

DOUBLE INDEMNITY: Introduction

Story:

Screenplay:

Run one scene (start of ch. 4, starts at 12:35) of Neff in car driving and narrating in voice-over. “It was a hot afternoon and I can still remember the smell of honeysuckle all along that street. How could I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle? Maybe you would have known, Keyes, the minute she mentioned accident insurance. But I didn’t. I felt like a million.” (Dissolve to Pacific All Risk set, now in daytime, filled with people. “Park this for me, will you sweetheart.” (Cars, everywhere in dialogue, machines, engines moving “all the way down the line.”) As he walks along railing, he is in distance—looks smallish in the perspective of shot, not a dominant figure.

Into Keyes office. Shadows of window on back of Keyes’s vest. Stop. (13:23) Deep focus. Sparseness of décor. Simplicity of light / shadow patterns. Unusual to have Keyes (star performer) stand with back to camera for so long. Fills foreground, dominates as authority figure. When we see him and he sits down, we have a firm sense of his cynical intelligence, yet benign manner and interest in Keyes. He vents to him, Neff takes it in stride. He stands erect, paces, Neff leans back, “rakish.” Puts his hand on the shoulder.

Screenplay

Brilliant idea: have Neff narrate story into Dictaphone, addressed to Keyes. “Key” relationship of film (father/son, play by the rules/look for the angle, Old world/New world). Both linked by “smarts” = cynical view of world. Two sides of Wilder himself. But Keyes is also the Chandler idea of the moral center in a universe that is otherwise mostly cold and corrupt. (But not Lola. Too young?) Neff lights his cigars, using a flick of thumb, a trick used by common guys to impress girls before invention of safety matches (per Richard Schickel).

Brilliant dialogue: funny as well as corny banter. First scene between Neff & Mrs. D sets the tone: “Fully covered” “No pigeons” “Philadelphia story” “My name. “Wish you’d tell me what’s engraved on that anklet. / (pause, looking down) Just my name. / As, for instance. / Phyllis. / (smiling) Phyllis, huh? I think I like that. / But you’re not sure. / Oh, have to drive it around the block a couple of times.” speed-limit repartees (stichomythia!). He likes to think he’s in control of this flirtation, but she’s running him, he realizes. “I wonder if I know what you mean. / I wonder if you wonder.”

Mrs. D: costumes, her lines and voice all indicate her lower-class origins (just like his). “honey of an anklet” (not worn by refined upper-class women). Watch her pace around as Neff tries to sell her on renewing the auto insurance. Thinking it through.

The three leads were all cast somewhat against type, and it made their performances both interesting at the time and somehow still convincing. MacMurray's comic lightweight qualities make him effectively harsh yet lightweight. Stanwyck "lady of burlesque" (*Ball of Fire* year before = "snow white" as femme fatale in middle of 7 dwarfs!)

Wilder as director: superb with bit players as well as leads.

Elevator operator: you really believe that's who he is! (Great line about why "they" won't sell him any insurance: "Something loose in my heart. Hah-hah. I say it's rheumatism.")

Netty (house maid). Small, but thick and tough, like a watch-dog. One good zinger: "we keep the liquor cabinet locked up."

Sets

Pacific All-Risk Insurance (novel: "General Fidelity"!): Balcony looks down on rows upon rows of ordinary desks (no partitions), cleaning help. Neff moves along balcony railing (cf. first shot of Mrs. Dietrichsen).

Dietrichsen house: "one of those California Spanish houses everyone was nuts about about ten or fifteen years ago. ... This one must have cost somebody about thirty thousand bucks—that is, if he ever finished paying for it." Inside—main room, filled with things, but little personality. (Cf. his apartment.) Just emptiness, light, shadow, and dust. (Cameraman used aluminum filings to create haze). Venetian blinds give texture to lighting—complicated criss-cross patterns, depths (as in railings of All-Risk).

Locations

First is Los Angeles street—empty! (no cars)—workmen at night, car racing towards camera (picks up idea of moving toward camera from opening credits). / C.U. stop traffic signal: car rushes through "Stop" sign, near accident. / Exterior office building (= first set.)

Second is view of LA from hillside road. Lots of haze in background. 3 kids playing stickball in street. (Sense of family/friends/American traditional.)

Run second clip, but without sound.

Drive -in / bowling alley (quick shots). Darkness of his apartment. One source of light (window) with shadows of rain streaking. He paces irresolute. Hears something, goes to door, opens it, and there she is. Only one main light source. When she comes in she steps into his darkness.

Quotes © Paramount Pictures, Inc. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/fairuse>.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

CMS.S61 Special Subject: The Rise of Film Noir
January IAP 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.