

ely  
film  
society

dec  
2017

the  
notes

coming up @ kings lynn

JANUARY

FILM Thursday 11th 7.30pm

**POPULAIRE**

CLOSE-UPS EVENT

Thursday 18th 7.00-9.00pm

**The Sound of Silents**

FESTIVAL FILM Friday 26th 3.30pm

**MY COUSIN RACHEL**

FILM Sunday 28th 3.30pm

**HOBSON'S CHOICE**

FEBRUARY

FILM Thursday 8th 7.30pm

**MAUDIE**

CLOSE-UPS EVENT

Thursday 15th 7.30-9.30pm

**Hong Kong and Taiwanese Cinema**

details: [www.klccc.uk](http://www.klccc.uk)

# The Illusionist

Sylvain Chomet,  
France 2010

Script by Sylvain Chomet, from an original screenplay by Jacques Tati

With the voices of:

Jean-Claude Donda ...

The Illusionist/French Cinema  
Manager

Eilidh Rankin ... Alice

Duncan MacNeil, Raymond Mearns,  
James T. Muir, Tom Urie, Paul Bandey

This movie by the French film-maker Sylvain Chomet is an act of homage and an act of cinematic love: a classically conceived, hand-drawn animation based on an unproduced script by Jacques Tati, written in 1956: a manuscript evidently guarded for more than 50 years by his family, and particularly his daughter Sophie, until Chomet begged for permission to



adapt it, with a new British setting. The result is utterly distinctive and beguiling, with its own language and grammar of innocence: gentle, affectionate, whimsical, but deeply felt and with an arrowhead of emotional pain. I think it will be admired and loved as much as Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* was 10 years ago.

*The Illusionist* is a semi-silent movie, with rudimentary, mumbled fragments of dialogue, about an old-fashioned variety-turn conjuror at the end of the 1950s, specialising in rabbits and hats, paper flowers and coins. He presents each creaky trick with a deadpan fastidious flourish and a raised forefinger, like a distracted sommelier in an empty restaurant.

Lack of work forces him to leave France for England, from where he heads north and acquires a companion, a girl from rural Scotland, who shares tatty theatrical digs with him as a daughter-figure – or is it that he is her “uncle”? – heartbreakingly dazzled by the dusty, faded showbiz glamour that everyone else finds so passe, or perhaps actually believing in the illusions themselves. It is in Edinburgh, where the movie winds up, that the illusionist becomes disillusioned, but brings off an authentic act of human magic.

Simply being an animation, and an old-style animation, is a great effect. *The Illusionist* is like a séance that brings to life scenes from the 1950s with eerie directness, in a way that glitzy digital animation or live-action period location work could somehow never do. Something in the unassuming simplicity of the composition allows the viewer to engage directly with the world being conjured up. This is, after all, a film for which the 1950s is the present-day. The visions of the old King's Cross railway station in London, or the old boat-train, or Edinburgh with its lonely seaside-cry of seagulls, are all weirdly like a remembered dream of a fictional childhood. Everything is paradoxically, vividly present.

And animation allows the *Illusionist* to be Tati himself, a decision which seems audacious, while being

arguably at the same time inevitable. That unmistakable figure, all elbows, chin, nose and great unwieldy backside, suggests someone between middle-aged and old, and yet also like a gawky, maladroit teenager or hopeless boy. He looks heavy-set and yet agile and eccentrically graceful, as if persistently rising on tiptoe: the Tati-*Illusionist* has something of Hugh Dalton's description of Charles de Gaulle: “A head like a pineapple and hips like a woman.”



**SYLVAIN CHOMET**

**Born: 10 November 1963**

**Maisons-Laffitte, France**

Leaving his native France, an innocent abroad, he gets work coming on after one of the new super-cool pop groups, Billy Boy and the Britoons (do I sense a Gallic disdain for Anglo-Saxon youth culture in that name?). Chomet shows how excruciatingly obsolete our hero has become, waiting politely in the wings as Billy Boy and the band do encore after preening encore for screaming teens who are clearly going to loathe his quaint act. (Lulu is also on the bill, incidentally, but sadly we never see her on screen.)

Later, we glimpse a headline outside a newsagent to the effect that Billy Boy and the Britoons have been involved in a “scandal” and Chomet elegantly leaves it to us to wonder ... a Mick Jagger scandal? A John Gielgud scandal? Billy Boy is still in work, though not a massive star.

The *Illusionist* gets an awful gig at some sub-Glyndebourne summer

party, where a very drunk man in a kilt books him to play his pub in the Scottish Highlands, and it is here that the starstruck girl tags along, running away from home to join him in Edinburgh. The scenario is swathed in innocence. The girl's family are evidently relaxed or fatalistic enough not to pursue her, and there is no question of the *Illusionist*'s intentions being anything other than honourable: he is tender and protective, buying new dresses for his protégée, and without either man or girl fully realising it, she begins, shyly, to blossom.

Piercingly well-observed details are everywhere: the tiling around a hissing old gas fire, the test card playing on the televisions in the shop window, a woman's crucifix matching the cross on her Bible in the train compartment. Whole interior scenes will play solely to the sound of shoes and boots squeaking and creaking across floorboards. In case we thought the movie was too sugary, we see a gang of short-trousered boys booting an unconscious tramp. Yet when Chomet's animated “camera” takes off for a swirling, overhead shot of a lovingly realised Edinburgh, the effect is dashing, breathtaking, even weirdly moving.

Admittedly, one has to adjust to the gentle, undemanding pace of this movie, which does not force its insights and meanings but allows them to meander into view, a pace which suddenly jolts into a higher gear when Chomet and Tati show us how *The Illusionist* loses his faith in his vocation. There is something shocking in the way he deliberately, angrily sabotages a trick with short and long pencils, thus upsetting and bewildering a little boy. But the real magic, the magic he has created, is happening behind his back, and under our noses. *The Illusionist* is an intricate jewel.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS**  
**CENTRAL STATION**  
(Walter Salles, Brazil 1998)  
**Monday 15 January**