

The Main Feature

Season 32 - Issue 10 (screening 9.2.12)

Directed by Sylvain Chomet

Produced by Sally Chomet and Bob Last

Screenplay by Henri Marquet and Sylvain Chomet

Story by Jacques Tati

Music by Sylvain Chomet

Vocal Cast:

Jean-Claude Donda	The Illusionist/French Cinema Manager
Eilidh Rankin	Alice
Additional voices	Duncan MacNeil
Raymond Mearns	James T. Muir
Tom Urie	Paul Bandey



L'illusionniste is a 2010 British-French animated comedy-drama film directed by Sylvain Chomet. The film is based on an unproduced script written by French mime, director and actor Jacques Tati in 1956. Controversy surrounds Tati's motivation for the script, which was written as a personal letter to his estranged eldest daughter, Helga Marie-Jeanne Schiel, in collaboration with his long-term writing partner Henri Marquet, between writing for the films *Mon Oncle* and *Play Time*.

The main character is a version of Tati animated by several people under the lead of Laurent Kircher. The plot revolves around a struggling illusionist who visits an isolated community and meets a young lady who is convinced that he is a real magician. Originally intended by Tati to be set in Czechoslovakia, Chomet relocated the film to Scotland in the late 1950s. According to the director, "It's not a romance, it's more the relationship between a dad and a daughter." Sony's US press kit declares that the "script for *The Illusionist* was originally written by French comedy genius and cinema legend Jacques Tati as a love letter from a father to his daughter, but never produced."

The story is told with only a few brief snatches of heavily accented dialogue. A down-on-his-luck Paris illusionist (known by his stage name, "Tatischeff") packs his meager belongings and props, including an ill-tempered white rabbit, and moves to London. There he finds himself as the irrelevant act following a popular rock band. Despite his wounded pride, he adopts a nothing-to-lose attitude and continues plying his trade at yet smaller venues and private parties.

He accepts the invitation of a drunken party patron, taking a long, slow journey to a remote Scottish island. The small village's pub has only recently been wired for electricity, and he and his rabbit are appreciated for a time. Living modestly in a room above the pub, the illusionist encounters a young girl named Alice who is captivated by his otherworldly abilities and kind gestures, including a gift of new red shoes. Competition from more modern forms of entertainment follow the illusionist even to this idyll, and he soon moves on.

Alice believes the downtrodden performer possesses genuine supernatural powers, and follows him to Edinburgh, where he performs at a modest, out-of-the-way theater. They book a room in a rundown guest house favored by other fading performers (a trio of acrobats, a clown, and a ventriloquist). The illusionist

sleeps on a small couch and the girl keeps busy by cleaning and cooking food that she shares with the neighbors. The girl's affections even tame the rabbit, but the illusionist's increasingly meager wages, lavished on a series of gifts for Alice, lead him to pawn off his magic kit and secretly take on more demeaning jobs. The other traditional performers become similarly depressed and destitute.

Unable to muster the courage to tell his starry-eyed admirer the truth about his fading trade, the illusionist continues giving until he has nothing more to offer. Alice meanwhile discovers the affection of a handsome young man, and once he sees them walking together, the illusionist opts to leave her with money and move on. His final message is a letter that says "Magicians do not exist." Alice subsequently moves in with her new boyfriend.



The illusionist looks longingly at a photo throughout the film, though it is never revealed to the audience. At the end of the film, a photo appears dedicating the film to author Tati's own daughter. During the final train trip, the illusionist looks at the photo for a last time, and his hand drops down where the photo can be vaguely seen, particularly in the Blu-ray release. It is apparently the same picture of Tati's daughter seen at the end of the film.

Controversy has dogged *The Illusionist*, with it being reported that "Tati was inspired to write the story in an attempt to reconcile with his eldest daughter, Helga Marie-Jeanne Schiel, whom he had abandoned when she was a baby. And although she's still alive today and may in fact be his only direct living relative, she is nowhere mentioned in the dedications, which has seriously annoyed some."

In January 2010, *The Guardian* published the article "Jacques Tati's lost film reveals family's pain" stating, "In 2000, the screenplay was handed over to Chomet by Tati's daughter, Sophie Tatischeff, two years before her death. Now, however, the family of Tati's illegitimate and estranged eldest child, Helga Marie-Jeanne Schiel, who lives in the north-east of England, are calling for the French director to give her credit as the true inspiration for the film. The script of *L'illusionniste*, they say, was Tati's response to the shame of having abandoned his first child [Schiel] and it remains the only public recognition of her existence. They accuse Chomet of attempting to airbrush out their painful family legacy again."

