

## 'Double Indemnity' review: Can't ensure suspense

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Chris Bennion / Chris Bennion

Housewife Phyllis Nirlinger (Carrie Paff) flirts beguilingly with insurance salesman Walter Huff (John Bogar) in San Jose Rep's "Double Indemnity."



**Double Indemnity:** Drama. Adapted by David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright from the novel by James M. Cain. Directed by Kurt Beattie. Through Feb. 5. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio. Two hours, 10 minutes. \$29-\$74. (408) 367-7255. [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).

The wheels of justice not only grind slowly but also tend to give way to corporate need and other prerogatives in the noir world of "Double Indemnity." That much comes across, but other aspects may be more confusing in the fitfully compelling new stage adaptation of the noir classic at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

Fans of the Billy Wilder movie may find themselves a little at sea, particularly in the shipboard scenes, and miss the crisp Wilder-Raymond Chandler dialogue. That's because adapters David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright are working not from the 1944 screenplay but from James M. Cain's serialized 1935 novel. The story and dialogue stick more closely to the original.

But some elements of the script and Kurt Beattie's handsome world-premiere staging add to the confusion as well, not always in ways that enhance intrigue or suspense. A co-production with Seattle's ACT (A Contemporary Theatre) - where it originated (and where Beattie is artistic director) - the play stumbles in setting up its plot to kill a husband for his insurance money, moves sure-handedly through some of its execution and repercussions but shortchanges other aspects.

It's a tale told, as usual, in flashback by the wounded insurance salesman Walter Huff (John Bogar). Thomas Lynch's sets open up fish-eye style and revolve insidiously in the shadowy, noir lights of Rick Paulsen, to Adam Stern's aptly ominous score. Carrie Paff is every inch the dangerous femme fatale, seductively svelte in Annie Smart's period costumes, with a winning innocence cloaking her deadly designs.

That innocence is a bit too convincing early on. Though Paff's housewife Phyllis Nirlinger flirts enticingly with Bogar's street-wise Huff, the salesman doesn't generate any electricity in response. As written and performed, his actions make it seem as if he's less the passion-blinded co-conspirator than a heartless womanizer who plants the murder plot in her head.

The story and supporting performances clarify the plot to a great extent, particularly Richard Ziman's wariness as the doomed husband and craftily homespun doggedness as crack claims investigator Keyes. Jessica Martin is a delight as Phyllis' wayward, suspicious stepdaughter, and Mark Anderson Phillips is ominously creepy as her lover, blindly arrogant as Huff's boss and comically garrulous as an interloper who almost foils the plot.

Some of Pichette and Wright's alterations set up themes and plot developments very nicely. Other elements don't add up as well, such as a confusing love-wrestle with a knife and a death fixation that cheapens the intrigue. As beautifully as some of it works, this thriller is less hard-boiled than half-baked.

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