

Let's Talk Business

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By Kiley, Brendan, Proquest LLC

THEATER - Chekhov Meets The Office, and a New Adaptation of Double Indemnity

ACT Theatre is running a different world-premiere script about angst and bankruptcy—a new adaptation of Double Indemnity, the 1935 crime story by James M. Cain about an insurance agent who falls for a wealthy woman and conspires with her to murder her husband for the dough.

Longtime Seattle actors David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright wrote the script. (Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder previously adapted it into a cornerstone film noir in 1944.) As director Kurt Beattie points out in his program notes, Double Indemnity was radical in its time for having no good guys: A bored, lusty insurance salesman named Walter Huff gets all tangled up with the wife of an oilman, as well as her lusty daughter and her daughter's no-good boyfriend, Nino. All of the characters are self-interested jerks—though not all are homicidally self-interested. Written during the Great Depression, Double Indemnity is a moral (not economic or structural) indictment of greed. While the characters in *Suffering, Inc.* wring their hands about money, the characters in Double Indemnity reach their hands around each other's throats for it.

The adaptation is lucid, hitting all its marks about what the characters do and why they do it. As the insurance agent Huff, John Bogar glides around the stage with the casual amorality that saturates Cain's original story, successfully giving the wisenheim tone of the '30s and '40s some naturalistic ballast so he never tips over into caricature. Carrie Paff as the wife gives a similarly even-keeled performance, though she occasionally lapses into a breathy voice that seems less about the lines than about imitating femmes fatales of the 1940s. Overall, Double Indemnity is middling. It doesn't bring any new juice, fresh revelations, or tension about the source text or the film. It's just a thoroughly adequate recitation of a classic American crime thriller.