

# The Clockmaker of St. Paul

Produced by Raymond Danon; directed by Bertrand Tavernier; written by Jean Aurenche, Pierre Bost, and Bertrand Tavernier; cinematography by Pierre William Glenn; edited by Armand Psenny; music by Philippe Sarde; starring Philippe Noiret, Jean Rochefort, Jacques Denis, Andrée Tainsy, Sylvian Rougerie, and Christine Pascal. Blu-ray and DVD, color, French dialogue with English subtitles, 105 min, 1974. A Kino Lorber Release, [www.kinolorber.com](http://www.kinolorber.com).

The title of *The Clockmaker of St. Paul* refers to Michel Descombes (Philippe Noiret), and to the suggestion that his work is his life. Introduced in a familiar haunt, a local bistro, Michel is repairing the clock back in the kitchen as his friends swap generous portions of local specialties and banter over politics and prostitutes. The death penalty is also a hot topic, and the election returns that come in over the radio will once again disappoint the left, most bitterly Michel's closest friend, Antoine (Jacques Denis), a leftist who mourns the loss of that moment of May 1968, when anything seemed possible.

Michel is surely of the left as well, but he gives it not much thought. His work keeps him busy, and there is a son as well, nearly but not yet grown, who he has raised alone. Michel's life, fittingly, is well ordered and precise; he's the sort of fellow who waits to cross the street with the light long past the hour when any traffic might be expected. And when he sets up shop in the morning, taking down the grates and laying out the wares, his movements have the ritualistic quality of long-standing practice.

Today, however, will be different. The police have arrived at the door. It seems that Michel's van has been stolen, and then abandoned—he must come with them to identify it. Not far from town he is introduced to Commissaire Guilboud (Jean Rochefort), who peppers him with a few odd, innocuous questions, and then, satisfied with what he has gleaned, invites Michel to sit down, and delivers some grim news. “Your son killed a man.”

Noiret and Rochefort, outstanding throughout, could not be better in that moment (Tavernier credits his collaborators with the pitch-perfect dialogue in that scene). And everything that happens in this extraordinary film follows directly from this brief, remarkable exchange—the odd, largely sympathetic relationship that emerges between Descombes and Guilboud, Michel's desperate desire to protect his son, and his realization that the gulf between them had grown even greater than he had imagined. Tavernier describes *The Clockmaker* as “an emotional journey of a father” to find his son. But it is in addition a deeply personal film for its director—shot lovingly in his beloved Lyon and revisiting the locations of his youth

(including a scene set in his childhood home), the movie is also haunted by the disappointments of 1968, and, more subtly, by the lingering humiliation of France's wartime collaboration with its Nazi conquerors. (During the Occupation, Tavernier's father secretly sheltered Resistance figures in their home, including the fugitive poet Louis Aragon.) At one point, Guilboud, standing in the shadow of a monument to those lost in the World Wars, expresses confidence that the manhunt will soon conclude, as “France is a nation of fifty million people and twenty million informers.”

The first feature of Bertrand Tavernier was a long time coming. First a critic, he graduated to film production assistantships, working for the notoriously difficult Jean-Pierre Melville. Shown the door, he became better known (and more successful) as a publicity agent. But like many young French cinephiles working at the margins of the industry, he aspired to direct. Claude Sautet, who, with Melville, was an essential mentor, was an important source of support during those lean years, and Tavernier subsequently would, as a filmmaker, invariably seek out the advice of the director he considered “the greatest script doctor and edit fixer in French cinema.” (Tavernier also dedicated his enthralling late career documentary, *My Journey Through French Cinema* [2016], to Jacques Becker and the still largely underappreciated Sautet.)

*The Clockmaker*, based on *The Watchmaker of Everton* by Georges Simenon, is an exemplar of how the greatest cinematic adaptations of novels are very often inspired by small notions and kernels of ideas within them, as opposed to slavish efforts to be faithful to the source material or misguided

labors to “film the book.” Tavernier's original thirty page treatment and subsequent drafts had vanishingly little in common with *The Watchmaker*. Simenon, whose slim volume was written in America in 1954 and set in upstate New York, certainly could not have had the key influences that shape *The Clockmaker* in mind—the events of May 1968, the somber weight of French politics and history, and the essential role of the living city of Lyon as a key character in setting and story. Moreover, and more dramatically, Tavernier invented out of whole cloth two of the film's crucial characters, the ubiquitous and indispensable Commissaire Guilboud, as well as the fugitive son's childhood nanny (movingly portrayed by Andrée Tainsy, whose distinguished career on screen stretched from 1945 to 2004). Michel's leftist friend Antoine was also invented for the film—as was the weighty suggestion that gender politics and social stratification contributed to the motive for the murder in the film, which, in the book, is left unexplored and barely gestured at as perhaps the sort of “thrill killing” juvenile delinquents might undertake, a concern of some significance across white-picket-fence America in the 1950s.

Simenon is a revered novelist, and dozens of his books have been made into distinguished feature films (notable among them efforts by Jean Renoir, Julien Duvivier, Jean-Pierre Melville, Claude Chabrol, Béla Tarr, and Matthieu Amalric). But *The Watchmaker of Everton* is a flat and undistinguished story, from which *The Clockmaker* draws on one solitary inspiration, that of a single father (even the circumstances of his wife's departure are different and more deftly handled in the film), confronted with



The life of Michel Descombes (Philippe Noiret) is disrupted when he learns that his son has been arrested for murder in Bertrand Tavernier's debut feature *The Clockmaker of St. Paul*.



the shocking fact that his teenage son has committed a murder. Other fragments are retained, such as the boy's subsequent lack of regret, his initial unwillingness to see his father after his arrest, and a final ironic epiphany about their relationship. But Tavernier, who was moved and inspired by the novel, cheerfully (and generously) assesses that the film is about "eighty percent" different from the book.

