved yet sexually repressed British gent that he is, can hardly be blamed for expecting something else to happen as a result of Anabella’s actions, given that she enters saying “Richard! Richard!” with a kind of desperate longing in her voice. This, coupled with Hannay’s expectant guise is incredibly humorous and therefore vibrant and lively, because the audience had been somewhat seduced by Anabella’s earlier flirtation with Hannay as well.

Jackson-Smith also brought his character to life in this scene mainly by being extremely awkward underneath Anabella’s death throes and having very little response to having someone just dying on him. At the beginning of the scene Anabella approaches him with a husky voice, and thus Hannay assumes that this will be an intimate moment between the two of them. He brings his character to life for the audience by leaning towards her expectantly and with a passion filled face, ie: eyes barely open, mouth open as if expecting a kiss, and he had a very quiet and anticipating voice. He takes quick breaths (as if his heart is beating faster) and speaks in a breathless and desperate tone. He even goes so far as to physically push himself up from the chair in order to try and kiss her, which again is funny for the audience to see him so eager. After Anabella falls on him his facial expressions and body language completely changes and this sudden contrast given the assumed nature of the scene before this moment both brings Hannay alive and creates lots of humour for the audience. When she falls from him, his face changes to wide eyed and mouth gaping open in shock and he jumps slightly in his chair, again showing his surprise. On the line “Golly” he goes back to having very little shock and surprise and this therefore shows the pure British stiff upper lip that is being conveyed in the play as a comedic message. He says this with only raised eyebrows and a tone of mild surprise which is much less shock than one would expect given he has just had someone die on him. The most comedic part of this scene is also when the character of Hannay is best brought to life because due to Anabella’s dead weight on him, he is unable to rise from the armchair, so he must struggle out underneath her. made this comical by taking a lot of effort to extricate himself and he showed this by flailing his limbs wildly and jerking his legs around frantically in order to try and escape, even getting stuck at one point which further added to the hilarity of the situation. What makes this particular scene so funny is, because he is introduced to us as being so stereotypically British and reserved, so we hardly expect him to act so stupidly and all preconceptions of him being distinguished are completely subverted by his very base and comedic movements. After escaping from Anabella, as is typical of Jackson-Smith’s portrayal of Hannay, he again has very little reaction to his current predicament apart from taking a drag from his pipe, one of his idiosyncrasies that he used throughout.

Another scene where both actors were particularly effective in conveying farce in the performance is during Hannay and Pamela’s exchange during their moments in the McGarigles’ hotel room when they are handcuffed to each other. On the line, “and my stockings” Jennifer Bryden (now playing Pamela, a character rather like a female version of Hannay who is very uptight and reserved – signified by her very tight clothing and hair always up in a tight bun – who is completely different to Anabella through Bryden’ portrayal. She holds herself much more upright and is always attempting to distance herself from Jackson-Smith as much as possible which is essentially the opposite of the sensual, forward Anabella. A very successful multi-role by Bryden) moves her hand across to remove her stockings, maintaining her uptight facial expression (pursed lips and head held up, as if looking down on someone) and hair all tightly done up, but due to the handcuff on her wrist Hannay’s hand falls onto her thigh. Her facial expression changes to one of shock with wide eyes and mouth open because she did not expect it and this is then comical because she directs this face purposefully at the audience, breaking the fourth wall, and involving them directly, thus bringing her character to life. What she also does very well in a different way is to take off the stockings in an accidentally seductive way, and this is done to highlight the theme throughout the play of British sexual repression that Patrick Barlow wanted to highlight. What she does is to take off the stocking very slowly but again, due to Hannay’s hand being cuffed to her wrist , his hand ends up sliding down her leg and the atmosphere becomes filled with awkwardness with an undercurrent of sexual tension (which Bryden then mirrors with her body by stiffening her limbs and back).

Additionally, Jackson-Smith is, in my opinion at his funniest here because of his facial expressions coupled with the aforementioned tense/sexual aura. When his hand lands upon Pamela’s thigh his face becomes, like hers, one of shock except his face changes to a raised eyebrow and he becomes very thin lipped (given his reserved nature the audience by this point has become accustomed to him not having much reaction to things). This, coupled with Pamela’s facial expression only adds to the hilarity of the situation. What he also does to bring his character to life is to actually be quite charming towards Pamela so that the audience actually feel a connection with him. What he does to convey this is to be close to her – even with the handcuffs on he manages to make an effort to be close to her – and to have prolonged eye contact with her whenever she is talking. Occasionally he would mess up his words intentionally in order to show that he is feeling nervous in his current situation: handcuffed to a beautiful woman, which in turn endears him to the audience and makes him more than something for the audience to laugh at, but makes him become a character that is much more relatable and warm. One particular line where this is most prominent is when he says the line: “would you like your milk now?” He says this with genuine geniality with a smile on his face and a light tone, offering her the milk casually, rather than thrusting it at her (which he would be well entitled to do). This act of kindness returns the audience’s opinion of him back to the typical English gent that they have come to know and understand and therefore their outlook on him improves considerably, it’s genuinely quite a heart-warming moment.

In conclusion then, both actors use a wide range of performance skills, ranging from facial expression to idiosyncrasies to physical movement and even to breathing. Even when they are motionless they always managed to convey something about their character to the audience, and that, in my opinion, is what truly brings them to life.

33/50

The bit with Pamela and the stockings is very clear; the others are less detailed in terms of acting skills. This is really long now; you’d never be able to write at this length in the exam.

The main issue is the clarity lost by covering what one actor does and then the other; you would have greater success to cover them both together.

Explaining the multi- role playing is very successful for you.