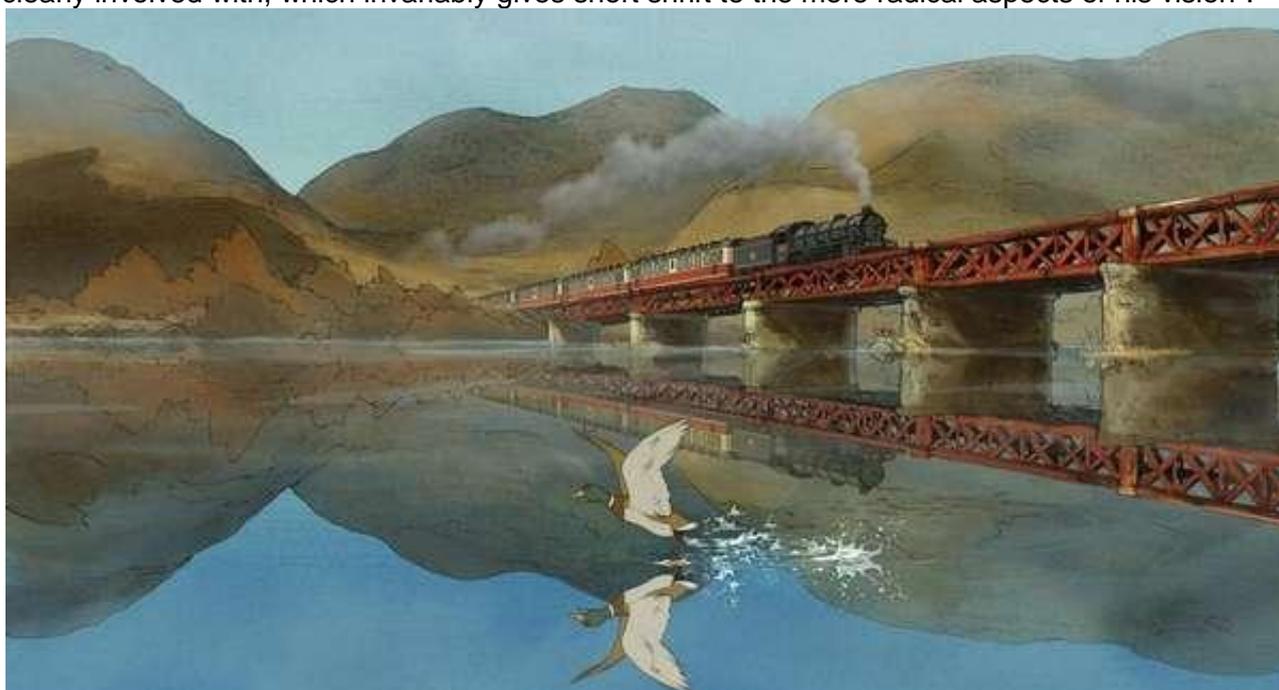


On 26 May 2010, renowned film critic Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* published a lengthy letter from Jacques Tati's middle grandson, Richard McDonald that pinpointed historical events in his private life that the family believe was his remorseful, melancholy inspiration to write, yet never make *L'illusionniste*.

Chomet has a different opinion about the film's origins although acknowledging: "I never got to meet Sophie, or even speak to her about the script." Chomet said, "I think Tati wrote the script for Sophie Tatischeff. I think he felt guilty that he spent too long away from his daughter when he was working."

In a June 2010 interview for *The National*, Chomet gave his personal reasons for his attraction to the script: "I have two young children, a four-year-old and a two-year-old. But I also have a daughter who is 17 who I don't live with because I separated from her mother. She was 12 when I started the project and you can feel things changing." This appears to mirror the regret of a broken paternal relationship that Tati had with his own daughter Helga Marie-Jeanne Schiel. Of the story, Chomet commented that he "fully understood why [Tati] had not brought [*The Illusionist*] to the screen. It was too close to him, and spoke of things he knew only too well, preferring to hide behind the figure of Monsieur Hulot".

Having corresponded with Tati's grandson, former Tati colleague and *Chicago Reader* film reviewer Jonathan Rosenbaum published an article entitled "Why I can't write about *The Illusionist*" in which he wrote, "Even after acknowledging that Chomet does have a poetic flair for composing in long shot that's somewhat Tatiesque, I remain skeptical about the sentimental watering-down of his art that Chomet is clearly involved with, which invariably gives short shrift to the more radical aspects of his vision".



The first footage from the film was shown at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival. The film premiered at the Berlinale festival in February 2010. The film opened the 2010 Edinburgh International Film Festival Pathé Pictures managed distribution for France and the UK, and distribution deals were secured for Lithuania, Japan, Italy, Greece, the United States, Benelux, Russia and the Middle East The first official trailer for the film was Russian and was released on 13 March 2010. The film was released in France on 16 May 2010. The film was nominated at the 2010 European Film Awards and 68th Golden Globe Awards for Best Animated Feature Film. On 25 February 2011, *The Illusionist* won the first César Award for Best Animated Feature.

It was nominated for Best Animated Feature Film in the 83rd Academy Awards, (but lost to *Toy Story 3*), and an Annie Award for Best Animated Feature.

Norman Holden

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