



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Double Indemnity

‘It has all the characteristics of the classic forties film as I respond to it. It’s in black and white, it has fast badinage, it’s very witty, a story from the classic age. It has Edward G. Robinson, and Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray and the tough voice-over. It has brilliantly written dialogue, and the perfect score by Miklos Rosza. It’s Billy Wilder’s best movie... practically anybody’s best movie.’ (Woody Allen)

Agreed. With amendments. Extensive ones. For *Double Indemnity* acts as a kind of purgative, at once bringing out the worst in us while making us feel so much the better for it. As such it contains more devious felicities than memory, however fond, can summon up in the course of a casual conversation. It has, as well, more dark virtues than we may be able to pick up as – warmed, relaxed, our critical faculties disarmed by the nostalgic impulse – we revisit it via home video or late-night television. It is, in fact, a movie that not only withstands rigorous scrutiny, but actually improves the more closely we study it, the more we know about the circumstances of its creation.

All the good qualities Woody Allen quickly enumerated for his biographer, Eric Lax, obviously deserve additional consideration. But here are others he did not mention which must be taken up as well. These, indeed, account for much of the film’s powerful initial impact and for its continuing – and still growing – claim on our attention.

Perhaps the most basic of them, made clear only if one happens to read James M. Cain’s original tale while studying the film version, is the craftsmanship with which the screenplay is fashioned. The wit which Allen rightly admires is not present in Cain’s text. While its prose is admirably straightforward, and aware of the ironies in which it is dealing, you will not find much ‘badinage’ in it. That’s the creation of Wilder and his screenwriting collaborator, Raymond Chandler. Their dialogue is just a little jazzier than any we are likely to hear in life. More important, though, their adaptation shrewdly and smoothly solves problems of structure and characterisation that the novelist did not work out very carefully. The gain in plausibility is incalculable. And it is accomplished without blurring the bleakness of Cain’s instinctive existentialism.

Imagery is the movie’s other great strength – more immediately apparent to most viewers than the subtle remodellings Wilder and Chandler undertook when they moved into this property and made it their own. Allen’s glancing reference to the film stock on which the film was shot does not quite cover this matter, as he would surely agree. Wilder is not a director who frames his shots eccentrically or cuts for shock effect. He is fond of saying (with a degree of false modesty) that since he doesn’t much like shooting, he does whatever he can to keep the job simple. But he is a man who likes to work in close, not to say claustrophobic, quarters. And he is, even in his comedies, powerfully drawn to what I think of as night-for-day shooting; that is to say, rooms that are quite dimly lit even though we know the sun is shining outside.

Chiaroscuro, shadow projections, shafts of bright light entering the frame at arresting angles – these are among Wilder’s favourite devices, and *Double Indemnity*, which was his third film as director, represents his first full-scale orchestration of them. It may not be too much to say, indeed, that like the subsequent *Sunset Boulevard* it is a drama about light, about a man lured out of the sunshine and into the shadows.

Be that as it may, it must be said that the movie’s visual style analogises very well with its literary style. It is no more ‘realistic’ than its dialogue, but it is certainly not expressionistic, either. Perhaps the best way to put it is this: stylistically the film presses firmly against the imagistic conventions of American movies of its time without shattering them by a resort to inflated stylisation. Working this borderline it manages simultaneously to reinforce the most potent quality of Cain’s work – its air of doomy portent – while adding felt realistic substance to a story that was originally written in some haste for magazine serialisation by an author who lacked time, space and perhaps inclination for extended descriptive detail. Put simply, the movie has a very firm sense of place – no movie, documentary or fictional, offers a better sense of how the Los Angeles of its moment looked – but at the same time it energises that reality with a subtle air of menace. And few movies of any era have more deliciously proved the writerly adage that landscape is character. You could charge L.A. as a co-conspirator in the crimes this movie relates.

Dialogue and imagery (and, yes, performance – the actors Allen mentions were never better than they are in this film) transform an essentially banal and in some respects unpersuasive narrative. They impart to Cain’s story something it also did not have in its rather tatty original form, namely weight and conviction. They, more than the tale they tell, are the source of *Double Indemnity*’s original impact, and they remain the basis of its continuing hold on us. To put the point simply, their singular qualities are the source of the film’s singular – no other word will do – authority.

Extracted from *Double Indemnity* by Richard Schickel (BFI Film Classics, 1993).

