

## Review: Dangerous curves engulf San Jose Rep's 'Double Indemnity'



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Phyllis Nirlinger (Carrie Paff) ponders the fate of her husband while Walter Huff (John Bogar) looks on in "Double Indemnity," playing through Feb. 5th at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

Credits: Chris Bennion

### Rating for Double Indemnity:



Walter Huff has a very pragmatic view on insurance companies, and the logic that sits on two sides of fence – "Insurance is gambling - you bet that your house will burn down, and the companies bet it won't."

In a thrilling new show at San Jose Repertory Theatre, Huff (John Bogar) brings his knowledge as an insurance man to create a perfect murder in James Cain's classic film noir thriller "*Double Indemnity*," a co-production with Seattle's A Contemporary Theatre (ACT). The show is a Shakespearean tragedy, full of seduction, passion and deception. Adapted from the movie of the same title, which premiered in 1944 and launched the film noir genre, David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright's adaptation of the film is heavy on excitement and danger, which dismisses the moral core of its principals in order to weave an exemplary tale of lust and greed. Huff is a longtime insurance salesman, and sets his sights on steamy housewife Phyllis Nirlinger (Carrie Paff), who is interested in taking out an insurance policy on her husband without his knowledge. The intention is to murder her husband (Richard Ziman) with Huff's help, and with Huff's inside knowledge of the insurance industry, they decide on a plot to make his death look like an accident, which would kick in a double indemnity on the policy. That is, doubling up what the policy would pay. In this case, Huff and Phyllis make off with a cool 50 grand.

The proposition is a thrilling one. Phyllis struts around as a vision in red with a Lady Macbeth-like aura, a seductive siren married to a veritable bore who is clearly her senior. While he heads out to Palo Alto on a train from Los Angeles to carouse with his buddy Leland Stanford, this allows the plot to thicken and go into a whole new stratosphere. While the murder plot is masterful in its execution, one thing Huff never accounted for was the fact that his colleague, insurance investigator Keyes (also played by Ziman) would see right through the plan as well. And what continues on the Rep stage is a high stakes game of poker, where Huff and Phyllis attempt to navigate this web of deceit created from their very own fingertips.

Kurt Beattie directed the show with a sharply polished brush, creating some stunning images on the canvas. You can see clearly that this show was heavy on sharp details, stressing the richness of simplicity while juxtaposing intricate details with refined, creative staging.

The color palate was wonderfully rich, heavy on reds for the inner-workings of Phyllis, whether it was cherry lips or eye-popping silks. And a nice touch was Thomas Lynch's inventive set, which created many metaphoric moments with a turntable on the stage. Whether it was a feeling that the actors could never get ahead walking against the turntable, or staying in place while situations would come at them uncontrollably, unity was definitely on full display.

The cast was very strong. With five actors playing ten roles, the actors pushed Cain's writing forward with zeal. What works so well is that Huff has a certain Richard III type quality to him, with a whole lot more self-doubt. I was reminded of Richard's opening monologue, where he speaks of the plots he has laid, and how by the end of the play, King Richard is willing to trade his entire kingdom for a simple horse. Bogar was wonderful in creating a character that is an everyman, nothing extravagant, a simple insurance salesman who is seduced by a pair of red lips. And Paff was radiant as a storyteller, consistently working each angle like the master manipulator she was. Ziman was most enjoyable as the sharp-as-a-tack investigator Keyes, who embraced the ability to piece together a mystery the way a starving dog embraces a pork chop.

*"Double Indemnity"* is a wildly entertaining, wonderfully crafted tale. And if we learn nothing from this play, we can learn this – despite all of the twists and turns of the plot, there is no turning away from a pair of red lips, and a set of dangerous curves.

## **EXAMINE IT FOR YOURSELF**

San Jose Repertory Theatre presents ***"Double Indemnity"***  
A co-production with A Contemporary Theatre of Seattle (ACT)  
Written by James M. Cain  
Adapted for the stage by David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright  
Directed by Kurt Beattie  
Through Feb. 5th  
San Jose Repertory Theatre  
101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA 95113  
Tickets range from \$17.50 - \$79  
For tickets, call (408) 367-7255 or visit the Rep's official [website](#).