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CAST

RAY MILLAND GEORGE STROUD
CHARLES LAUGHTON EARL JANOTH
MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN GEORGETTE STROUD
GEORGE MACREADY STEVE HAGEN
RITA JOHNSON PAULINE YORK
ELSA LANCHESTER LOUISE PATTERSON
HAROLD VERMILYEA DON KLAUSMEYER
DAN TOBIN RAY CORDETTE
HARRY MORGAN BILL WOMACK (AS HENRY MORGAN)

CREW

DIRECTED BY **JOHN FARROW**
PRODUCED BY **RICHARD MAIBAUM**
SCREENPLAY BY **JONATHAN LATIMER**
BASED ON THE NOVEL BY **KENNETH FEARING**
MUSIC BY **VICTOR YOUNG**
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN F. SEITZ** A.S.C.
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR **WILLIAM H. COLEMAN**
FILM EDITOR **LEROY STONE** (UNCREDITED)
EDITORIAL SUPERVISION BY **EDA WARREN**
COSTUMES **EDITH HEAD**
SET DECORATORS **SAM COMER** AND **ROSS DOWD**
ART DIRECTION BY **ROLAND ANDERSON**, **HANS DREIER** AND **ALBERT NOZAKI**



THE INNER WORKINGS OF THE BIG CLOCK

by Christina Newland

“Better wear gloves to this thriller, or you won’t have any fingernails left!”, promises the headline of a two-page advertisement for *The Big Clock* in a 1948 issue of Box Office Magazine. Promising a fingernail-biting good time from veteran Hollywood director John Farrow (father of Mia), this crime drama is in fact anything but easily categorised. From its tangential interest in the contemporary art world to its commentary on the deleterious impact of company-man culture, *The Big Clock* forays far out of the realms of simple crime thriller.

Released in 1948, *The Big Clock* falls right into the heyday of film noir. These low-budget and influential crime dramas were mainly released between 1941 and 1958 or so, and this film contains - at least superficially - most of the elements. It opens with a wide shot of the city skyline under the blanket of night, before dollying slowly into the seemingly deserted lobby of a building entitled Janoth Publications. Hiding amidst the cavernous shadows is one George Stroud, a crime reporter at a magazine of Janoth’s, sneaking around for reasons as yet unknown. The actor who plays Stroud, Ray Milland, begins his story in voiceover as his avatar hides in corners: “Just 36 hours ago, I was a decent, respectable, law-abiding citizen.”

In a flashback storytelling mode, director John Farrow reveals the unlucky accidents of fate that may see the protagonist wrongly framed for murder. His boss, Mr. Janoth (Charles Laughton), is a tyrant who fires George after he tries to take his neglected wife and child on a much-needed vacation. An alluring blonde named Pauline (Rita Johnson) - who turns out to be Mr. Janoth’s fed-up mistress - meets George in the hopes of sharing dirt on the mogul, but later that evening she winds up cruelly bludgeoned to death by her lover. Janoth promptly rehires his star crime reporter to investigate the mystery man seen with Pauline in the secret hopes of framing the man for his murder, unaware that the man is none other than George Stroud.

The ‘wrong man’ format of the story is ideal for lead actor Ray Milland, doing excellent work as the unlucky George. His tendency for playing upright, slightly square everymen



caught in a spiral of desperation is used to great effect by Farrow. In 1945, Milland would give what was arguably the defining performance of his career in Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend*, as an alcoholic attempting to dry out. Here he mines similarly dark subject matter.

On first glance, John Farrow's film is every inch the film noir. Even the fact that the film is bookended with a flashback structure is one of the most common elements of the 40s noir style. That's to say nothing of its nocturnal urban landscape; its mysterious figures; its long shadows, and its voiceover speaking in foreshadowing tones. Some critics, though, demur at the idea of the movie as a full-blown noir, given its all-around-good-guy protagonist and focus less on dark alleyways than on middle-class vacation time.

The 'Big Clock' of the movie is located in Janoth Publications' lobby over a large circular plinth, boasting a grandly expensive and complex mechanism that tells hyper-accurate time across the world's cities. Here, it's drawn in parallel to Mr. Janoth's own obsession with timekeeping, to the detriment not only of his workers but seemingly of his own soul.

The imagery comes hand in hand with a literalisation of one of the noir's key elements: manipulation of time. This manifests itself most commonly via flashback, but also through flash-forward, various accounts of the same events, or a haunted obsession with the immutability of

the past. One only has to think of the multiple perspectives and Du Maurier-style ghostliness of Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) to get the idea.