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A contemporary review

Carefully constructed with, seemingly, a thorough knowledge of the insurance background, this plot sustains suspense and plausibility throughout. Its main brake is the obtrusive use of the flash-back technique. For the rest the narrative is clearly and smoothly set out, with some sensitive use of camera and lighting. MacMurray’s early characterisation of the insurance salesman is his most thorough work to date. Edward G. Robinson also contributes mightily by getting right inside the part of the insurance company’s claims investigator; and director Wilder has shown how much more effective a Robinson role can be if the long, overemphasised close-ups are eliminated. Barbara Stanwyck does her best with an unconvincing part.

***Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1944**

DOUBLE INDEMNITY

Director: Billy Wilder
©/Production Company: Paramount Pictures
Screenplay: Billy Wilder, Raymond Chandler
Based on the novel by: James M. Cain
Director of Photography: John F. Seitz
2nd Camera: Otto Pierce, Harlow Stengel
Process Photography: Farciot Edouart
Editorial Supervision: Doane Harrison
Art Directors: Hans Dreier, Hal Pereira
Set Decorator: Bertram Granger
Costumes: Edith Head
Wardrobe: Neva Bourne, Bill Rabb
Make-up Artist: Wally Westmore
Music Score: Miklós Rózsa
Symphony in D Minor by: César Franck
Sound Recording: Stanley Cooley, Walter Oberst

uncredited
Executive Producer: B.G. De Sylva
Producer: Joseph Siström
Production Manager: Hugh Brown
Assistant Production Manager: Al Trosin
Dialogue Director: John Gage
Assistant Director: C.C. Coleman
2nd Assistant Director: Bill Sheehan
Screenplay Clerk: Nancy Lee
Casting: Harvey Clermont
Grip: Walter McLeod
Microphone Grip: Bill Pillar
Electrician: Chet Stafford
Cableman: Jack Duffy
Stills: Ed Henderson
Assistant Cutter: Lee Hall
Props: Jack De Golconda, James Cottrell
Make-up: Bob Ewing
Hair: Hollis Barnes
Stand-in for Barbara Stanwyck: Dorothy Staten
Publicity: John Woolfenden

Cast

Fred MacMurray (Walter Neff)
Barbara Stanwyck (Phyllis Dietrichson)
Edward G. Robinson (Barton Keyes)
Porter Hall (Mr Jackson)
Jean Heather (Lola Dietrichson)
Tom Powers (Mr Dietrichson)
Byron Barr (Nino Zachette)
Richard Gaines (Mr Norton)
Fortunio Bonanova (Sam Gorlopolis)
John Philliber (Joe Peters)

uncredited
Bess Flowers (secretary)
Kernan Cripps (conductor)
Harold Garrison (red cap)
Oscar Smith, Frank Billy Mitchell,
Floyd Shackleford, James Adamson
(Pullman porters)
Betty Farrington (Mattie, maid)
Dick Rush (pullman conductor)
Edmund Cobb (train conductor)
Sam McDaniel (garage attendant)
Judith Gibson (Pacific All-Risk telephone operator)
Miriam Franklin (Keyes’ secretary)

USA 1944©
107 mins

Introduction by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London
(Wed 29 Sep only)

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Detective Story
Thu 2 Sep 18:00; Fri 24 Sep 18:00; Sun 3 Oct 12:10
Double Indemnity
Thu 2 Sep 14:45; Sun 12 Sep 15:00; Wed 29 Sep 17:45 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London); Sat 2 Oct 20:50
Call Northside 777
Fri 3 Sep 20:40; Thu 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 17:50; Mon 20 Sep 17:50
The Hound of the Baskervilles
Sat 4 Sep 15:15; Thu 30 Sep 18:15
Cry of the City
Sun 5 Sep 18:10; Thu 9 Sep 18:10; Sat 18 Sep 21:00; Tue 21 Sep 14:45
The Undercover Man
Mon 6 Sep 18:10; Thu 23 Sep 14:45; Sun 26 Sep 12:00
The Big Sleep
Tue 7 Sep 20:45; Sun 19 Sep 11:00; Mon 4 Oct 17:45

Laura
Wed 8 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 16 Sep 14:30; Tue 21 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 20:50
The Third Man
Wed 8 Sep 21:00; Fri 10 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 20:50; Sat 2 Oct 11:30
Rear Window
Thu 9 Sep 20:45; Wed 15 Sep 17:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sat 25 Sep 11:30; Tue 28 Sep 20:45; Tue 5 Oct 14:30
The Big Heat
Sat 11 Sep 14:30; Mon 13 Sep 21:00; Wed 22 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by Simran Hans, writer and film critic for ‘The Observer’); Mon 27 Sep 17:50
The Stranger
Fri 17 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 14:30
Philosophical Screens: Temptation and Coincidence in ‘Double Indemnity’
Wed 29 Sep 20:00 Blue Room

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