

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: **Double Indemnity**

USA, 1944. Not Rated. 107 min.
Cast: Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson;
Music: Miklos Rozsa;
Cinematographer: John F. Seitz;
Screenplay: Raymond Chandler;
Producer: Buddy G. DeSylva;
Director: Billy Wilder

Double Indemnity first appeared as a story written in the 1930s by James M. Cain, author of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. When Billy Wilder made the decision to adapt *Double Indemnity*, Cain was already under contract to another studio so Raymond Chandler was brought in as a replacement. Chandler had never worked in film before and showed up drunk when he met with Wilder. Although their relationship was tense initially, they eventually managed to work very effectively together. Wilder later said he felt that Chandler was nearly peerless in the way he captured Los Angeles. In Chandler's novels, the City of Angels is often so vivid as to be a main character in the story.

Double Indemnity is in many senses the prototypical film noir. The seemingly innocent man who falls under the spell of a femme fatale and proceeds to do very, very bad things. Barbara Stanwyck's character is a descendant of the "Woman From The City" in Murnau's *Sunrise*. She comes to represent everything sinister about the industrialized world, and the consumer culture that is a part of it. It is not a mistake that the murder is plotted in a supermarket, the ultimate symbol of consumerism. That a train, a symbol of industrialized America, plays a major part in the murder plot itself also does not seem to be acci-

dental. Even the language between Neff and Phyllis is full of metaphors for industry: when they say they're in it together "straight down the line" or later when Neff, recounting the events says, "the machinery had started to move and nothing could stop it".

The relationship between Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) is one based solely on lust which then morphs into something else. Wilder seems to go out of his way to show the lack of tenderness between the two characters.



Because of the production code, there was a lot going on that we do not get to see as an audience. Still, one gets the sense that even if Wilder were able to portray the sexual relationship between Neff and Phyllis more overtly, the essential coldness between the two characters would remain. There is far more warmth for example, in the relationship between Neff and Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), who is a father figure to Neff. It is clear when Neff confesses to him at the end that not only has Keyes been surprised by his protégé's actions but deeply hurt as well.

John F. Seitz's cinematography is noteworthy. The dark shadows that shroud nearly everything in the film are the definition of noir. Seitz had previously worked on other noirs such as *This Gun For Hire* and he would work with Wilder again on *The Lost Weekend* and later *Sunset Boulevard*. The score is by Miklós Rozsa, who was responsible for many of the best known film noir scores including: *The Naked City*, *Criss Cross*, *A Double Life*, *Spellbound* and *The Killers*. He was nominated for the Academy Award several times (including a nomination for *Double Indemnity*). His scores for *A Double Life*, *Spellbound* and *Ben Hur* all won Academy Awards.

Wilder had always been fascinated by America. His mother had named him after the legendary "Buffalo Bill". The cynicism often attributed to his films was hard won, to say the least. The rise of the Nazis forced him to move from Germany to France and ultimately to America. His mother died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz just before the filming of *Double Indemnity* began - something he did not know until later. Billy Wilder was well acquainted with the dark underbelly of Europe. With *Double Indemnity* we see him examining his adopted homeland and finding the darkness lurking just beneath the manicured surface of Los Angeles and all its picture perfect suburbs.

- Matt Smith