Charles Laughton is devilishly brilliant as Mr. Janoth, the unscrupulous media mogul. In spite of a soft-spoken, gentlemanly demeanour, the boss keeps a vice-like grip on all the comings and goings of his many employees, ruthlessly firing those who don't meet his whims. In an argument with his mistress Pauline, she insults his pride, telling him, "Have you lived this long without knowing everybody laughs at you behind your back?" In an extreme close-up shot, Laughton's veneer of civility slips as a sheen of sweat coats his face - not unnoticed by Pauline, who sneers at him about being clammy. The corner of his upper lip begins to twitch, until he bashes his mistress in the head with a heavy sundial.

His hot rage is blink-and-you'll-miss-it; almost instantly subsumed by his firm grasp on control. Afterward, he visits his lackey Steve and coolly admits to homicide - with no real sense of why he's committed this crime of passion. Once the audience has seen the monstrosity behind his mask of sophistication, there's no going back.

The Big Clock was adapted from a 1946 novel of the same name by Kenneth Fearing, and was thought to have remained highly faithful to its source material. The screenwriter who adapted it, John Latimer, was a literary sensation in his own right - a hard-boiled crime novelist who had worked with John Farrow on 10 movies. Farrow himself had been a screenwriter since the silent era, making his directorial debut on a Warner Bros. B-picture from 1937 called *Men in Exile*. Farrow began to make films under contract with Paramount Pictures, finally getting an A-picture breakthrough with 1942's *Wake Island*. Though he would take a workmanlike approach to several genres, it was clear he had an affinity for the crime or war film above all else.

Inasmuch as any other genre or style adopted by Farrow, *The Big Clock* is a workplace drama. The groundwork of newspapermen on the crime beat is judiciously observed, and the big boss of the company is not only a villain in the halls of his building but in the moral universe of the film. George Stroud is a straight arrow employee and a family man, providing an unusually clear delineation between his own goodness and the evil of Mr. Janoth in a typically murky noir. In fact, one of the central contentions of the movie is that George is actually *too good* at his job. His own fastidiousness at hunting for clues as an investigative reporter leads to his staff coming dangerously close to accusing him of the crime.

By the following decade, the workplace drama - particularly the kind set in individual-dwarfing office blocks, with hundreds of busy secretaries and well-tailored businessmen - would become something of a Hollywood staple. Films that specifically took an interest





in the morally corrupt intrapersonal politics of the city office building would span the 50s, from *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* (1951) to *The Best of Everything* (1959). As far removed as these titles may seem from the terse newspaper-led dramas of the thirties and forties, it could be said that *The Big Clock*, in 1948, was somewhat ahead of its time. Farrow seems more interested in the evils of the corporate workplace culture than he does in the pulpy machinations of yellow journalism. His view of George Stroud is of a decent man who forsakes wife and family to satisfy career ambition and a boss that will never offer the same fulfillment. In film noir mode, though, that career and boss almost cost the hero his whole life as he is framed for murder.

These interests in the emptiness of workplace culture are aligned to the unusual set design, most notably within the monolithic, towering Janoth Publications building. Full of curlicue architecture and blocky, imposing interiors, it has a sinister, quasi-sci-fi atmosphere. Art director Roland Anderson was a veteran of the movies by the time of *The Big Clock*, having worked regularly with Cecil B. DeMille on his sets in films as lavish as *Cleopatra* (1934). The overall effect is discomfiting and cold, with the high-contrast black and white cinematography underlining the building's many shadowy corners.

John F. Seitz, the film's director of photography, was a highly innovative cameraman and another member of the crew with decades of experience under his belt. He began shooting during the era of Rudolph Valentino, and retired with 18 patents to his name – having invented remarkable things like the low-key lighting system that created the expressive high contrast and shadows of film noir. In fact, Seitz was a favourite cameraman of Billy Wilder's, shooting *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *The Lost Weekend* (1945) for him and therefore also working with *The Big Clock*'s star Ray Milland.

At the film's conclusion, Mr. Janoth meets a terrible fate by falling down one of the building's elevator shafts to his demise. It seems befitting that this self-made king should scale the heights of his media empire only to meet a violent descent. Meanwhile, George gets something like a happy ending, perhaps film noir's biggest anathema. But even if *The Big Clock* is only wearing noir style as a thin disguise, it draws together enough disparate elements to make this effective. As difficult as it is to classify, it's a startlingly modern and thoughtful take on the popular crime genre of the era.

Christina Newland is a freelance journalist on film and culture. She has written for Sight & Sound, Little White Lies, BFI, VICE and others.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Big Clock is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with 1.0 mono audio. The master was prepared in High Definition by Universal Pictures and delivered to Arrow Films.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**
Blu-ray Mastering **Fidelity in Motion**
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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