



DOUBLE INDEMNITY: A THRILLER ON EVERY LEVEL

By Lynn Ruth Miller

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San Jose Rep presents.....

DOUBLE INDEMNITY

By James Cain

Adapted by David Pichette & R. Hamilton Wright

Directed by Kurt Beattie



DOUBLE INDEMNITY, now playing at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, is based on a 1936 serialized novella by James M. Cain, in which a woman and her lover conspire to murder her husband for the insurance money. In 1944, the year after the story was published in a collection by Cain, Billy Wilder made it into a very famous movie starring Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson; Raymond Chandler shared the writing credit with Wilder. The movie rather than the novel has lasted in the public consciousness. **DOUBLE INDEMNITY** was not made into a stage play until David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright adapted it last year for Seattle's ACT (A Contemporary Theatre); the current San Jose run is a co-production with Seattle.

Pichette and Hamilton based their adaptation on the novella rather than the movie. The result is a spare, stylized work that communicates the spirit of *noir* better than any recreation of the movie could have done. It comes to the stage as a taut, streamlined chamber piece (five actors play ten roles, compared to 30 credited roles in the screenplay), deliberately simple on the surface but much deeper than it looks at first. Hamilton said that **DOUBLE INDEMNITY**

reads as if Dostoyevsky "decided to write a leaner, meaner little book in English."

Director Kurt Beattie has kept this concept clearly in mind, and the result is a tight and compelling evening of *noir* entertainment. The audience is kept continually involved, even though everyone knows the story cannot end well. As the apparently perfect crime first evolves and then unravels, we identify with the very flawed, indeed wicked, characters – this is the mark of *noir*, which approaches a mystery from the viewpoint of the participants rather than that of an outside detective. Rooting for murderers is a walk on the wild side for us, a thrill that is part of the excitement of the genre.

Beattie (and Cain) are helped by a cast that is always competent and sometimes outstanding. John Boger has many excellent as the insurance salesman drawn into Carrie Paff's murderous plot. It is sometimes deliberately ambiguous just whose plot this is. Boger's intentionally subdued affect is part of the style, and strangely helps rather than inhibits his communication of unspoken passion. Richard Ziman is terrific as the doomed husband, and extra-terrific as the insurance man who tries to solve the crime. Mark Anderson Phillips takes three small roles and makes something memorable out of each of them.

Double Indemnity is effectively staged. Thomas Lynch's set provides many startling and ingenious effects while staying within the production's minimalist tone. Its details, and Annie Smart's costumes, help keep the action believably in its period, as does a modest amount of actual smoking, without which *noir* is barely *gris*.

Cain wrote, in the preface to his novel *The Butterfly* (1947), "I think my stories have some quality of the opening of a forbidden box, and that it is this, rather than violence, sex, or any of the things usually cited by way of explanation, that gives them the drive so often noted." This is certainly true of **DOUBLE INDEMNITY**, and the San Jose Rep makes opening that box very pleasurable indeed.

DOUBLE INDEMNITY plays at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, through February 5. Evening performances are at 7:30 on Tuesday and Wednesday and 8:00 on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; matinees at are 11:00 AM (on Wednesday January 25th only), 3:00 on Saturdays and 2:00 on Sundays. Tickets can be ordered from the theatre's website at www.sjrep.com. Discounts are available for students, teachers and seniors.