

AN INTERVIEW

WITH THE ADAPTERS & DIRECTOR OF ACT'S DOUBLE INDEMNITY

FROM VINCE KEENAN'S INTERVIEW IN *NOIR CITY* MAGAZINE
WITH DAVID PICHETTE, R. HAMILTON WRIGHT, AND KURT BEATTIE

NOIR CITY: *How did the idea of the adaptation originate?*

DAVID PICHETTE: We'd been thinking for years about doing some kind of adaptation because all three of us are big fans of that branch of American lit, the crime novel. One of the first things we looked at was *Nightmare Alley*, which I still think is the greatest of all those crime novels. It's better every time I read it. And a really good film adaptation, too, if you ignore the tacked-on ending. I always stop it just before his redemption. It happens so often, like with *Ride the Pink Horse*, a really good adaptation of a really good Dorothy B. Hughes novel. And then they f*** it up at the end, because they have to. It's so rare that they stick to their guns. But then *Double Indemnity* had been such a huge hit, you'd think that would set the precedent. You can do this and have a successful film.

R. HAMILTON WRIGHT: Like a lot of people I started reading Hammett and Chandler



when I was in my teens. I think the reason I liked them so much, and Hammett especially when I first got into him, was the sense of him being a Western writer. Being a West Coast kid, I grew up in Seattle. I came to Cain later on, probably in my 20s and 30s.

PICHETTE: I didn't get to Cain until maybe 20 years ago. What I love about Cain is that he's the first guy to write a popular thriller that's like a Black Mask world but doesn't involve a detective. Elmore Leonard talked about *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as the greatest one-two punch in

American lit, because they came out so close together. Actually, they're the same story.

WRIGHT: They really are.

PICHETTE: And both enormous successes. But it's like Georges Simenon getting pissed off when the Nobel Prize for Literature went to Albert Camus [in 1957]. Simenon, who by that point had written at least 100 novels, was covering exactly the same world that Camus did with *The Stranger* but he was doing it like James M. Cain. He was writing popular novels, making mainstream huge philosophical angst and dismay at the meaninglessness of existence but telling it as a popular story and being a huge success. They were doing the same thing in the same era, in the 1930s, Simenon in France and Cain here.

WRIGHT: Sometimes you feel when you read Cain's novel it's like Dostoyevsky has decided to write a leaner, meaner, little book in English. They are thrillers, but you can quite appropriately call them American



"AS A REMEDY TO LIFE IN SOCIETY I WOULD SUGGEST THE BIG CITY. NOWADAYS, IT IS THE ONLY DESERT WITHIN OUR MEANS." — CAMUS

novels. The fact that they have to do with murder doesn't significantly alter them from, say, Theodore Dreiser or any number of great novels. With death and culpability and sin as major precipitating events.

KURT BEATTIE: Cain documents the fear and terror at the heart of modern life in his own odd way, and it's why his work has hung around. You could get a hundred pulp novels and you wouldn't find anything that's as compelling as Cain's novels. And they're compelling not just because they're good entertainments but because they are actually saying something about what it is to live in the modern world. That's why I think it's an inspired choice of Bob and David's to take on this material. If we're able to do it right, it will be both an entertaining and, dare I say it, philosophical journey for the audience. Noir, for me, is a fantastic journey into a morally featureless universe. I see noir as fundamentally melodrama with one great difference. In the moral definition of the world, good people and bad people, moral absolutes are hugely blurred in noir. But you have all the devices of melodrama. Mood heightened by music, cliffhanger situations, suspense. And noir generates a tremendous amount of fear, pleasurable fear, about being waylaid in the dark, about being destroyed by people who supposedly care about you. And yet these stories are often discussions of moral values. Noir is a brilliant way of bringing forward and amplifying those emotional forces, those anxieties that people struggle with daily.

NOIR CITY: *How do you hope to make Cain's story relevant to contemporary audiences?*

PICHETTE: This is one of those questions that's always asked, and without being a smartass, I don't think it's important. I think you do something because you feel compelled to do it. I think both Bob and I would have been willing at any point in the last 20 years to tell this story, because we love it. It is a little bit lucky, right now, because we are in fact facing a national crisis where again, we've watched malfeasance on a level that had been unthinkable. You start getting into a Huff-like mentality where you think, "If those are the new rules, why I shouldn't I take advantage in a similar fashion? My goals are smaller. The only difference between me and J. P. Morgan is I'm going to kill one person and get a little bit of money instead of destroying a nation and making a fortune."

WRIGHT: We always ask the question, when you see a production of *Macbeth*, beyond the fact that there's all the baggage of it's Shakespeare and why do it, why do you want to watch? You want to watch because it's people caught in the grip of fate and their own pathetic flailings to get away from it. And we can see that they're doomed. Cain has the added advantage that I think too many Shakespeare productions don't have, which is an actual sense of humor about it. I don't mean funny, necessarily, but that human vulnerability that makes people gasp.

So often in Shakespeare we create creatures that aren't quite that because of the language and everything else. It doesn't seem to echo ourselves enough.

PICHETTE: And tragedy is always going to be compelling, whether times are good or bad; that you are in fact simultaneously a victim of fate and the architect of your own doom. A sense that things are never going to turn out the way you want them to.

BEATTIE: I look upon it as a sociopolitical description of where we are right now. This is one of the uber-reasons why we programmed this. One, we programmed it because it's fun. Everybody likes a thriller. Crime stories are endlessly popular to us all, and if done well, audiences will enjoy it and will want to buy tickets to see it. But there is another reason for doing it, and it has to do with creating consciousness. It's an examination of human behavior; the morality of the marketplace, the philosophy of self-interest. And I hope that audiences watching this story will be stimulated to think about it intellectually. Certainly film noir created that. The genre, as it was defined by film historians and intellectuals had that effect on audiences. They said, "This articulates something really important and serious about who we are and how we live. It describes a malady." The idea is how do we correct the malady, can we correct in it. In the end, that's one of the reasons why I'm doing it.