

Review: 'Double Indemnity' at the San Jose Rep

By Charlie McCollum

01/19/2012

Any short list of great American film noir has to start with 1944's "Double Indemnity." With Barbara Stanwyck as femme fatale and Fred MacMurray as the smitten insurance man giving indelible performances, the Billy Wilder masterpiece was caustic, sex-drenched and utterly amoral -- all the while somehow skirting the restrictions of the Hays Code that then governed Hollywood.

But before there was the movie version -- co-written by Wilder and Raymond Chandler -- there was James M. Cain's original 1935 novella. Cain could certainly spin a dark murder yarn (he also wrote "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Mildred Pierce"), but his florid prose works far better on the page than it does read aloud.

In fact, Chandler was originally hired to craft a script using large chunks of the original dialogue. He eventually convinced Wilder to all but start from scratch, because Cain's words simply didn't sound right coming from the mouths of real people.

Perhaps the folks behind the beautifully crafted but fundamentally flawed stage version of "Double Indemnity" -- now at San Jose Rep through Feb. 5 -- should have paid attention to what Chandler said more than six decades ago.

The basic and very compelling plot of Cain's novella remains intact: Black widow Phyllis Nirlinger entices more than willing insurance salesman Walter Huff to kill her husband for his life insurance. So willing is the patsy that he actually concocts the scheme. Eventually, things unravel as the killers turn on each other, and there is an ending even more dark (and more surreal) than the film's climax.

But co-writers David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright, who adapted "Indemnity" for this coproduction by the Rep and Seattle's A Contemporary Theatre, rely almost exclusively on Cain's original dialogue. As a result, there is no hint of the crackling Wilder-Chandler lines from the movie, and at times, the prose gets so purple that it feels like a pulp fiction parody.

Worse, it commits an unforgivable crime for a suspense thriller: It drags.

Some scenes really carry a punch, most notably the early verbal dances with Phyllis and Walter and a segment in the second act where insurance men discuss the perfect crime, which borders on a 1940s version of David Mamet. But there are not enough of those moments to keep audience members from checking their watches -- which was done with regularity on Wednesday's opening night.

All of this is not to say that the writers simply should have transferred the film to the stage. Give them credit for going back to the source material and being true to Cain's darker vision. But they don't seem to grasp just how sluggish Cain's dialogue can be, and they bring nothing in terms of pacing to the work.



Carrie Paff and John Bogar in San Jose Rep's Double Indemnity. Photographer: Chris Bennion (Chris Bennion)

All of which is too bad because there is quite a bit to admire in this "Double Indemnity."

Director Kurt Beattie, A Contemporary Theatre's artistic director, has concocted a rich production. He makes excellent use of an extraordinary set by scenic designer Thomas Lynch, which uses a rotating stage and sliding panels to move from scene to scene. The period costuming by Annie Smart is pitch-perfect, the lighting by Rick Paulsen is a smart mix of classic noir and German Expressionism, and there's some very effective sound design by Brendan Patrick Hogan.

Then there's the cast, which manages to make portions of the play work even when they shouldn't.

Carrie Paff really shines as Phyllis. It's a measure of just how good she is that, when she disappears for large chunks of the second act, you really miss her. She oozes sex and duplicity and, more importantly, conveys the insanity that lies just below the surface of this woman.

John Bogar has to do a lot of the heavy lifting as Huff (he's on stage for the whole show), and he does it well. Mark Anderson Phillips brings a lot to a series of supporting roles, particularly one as a creepy insurance executive.

Richard Ziman is effective as both the murder victim and as Barton Keyes, the insurance adjuster who eventually figures out the how, if not immediately the who, of the crime. And Jessica Martin has her moments as Lola, Phyllis' stepdaughter.

In the end, though, this "Double Indemnity" is a case of a formidable piece of material simply defying an easy transfer to the stage. Like the murder plot itself, it eventually goes awry.

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By David Pichette and
R. Hamilton Wright
From the novella by James M. Cain

Through: Feb. 5

Where: San Jose Rep, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Running time: 2 hours (one intermission)

Tickets: \$29-\$74, 408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com