

The Illusionist, a Minority Report

As I left the theater tonight I almost wanted to stop one of the others leaving to ask if they could make sense out of this, the final film from Jacques Tati. The Illusionist is based on a script by Tati, left unproduced at his death. Sylvain Chomet took the script and made it into an animated film.

My first encounter with Tati's work was watching Mr. Hulot's Holiday, produced in 1953. I saw it while I was still in California, and remember feeling the film might actually be dangerous - at various points I was laughing so hard I could not catch my breath, and could easily have given truth to the old saying that one "died laughing". It was black and white, had little comprehensible dialogue, and no tangible plot. A series of sight gags, and an ingenious blending of sound with image, reduced me to tears of laughter.

I later saw his earlier film, Jour de fete, 1949, but wasn't as impressed. In 1958 he produced Mon Oncle, which is perhaps my favorite of his films. I've also seen Play Time (1967), and Traffic (1971). One might say that Tati was a "man of the left", in broad terms. He was essentially French, and more particularly Parisian. He loved the city, but hated what modern life was doing to it - the contrast between the "new" Paris of the middle class, and the Paris Tati loved was highlighted in Mon Oncle.

There is, I fear, a problem of age involved in viewing Tati. A young friend of mine, a man with a sense of humor, and himself a film maker - Anthony Giaccino - patiently sat through a showing of Mon Oncle at my apartment and found it utterly boring. In none of his films can one say there was a specific plot. Tati himself played the leading actor in most of his films; a tall man, with a pipe, and a hat, he had an odd walk that suggested he was always about to fall forward.

Jacques Tati was one of the great film makers of the last century, a man who made use of abstract sound as if it were living dialogue. He took remarkable care in making his films. Scenes that look casual had been carefully set up. It is true that on a second or third viewing of any of his films there is always something new to be found.

And always the danger one might die of laughter.

But I am, alas, an old man - painful to say it, but it may account for my negative view of this final film, The Illusionist. The script Tati left behind had set the story in Prague, not Paris. Sylvain Chomet shifted the primary location to Scotland. Perhaps it might have worked in Prague, which is still European, but Scotland is British. The people living there do not think of themselves as Europeans and emphatically not as French!

This, I suspect, is the fatal flaw in the film. As it opens, in Paris, (and I must say that the color and the animation is marvelous - as a work of visual art the film is remarkable), an aging magician is playing to smaller and smaller audiences, and looking to make a living, he goes to Scotland, with his top hat, his rabbit, and his bag of tricks. But the audiences dwindle. The time for magic and illusion is over. Cinema and television - and computer- generated animation - are the new magic.

Unhappily (for me), there is a kind of plot, as he meets a young woman in Scotland who follows him back to Paris. Yet their relationship is never clear (toward the end of the film she finds a handsome young man whom she takes as a lover). The magician - who perfectly captures the figure of Jacques Tati - finds odd jobs and without further giving away the plot, I will say only that at least the rabbit survives.

The film has several false starts and uncertain endings. Where Tati's other films had virtually no plot, *The Illusionist* can't seem to make up its mind whether to have a plot or not, and, removed from its native Paris, it is a beautiful but totally failed project.

I suspect we have two generations here, the older generation, which in its youth saw Hulot's *Holiday* and *Mon Oncle* - let's face it, those were made (and seen by me) more than half a century ago. A new generation, which may never have seen Tati's work, is watching *The Illusionist* and finding it a five star film, a thing of joy and wonder.

I so deeply regret turning in a minority report. Tati, in his losing battle against materialism and modernization, in his love for the earlier pace of Paris, represented a profoundly humane instinct. Yes, he was saying, technology gives us wonderful things, but it is isolating us. Charlie Chaplin made much the same point in *Modern Times*.

Those of us who are older are probably willing, as I am, to sit through *Mon Oncle* as many times as it is shown. Perhaps *The Illusionist* is for a new generation. It is a lovely film, a work of art, but I must dissent from the majority of the critics who hail it as a masterpiece.