



ACT's Double Indemnity: Nerdcore Gets Lavish Treatment

By Jose A. in Arts & Entertainment

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Carrie Paff as Phyllis Nirlinger & John Bogar as Walter Huff, in ACT's Double Indemnity, which is running through this Sunday. Photo by Chris Bennion.

Let's get one question out of the way first: Does ACT's production of Double Indemnity, which is running through this weekend, count as Nerdcore Theater? The answer is a qualified yes; for while Indemnity's adaptors, David Pichette and R. Hamilton Wright, take great care to hew closer to James Cain's novel than the Raymond Chandler script for Billy Wilder's movie adaptation, one would necessarily question whether this play would exist if it weren't for the celebrated film. Pichette and Wright's decision is a shrewd one, for it would be an act of impossible hubris to try to compete with one of the Noir genre's unquestioned masters.

As we've pointed out before, Nerdcore productions run the risk of being compared to their inspirations, whether that's fair or not. The challenge, then, lies in attempting to address the changes implemented to the presentation without declaring either side a victor.

Let's begin by addressing the biggest alteration: Director Kurt Beattie and his production team provide their strongest argument for having this be presented on a stage. At times, it's a little too strong. The centerpiece here is a rotating stage with several different independent tracks, which is quite showy. It is impressive, in its way, but doesn't add much thematically to the proceedings. An argument could be made for the impact it has during a getaway sequence, but that impact is fleeting, before it becomes unintentionally comical. The remainder of the production, however, it is just a neat trick, and whether it adds or detracts from the proceedings is up to the individual.

Next is the matter of interpretation, which by its nature is subjective, and greatly depends on how familiar one is with either the novel or the movie. It would be interesting to discuss this with someone who knows nothing about the story. In broad strokes, this is a story about Walter Neff, an insurance investigator who decides to trick the system by helping Phyllis Nirlinger commit the perfect murder. In order to maximize the payout (the double indemnity mentioned in the title), he makes the death look like it took place in an unlikely scenario. In fitting with the Noir genre, these are amoral people, and so, there needs to be something accessible about them, something identifiable, in order to hook the viewer and magnify the ambiguity which is central to the genre.

The ambiguity is muted here; which isn't to say that it's absent, just not clearly evident. While Cain and Wilder's Neff is driven by boredom, it's hard to say what is behind this production's protagonist. As played by John Bogar, who gives the role a variation of the kind of guileless charm he brought to Mackie in Seattle Shakes' Threepenny Opera earlier in the year, or to Father Urbain Grandier in John Whiting's *The Devils at Aha!* lo these many years ago. It seems this Neff is scheming from the start, so that his arc goes from planning trouble to growing a conscience, instead of showing us how his existential boredom leads to the troublemaking to the conscience growing. We're not given a chance to connect with him, and so his journey takes on a certain *schadenfreude*, when we could be complicit in his actions. We should be as scared of Keyes figuring out what has transpired as Neff is, but are not. (Similar thoughts are inspired by Carrie Paff's turn as Phyllis Nirlinger.) This might be the result of adding Neff's ongoing narration to the storytelling, but it could also be the result of your correspondent's familiarity with the source material.

That said, Bogar and Paff remain eminently watchable in the lead roles, and the production is greatly aided in its presentation by its supporting cast. Jessica Martin and Mark Anderson Phillips are fun to watch as they do triple duty as a number of extranumary characters (Martin's turn as Nettie makes one wish there was more of that character interspersed throughout). And while Richard Ziman is appropriately bombastic as Nirlinger (the man who inspires the murder the story revolves around), it's his portrayal of Keyes that stands out. A co-worker at the insurance company that employs Neff, the story's moral center is housed in Keyes, an equally intelligent insurance investigator, and as a result we end up cheering him on as his determination to get closer and closer to the truth intensifies.

It's unclear whether that is intended or not, but it is entirely possible that we'll see variations on this version of the story in the decades to come. *Double Indemnity* is a co-production between ACT and the San Jose Repertory Theater; the latter of which will see a production of *Indemnity* this coming January. If it is as successful there as it has been for ACT, the odds of it living on in other theaters throughout the nation are greatly increased. And so, Nerdcore Theater becomes cemented in the grander theatrical landscape.

Through Sunday // ACT's Falls Theater, 700 Union Street // \$15 - \$37.50; ACT's Day Of Pay What You Can at the Box Office after 1:00p.m. policy is in effect

Contact the author of this article or email tips@seattlest.com with further questions, comments or tips.