



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Gaslight

Following the success of his first two films, *The High Command* in 1936 and *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery* in 1939, director Thorold Dickinson was offered the opportunity to direct the adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's London stage success, *Gaslight*. Having originally opened in Richmond in 1938, audience reaction had been so enthusiastic towards the play that it had been transferred to London's Apollo Theatre in January 1939. A successful radio adaptation had already been broadcast by the time British National acquired the rights to produce a film version.

Dickinson's filming methods were usually based on a degree of improvisation, but with *Gaslight* he adopted a precise shooting plan from which there would be no deviation. Both he and editor Sydney Cole pre-planned every shot in advance, adopting a complex chart system, and set designer Duncan Sutherland was brought in on the production at an early stage to design a house set with detachable walls so that Dickinson could film from any angle he wished at any time. The bigger sets, primarily of the square in which the house was located, and a music hall interior, were built on an adjacent stage. By this method the film could be shot in continuity so that at any time during the production's lifetime, the film's rough-cut at that point could be viewed. The film was also shot on a closed set at Denham Studios, as Dickinson believed that this, in conjunction with continuity shooting, was the only means by which to transfer the inherent tension that existed within the play onto the film set.

Walbrook was initially unhappy with Dickinson's methods but, owing to the continuity of the filming, Dickinson could show him the rough-cut as it was being assembled which persuaded the Austrian actor as to the merits of the director's methods. Walbrook had a reputation of being difficult to work with but Dickinson, in a later interview in *Film Dope* magazine, was to have nothing but praise for the actor: '[he was] very generous, we got on extremely well once he got his faith restored after the first fortnight.'

Despite some members of the cast being brought low by influenza (Joss Ambler, in the role of the house agent, had to be replaced altogether, by Aubrey Dexter) the film was completed in a relatively swift nine weeks, and seven weeks later opened at the Leicester Square Odeon to generally ecstatic reviews. A.E. Wilson in the *Star* (14 June 1940) declared that, 'In *Gaslight* we have the opportunity of hailing another achievement in British filmmaking. Here, skilfully adapted from the play which was so successful on the stage, is a thriller of great persuasive power, a film which genuinely evokes an atmosphere of suspense and excitement and produces the eerie, creepy sensation of impending disaster.' Campbell Wilson in *The Daily Telegraph* (17 June 1940) proclaimed, with equal enthusiasm, 'on the stage Patrick Hamilton's thriller was almost as effective as his first success, *Rope*. On the screen it is even better. The play has been so skilfully adapted and so intelligently directed by Thorold Dickinson that the film moves freely without sacrificing the original's characterisation, atmosphere and tension.'

The period atmosphere evoked by the combination of Sutherland's sets and the photography of Bernard Knowles was especially praised, being seen as

essential to the film's success. One quote, from the *Eastern Daily Press* (14 June 1940) serves to exemplify the general response: 'The poor little wife is being frightened into madness not only by her husband's cruelty, but by the heavy conservatory atmosphere in which she is doomed to dwell. The potted palms, the betasselled draperies, the ornament-loaded piano, the wax flowers in glass cases, the festoons of miniatures on the walls, all stand as barriers to sanity and freedom. She is stifled under bric-a-brac.'

As regards the performances, Anton Walbrook received particular praise, offering a chilling portrait of sadistic cruelty, moving suddenly, within the same scene, from suave urbanity and charm to ruthless cold-bloodedness and emotional brutality. Diana Wynyard was also praised for her work in a difficult role; her scene where she stares into a mirror and grieves over her lost youth and glamour being a highlight. 'Anton Walbrook is responsible for a masterly portrait of calculated villainy as the man, and Diana Wynyard gives her finest screen performance in the exacting role of persecuted wife' (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 May). The supporting players were not forgotten either, and rightly so, 'To the excellent performance of Miss Wynyard and Mr Walbrook are added a vital piece of acting by Cathleen Cordell as the servant and an honest-to-God study of steady integrity from Frank Pettingell as Rough' (*Yorkshire Observer*, 14 June).

The success of the film led to Dickinson being offered a Hollywood contract by David O. Selznick (which, probably wisely, he turned down), and the production of further Victorian crime melodramas in the 1940s, including *Hatter's Castle* (1941) and *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945).