Tavernier co-wrote *The Clockmaker* with Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, reflecting his admiration for that venerable writing team, but which was also a provocative choice. Decades earlier, the veteran scribes had been singled out for withering criticism—to Tavernier's mind, unjustly—by a youthful François Truffaut in his legendary diatribe and the New Wave polemic "A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema." For Truffaut, Aurenche and Bost were exemplars of the dead hand of the "tradition of quality" that had stultified French films, with their emphasis on faithful adaptations of stuffy literary classics. Tavernier, in contrast, who invariably had a studied eye toward history and its nuances, thought they were in fact great and gifted writers—and in seeking them out for collaboration, pointedly positioned himself as a post-New Wave filmmaker. This was not a rejection of the Nouvelle Vague but indicated an approach which embraced that movement's greatest strengths—intimate, personal stories, innovative shooting, and the search for ambitious expressions of a truthful cinematic form—and synthesized them with an enthusiasm for a broader tapestry of earlier and often overlooked (or dismissed) achievements of French film history. (Thus, Tavernier's extraordinary *Journey* documentary, and his ten-part, eight-hour series that followed in 2017.)

Truffaut took the implicit rebuke in stride. He offered the novice director advice about the project, which at one point he had hoped to develop as his own production, and he would remain among Tavernier's informal set of trusted advisors to whom the younger man showed rough cuts of his films. Regarding *The Clockmaker*, Truffaut was in fervent agreement with Tavernier's courageous decision to shun movie convention and reject the typical (and tempting) approach of adding action to "open up" the story. (One shudders to imagine the Hollywood version of the film.) Instead, and in contrast, Tavernier withholds entirely the story of the fugitive couple, portrayed by Sylvain Rougerie and Christine Pascal. (Pascal would subsequently collaborate regularly with Tavernier, most notably co-writing and starring opposite Michel Piccoli in *Spoiled Children* (1977); she would also direct several films before her life was tragically cut short.) But the visceral, screen-filling action requisite to movies about outlaws on the run—crime, flight, lovemaking, capture, interrogation, and trial—these are of no interest to *The Clockmaker*. It is not a film about a crime, but a character.



In *The Clockmaker of St. Paul*, Commissaire Guilboud (Jean Rochefort) poses a few innocuous questions to Descombes, then gently breaks the tragic news to him about his teenaged son.

It was also, for Tavernier, a deeply personal one. Whether referring to the politics of the post-1968 period, or, with enthusiasm, describing the settings of his childhood featured in the movie, "I put a lot of myself in the film" is a common refrain from the director in interviews about his debut picture. Clearly the location—and shooting on location—were central to the story. Given the opportunity to double his salary if he would simply agree to shoot the movie's interiors in Paris, Tavernier turned the offer down flat. Instead, working closely with cinema-tographer Pierre-William Glenn (who was an invaluable source of support for the first-time director), he favored long tracking shots that threaded continuously from interiors to exteriors, establishing the geography and the integrity of the settings; the verisimilitude of the story was also enhanced by using local nonprofessional actors, including several legendary local restaurateurs.

*The Clockmaker* was well received upon release; it won the prestigious Louis Delluc Prize and a Silver Bear in Berlin, and although not widely distributed in America, it was lauded by Roger Ebert as "an extraordinary film," one that "attempts to show us the very complicated workings of the human personality, and to do it with grace, some humor and a great deal of style." The production also established continuing and essential professional relationships. Tavernier had Noiret in mind for the role from the moment he wrote his initial treatment for the would-be movie; the already established actor signed on and stuck with the project during its long and rocky road to secure financing ("I owe him my career," Tavernier plainly assesses). And the actor would emerge as his director's on-screen alter ego over the following two decades, most notably in the Oscar nominated *Coup de Torchon* (1981), and the justly celebrated masterpiece *Life and*

*Nothing But* (1989). Other enduring partnerships would emerge from *The Clockmaker* as well: Glenn would shoot six of Tavernier's first seven features and Armand Psenny would edit a dozen of his films; legendary composer Philippe Sarde, whose contributions to *The Clockmaker* Tavernier routinely emphasizes, would become another frequent collaborator.

Tavernier would follow this first success with *Let Joy Reign Supreme* (1975), reuniting with Rochefort, Noiret, and Pascal for a politically charged period piece that was showered with front-line C  sar awards, and set him firmly on the course for the distinguished career that would follow. Tavernier's films most typically featured historically sensitive, politically astute, personal dramas that treated the dilemmas of their protagonists with dignity and a Renoir-like respect for the difficulty of the choices with which they were presented; his documentaries mirrored a confident moral compass and an unabashed and undiminished cinephilia, activities which continued apace until his death in March 2021.

The extras on the Kino Lorber discs are outstanding, and well worth the price of admission alone. They include excerpts from Tavernier's forthcoming memoir, a short introduction by Walter Hill, interviews with Tavernier and Noiret from 2001 and again with the director from 2008 (each runs more than forty welcome minutes), and a riveting and informative feature length audio track by the director himself. All too often such commentaries ramble on with tangential anecdotes, and talk over key scenes as if afraid to give away any secrets. But here Tavernier is invariably smart, entertaining, informative, and on point—it is a pleasure to watch *The Clockmaker*, one of the great films of the 1970s, in his company. —Jonathan Kirshner



Historical Consultant Robert Rosenstone's Personal History of Warren Beatty's *Reds*

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