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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Michael Asimow](http://docs.google.com/michael_asimow.htm)       |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/manthere_denvir.htm)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0243133)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A246226) |         Freddie told the jury "to look not at the facts, but at the meaning of the facts. Then he said the facts had no meaning." | |  | | --- | | ***THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE*: Shyster Lawyers In Neo-Noir**  by Michael Asimow  The Coen Brothers have done it again! *The Man Who Wasn't There* delivers a loving parody in stunning black-and-white of noir favorites like *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It is superb. Hilarious. A knockout.  Billy Bob Thornton, at his stone-faced best, plays Ed Crane, a small town barber of few words but many cigarettes. The always exquisite Frances McDormand is his wife Doris who, it seems, has been straying with her boss Big Dave (James Gandolfini) over at Nirdlinger's Department Store. Now if only Ed could find a way to raise $10,000 to invest in the radical new idea of dry cleaning. . .  The story then meanders pleasurably through antic subplots, not to mention blackmail and various murders, suicides and other mayhem, with the wrong people getting accused of all the wrong crimes. Anyone who reveals the plot should be sent to the chair, so I'll refrain from disclosing any more of it.  Instead, let's turn to my personal favorite character in the film: the deliciously sleazeball lawyer Freddie Reidenschneider, said to be the best criminal lawyer in California, who winds up defending both Doris and Ed. Tony Shalhoub is picture-perfect in the role of Freddie. Freddie is such a world-class BS artist. He employs the Heisenberg uncertainty principle to illustrate that we can never know whether a fact is true since we will always change it by observing it. Indeed, Ed reports, Freddie told the jury "to look not at the facts, but at the meaning of the facts. Then he said the facts had no meaning." Also, Freddie lives by the motto "I litigate. I don't capitulate."  Knowing full well that his clients can't afford his services, Freddie tanks up on immense meals at the local eatery at their expense. He unabashedly instructs his clients what lies to tell. And, of course, he dumps them when the money runs out. He is replaced by the thunderously inept public defender Lloyd Garroway who pleads his murder client "guilty with explanation."  Freddie is in the grand tradition of movie shysters, and we law and pop culture mavens could reel off quite a few. Freddie reminded me particularly of the affable gonif Willie Gingrich (Walter Matthau) in *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) who enthusiastically cooks up a totally phony personal injury case and terrifies the suave insurance lawyers on the other side. Then there's the surpassingly inept Dennis Denuto in [*The Castle*](http://docs.google.com/winslow_boy.htm) (1997) who relied on "the vibes" from Australia's famous Mabo case.  But my absolute favorite movie shyster is the immortal Billy Flynn (Adolpe Menjou), the criminal defense lawyer in [*Roxie Hart*](http://docs.google.com/articles/RoxieHart.htm) (1942). This film was the basis for the fabulous Kander and Ebb musical Chicago. (Billy's the one in Chicago who describes his courtroom technique in the lyrics "Show them a little razzle dazzle, razzle dazzle 'em. . .) Billy defends only women who have killed their husbands or boyfriends and, of course, Chicago juries always acquit these lovely ladies. As in *The Man Who Wasn't There* or *The Fortune Cookie*, Flynn sees his job as concocting some wholly fictitious story for his murderous client and then selling this nonsense to the newspapers and to the jury.  Well, the lovable shyster Freddy is only one of the numerous attractions of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, a picture that fans of noir and of law movies simply can't miss.  Posted December 10, 2001 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/submit-comments.htm) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |