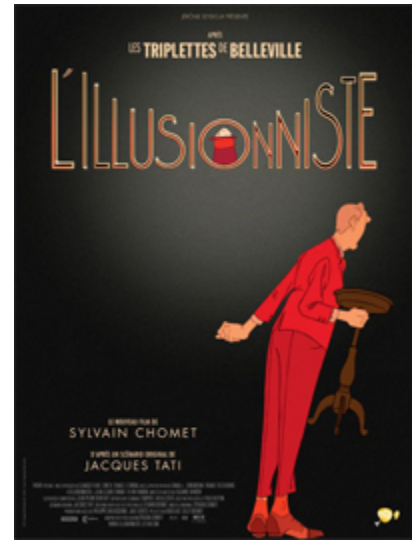


THE ILLUSIONIST

A film review by Ken McNaughton

The Illusionist was nominated for an Oscar in 2011 as Best Animated Feature Film. It is a love letter to Scotland inspired by two remarkable people—the director Sylvain Chomet and co-writer, Jacques Tati.

Sylvain Chomet was born near Paris in 1963, moved to London to work as an animator in 1988 and in the mid-2000s founded an animation studio in Edinburgh called Django Films. His first feature-length animated film, *The Triplets of Belleville*, was nominated for two Oscars in 2003. Jacques Tati burst onto my teenage scene when he wrote, directed and starred in the comedy, *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, which remains a classic. Tati plays a bumbling Frenchman on annual vacation with a variety of characters in L'Hotel de la Plage. He seems unaware that his odd gait and eccentric behavior makes him an alien creature, and he endears himself to some of the guests, despite the disasters he initiates. Part of the underlying sadness is that he is not even aware how much the pretty girl likes him. The movie received an Oscar nomination for Best Writing, Story and Screenplay in 1956. In the same year, Tati wrote a semi-autobiographical script called *The Illusionist*.



Tati had a daughter Helga in 1942 but abandoned the mother and child. In 1944, he married Micheline Winter and would father two children, Sophie and Pierre. Tati's script calls for a frustrated magician to travel across Western Europe to Prague with a devoted daughter-like young woman. Chomet rewrote it so the French magician, unsuccessful in France, travels to London, where he is again unsuccessful. On the invitation of a drunken Scotsman at a reception where he is performing, he makes a long voyage to successively remote parts of Scotland, where he is acclaimed in a small loch-side pub. The chamber maid, Alice, is enamored, follows him when he leaves, and suggests they go to Edinburgh. The magician is a caricature of Jacques Tati.

Chomet thought Tati wrote the script for his legitimate daughter Sophie out of guilt because he spent too long away from her while he was working. Pathé Pictures suggests it was written as a personal letter to his estranged eldest daughter Helga, which *The Guardian* reports is also claimed by Helga's family. No matter. This is a poignant story of father and daughter, with plenty of room for identification as the pair live closely together and go through dramatic and emotional adventures. As a poor, under-privileged young woman, Alice is devoted to this magical figure. She starts to influence his movements and finds that he can satisfy her needs. He accepts her presence, without being too demonstrative, but finds he has to work hard to transform the young woman. Eventually, after she is transformed, the inevitable happens, and he is once again alone.

The real magic here is the art and animation. So many frames are works of art—from stark realism to whimsical humor. I recognized with delight scenes in Paris, London and Scotland. Some looked like photographs, some like impressionist art, others like magical helicopter tours. The little loch-side town looks like Inveraray. Edinburgh itself is a wonder. Some scenes are magnificent tourist views, others dismal vistas in the rain and back alleys. But even the most mundane are so believable as to be laughable. There is very little dialog, except a few

exclamations in French, English and Gaelic. An uncooperative rabbit is a silent partner and there are hoards of interesting characters, such as the Hup Hup Trio. I smiled and laughed most of the way through. The film opened the 2010 Edinburgh International Film Festival.

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