The subsequent history of *Gaslight* itself, however, was not as fortuitous, and has been extensively commented on over the intervening years. When MGM bought the rights to the property in order to make their own version in 1944 (Dickinson's film having failed to secure a release in America), the story quickly circulated that MGM had, in the process, also bought up the negative and all existing prints of the British version and destroyed them in order to prevent both competition and comparison. It was widely believed, therefore, that the original film version had been lost and would never be seen again.

The perceived fate of Dickinson's *Gaslight* became a much-quoted example of cultural vandalism, taking on mythic proportions. The American version of 1944 (directed by George Cukor and starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman) was unjustly denigrated in some quarters, with a misguided patriotic fervour, as being inferior to the British original – which it most assuredly is not.

When Dickinson's version was eventually released in the US in 1952, under the title *Angel Street* (the title of the stage version in that country), indicating that it had not been destroyed after all, it was, nevertheless, cut by eight minutes and given only a moderate release within art-house circles.

Thankfully, however, the film's original British distributor, Anglo American, had earlier deposited a duplicate negative with the National Film Archive, or the National Film Library as it then was, in August 1942, which was followed by a print in January 1943.

John Oliver, BFI National Archive

GASLIGHT

Director: Thorold Dickinson
Production Company: British National Films
Producer: John Corfield
Associate Producer: Richard Vernon
Assistant Director: George Pollock
Screenplay: A.R. Rawlinson, Bridget Boland
Based on the stage play Angel Street *by:* Patrick Hamilton
Director of Photography: Bernard Knowles
Camera Operator: Cyril Knowles
Editor: Sidney Cole
Settings: Duncan Sutherland
Music: Richard Addinsell
Music Director: Muir Mathieson
Orchestrations: Roy Douglas *
Recording: A.J. Brunker

Cast

Anton Walbrook (*Paul Mallen*)
Diana Wynyard (*Bella Mallen*)
Frank Pettingell (*E.G. Rough*)
Cathleen Cordell (*Nancy*)
Robert Newton (*Vincent Ullswater*)
Jimmy Hanley (*Cobb*)
Minnie Raynor (*Elizabeth*)
Marie Wright (*Alice Barlow*)
Aubrey Dexter (*house agent*)
Mary Hinton (*Lady Winterbourne*)
Angus Morrison (*pianist*)
Jack Barty (*chairman of the music hall*)
Darmora Ballet (*dancers*)
Allan Lewis, Edwin Ellis, Molly Raynor, Pat Ronald, Alfred Atkins,
Johnnie Schofield, Joe Arthur, Frank Marsh *

UK 1940
84 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**The Manchurian Candidate**

Mon 1 Aug 14:40; Fri 5 Aug 18:00; Sun 14 Aug 14:40

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Tue 2 Aug 18:15; Wed 10 Aug 20:45; Tue 23 Aug 20:50;
Mon 29 Aug 12:00

Sweet Smell of Success

Tue 2 Aug 20:50; Sat 13 Aug 18:10; Mon 29 Aug 18:30

Dance, Girl, Dance

Wed 3 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Pamela Hutchinson, Film Critic and
Historian); Thu 18 Aug 20:45

Gaslight

Thu 4 Aug 18:15; Mon 8 Aug 20:45

Persona

Fri 5 Aug 20:50; Thu 11 Aug 21:00; Wed 31 Aug 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff
Andrew, Programmer at Large)

Raging Bull

Sat 6 Aug 20:30; Thu 11 Aug 20:30; Fri 26 Aug 20:30

La Haine

Sat 6 Aug 21:00; Fri 19 Aug 20:50; Wed 24 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Ginette
Vincendeau, Professor of film studies at King's College London)

Citizen Kane

Sun 7 Aug 14:30; Tue 16 Aug 18:15; Wed 24 Aug 20:40

The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)

Tue 9 Aug 17:50; Sat 27 Aug 17:50

Kes

Tue 9 Aug 20:45; Mon 15 Aug 18:15; Tue 30 Aug 20:40

The Night of the Hunter

Wed 10 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Director of Public
Programme and Audiences); Mon 22 Aug 20:45; Sun 28 Aug 12:20

Notorious

Thu 11 Aug 18:10; Wed 17 Aug 20:45; Sun 21 Aug 12:20; Thu 25 Aug
18:15

Bigger Than Life

Fri 12 Aug 20:40; Wed 17 Aug 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer at Large)

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