



BWW Reviews: DOUBLE INDEMNITY at ACT – Almost There

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Being a fan of film-noir, I was delighted to have the opportunity to review "Double Indemnity," the final show of [A Contemporary Theatre's](#) 2011 season. Adapted from [James M. Cain's](#) 1936 novella, it's basically the same framework as his 1934 novel "The Postman Always Rings Twice." If you're unfamiliar with the storyline, I shan't spoil the fun. Each was adapted into popular film versions and "Indemnity" featured [Fred MacMurray](#) as insurance salesman Walter Neff (Huff in the novella) and [Barbara Stanwyck](#) as femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson (originally Nirlinger). What both stories offer is the point of view of the perpetrators, rather than a hard-nosed police detective (as in "Laura") or a private eye (as in "The Maltese Falcon"). Though there were certainly appealing elements in ACT's world premiere (a joint effort with San Jose Repertory Theatre), I found the production ultimately unsatisfying. Herein lies the mystery; is the culprit script, direction, or actor's choices? Let's examine the evidence.

As interloping insurance salesman Walter Huff, [John Bogar](#) is a credible anti-hero, exuding charm and deviousness in equal portions. At times, his performance is pitch-perfect, but certain critical lines were delivered almost tongue-in-cheek. One that comes to mind is "It only takes a drop of fear to curdle love into hate." Had this been said perhaps in the monotone particular to the crime genre, it would have had great effect, however the delivery was touched with too much emotion and pulled me from the moment. His best work was when interacting with others (most notably [Richard Ziman](#) as insurance investigator Keyes) but the introspective monologues needed some fine tuning.

As scheming wife Phyllis Nirlinger, Carrie Paff also had much to offer in her role. She looked dazzling in her costumes (particularly the scarlet hooded outfit) and commanded focus without uttering a word, but when she spoke, I found her delivery too measured...as if studiously cultivated from 1940s films and coming just shy of lampooning the acting styles of that time. A delivery illustrating this was the line, "Do you sell *accident* insurance, Mr. Huff?" It's true when you revisit those films, the acting is highly stylized and unbelievable by today's standards. However, for a story like this to be adapted to the stage, I feel the material needs to be treated with the same respect it was afforded in its day. It's easy with modern sensibilities to fall into the trap of nudging and winking at your audience, the inside-joke being the style of acting, but this should be resisted rather than embraced. There was more laughter occurring on opening night than nail-biting, and that's not as it should be.

[Jessica Martin](#), [Mark Anderson](#) Phillips and [Richard Ziman](#) play multiple roles in the cast and were the most successful in evoking the genre, although Martin's infatuated secretary Nettie and Phillips's Italian thug Nino tend to skirt [The Edge](#) of caricature. The best scene of the evening was Ziman in the role of insurance investigator Keyes arguing with Phillips as insurance manager Jackson over whether Mr. Nirlinger's death was a suicide or murder. All the while, Huff smokes a cigarette, watching them argue with increasing tension and anxiety as Keyes begins to figure things out. It was exactly what I was expecting of the production. The laughter from the audience was a product of the grim subject being discussed, not because a line was delivered with stagey over-emphasis.

The technical aspects of the show were truly what kept it rooted in its bleak universe. [Thomas Lynch's](#) scene design is wonderful, continuously opening, closing, revealing, concealing and rotating the various locales of the play. [Annie](#)

[Smart](#)'s costume design is a perfect representation of the "amoral Los Angeles of the 1930s," most notably in Phyllis Nirlinger's attire. Music composed by Adam Stern, lighting by Rick Paulsen and sound design by Brendan [Patrick Hogan](#) are all deliciously moody and foreboding, further heightening production values.

So back to the suspects of my disappointed reaction to the show; is the script (adapted by local theatre artists [David Pichette](#) and [R. Hamilton Wright](#)) intended to be a nudge-and-wink parody? Are certain lines written in italics to hyper-stylize their deliveries? Or was it director [Kurt Beattie](#) who felt humor needed to be employed whenever possible because of the lurid storyline? Or was it choices of the actors, fueled by a misconception of the genre? My sense was that the production didn't quite know what avenue to take. Thankfully, it didn't go the route of all-out farce (as in Seattle Repertory's "The 39 Steps"), but it had fleeting moments that strayed disturbingly in that direction.

Overall, the show needs a little finesse in order to bring it to the level it (and the material it's based on) deserves. Happily, this doesn't necessitate a complete overhaul...it's about 90% there.

"Double Indemnity" performs at ACT through November 20th. For tickets or further information, contact the ACT box office at 206-292-7676 or visit their website: www.acttheatre.org.