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REVIEW

In and Out of Sync

In the films of Jacques Tati, even system failure can be sublime.

By Fred Camper

In his excellent book *Jacques Tati*, David Bellos recounts an anecdote from the French filmmaker's high school days. In English class, students were required to act out sentences while speaking them. Asked to say "I open the door" and "I close the door," Tati opened the classroom door, then stepped outside before closing it. He considered "which would be funnier, the suspense in the classroom as his absence grew longer, or his triumphant return," and ultimately went home for the day.

That Tati would take an ordinary joke to such an extreme prefigured the way he would push his films toward ever more total views of the world. An indifferent student and something of a dreamer, he dropped out of school soon after this incident, taking up mime (with a routine about a soccer goalie), playing rugby, and working in his family's picture-framing business. In the 1930s, as a professional mime, he attracted the attention of the novelist Colette. ("His act is partly ballet and partly sport, partly satire and partly a charade," she raved. "He has devised a way of being . . . the player, the ball, and the tennis racket.") Several of his performances were turned into short films, two of which he directed.

Between 1949 and 1974 Tati made six features, each great in its own way. All six are being shown in newly restored prints this month at the Gene Siskel Film Center. *Jour de Fete* (1949) and *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (1953) have already screened, but the remaining four—*Mon Oncle* (1958), *Playtime* (1967), *Traffic* (1971), and *Parade* (1974)—beautifully demonstrate his vision of the world as a mix of synchronicities and breakdowns. Things line up in space or they don't, and the mistakes resulting from misaligned views produce many of his gags—like the one in *Traffic* where what appear to be a woman's large breasts turn out to be her baby's buttocks.

The family at the center of *Mon Oncle* (Sat 2/13, 3 PM; Wed 2/17, 6 PM) lives in an absurdly artificial modernist house, and the mother aspires to an impossible perfection, dusting off her nine-year-old son's briefcase before he's driven off to school. Soon the car is on a three-lane highway filled with identical gray cars; everything syncs up, but that's not always a positive for Tati. (Nor is a breakdown always a negative.) He appears in the film as his enigmatic everyman, the pipe-smoking Mr. Hulot, who is the mother's brother. Given a job at the father's plastics factory, Hulot is asked to monitor a hose-making machine, but it malfunctions, creating an endless red strand that sometimes resembles balloons and other times a string of sausages. When Hulot tries to dispose of part of it by throwing it from a bridge into the river, a couple below thinks someone is committing suicide—the mass of red even suggests blood—and the man dives in to save the misshapen object. Such misunderstandings are often the stuff of comedy, yet here the gag is deeper: our dehumanizing surfeit of manufactured goods is underlined by the couple's admirably human response to what they think they see.

Much of the film's humor derives from the



Playtime

quest for control, in architecture and in the family's home life. The family's small garden is decorated with a vertical fish sculpture whose mouth is also a fountain; the mother turns it on when she thinks she has an important guest—and off when she decides, not always correctly, that she's mistaken. Inside the husband's office, a shot of three typists seated in a diagonal line that recedes into the background is rhymed in the next shot by a line of fire extinguishers. In an act of revenge against this prison, Hulot leaves a phone off the hook in the company president's office after making a call, and when the president next uses his phone, he hears cafe noise. In a related scene of chaos, some boys place bets on whether they can get pedestrians to bump into a lamppost by whistling at just the right moment. When one man misses the lamppost initially, then turns around and hits it, the boys argue over who's won the bet.

In Tati's films, such arguments tend to be about more than they seem: What has really happened? How can we understand this world we've made? That same challenge informs the scene in which Hulot, walking through his older apartment building to his top-floor unit, appears in a succession of windows and other openings. *Mon Oncle* is often called a parody of modernist architecture, but here we see that almost any building can create perceptual confusion.

Mon Oncle was followed nearly a decade later by *Playtime* (Sat 2/20, 3 PM; Wed 2/24, 6 PM), widely regarded as Tati's masterpiece. Tati shot the film on a massive set that presents Paris as a monstrous machine, and its vision of a sterile modernist world excited much critical attention. Tati's decision to dispense with a central character contributed to the film's commercial failure, however, and Tati was bankrupted. But if his mime act was partly ballet, so is his cinema; the paradox of *Playtime* is that its spaces and rhythms are not

only dehumanizing but also eerily beautiful. As on the rugby fields of Tati's youth, people and objects can either synchronize successfully or not, but it's possible to have fun either way.

Tati's next film, *Traffic* (Sat 2/13, 5:15 PM; Mon 2/15, 6 PM), though more conventional as a narrative than *Playtime*, has considerable virtues. Hulot has designed a gadget-filled "camping car" that a French company plans to exhibit at an Amsterdam auto show. The truck transporting the camper suffers mishaps of ever-increasing severity, and though the ostensible subject is once again technology and its failures, the film really deals with synchronicity and asynchronicity: Pumping a tire on the side of the road, Hulot bends his body with each stroke so that his butt regularly juts into traffic, and gaps between cars materialize exactly as needed. Or Hulot, walking for gas, passes a man with an empty gas container who's walking in the opposite direction and leads him to a gas pump. Or while the truck is being repaired, the Apollo moon landing appears on TV, a bit of irony reminding us that sometimes technology succeeds spectacularly.

Tati's brief montages of drivers in their cars can be funny—an old man's windshield wiper moves incredibly slowly—but also become an inventory of humanity. Tati's point isn't to praise or condemn anyone but to show the world in all its variety.

His last film, *Parade* (Sat 2/20, 5:30 PM; Mon 2/22, 6 PM), was financed by Swedish television, and though it's often regarded as a lesser work, in some ways it surpasses Tati's earlier films. It shows a single circus performance with Tati as one of the performers; the acts are less than spectacular, but the audience avails itself of Tati's invitation to join in, in an example of what Jonathan Rosenbaum has called Tati's "antielitism." The orchestra attempts to perform short pieces in varying

styles, often disrupted by pranks, and the exaggerated musical modes recall the physical gestures in a mime performance. In another scene, the audience members show their good humor by turning their heads in sync as Tati mimes a tennis match—except for one guy who moves his head in the opposite direction.

After the show is over, two little girls come onstage, stumble about, play with balloons, try to juggle, and then blow into horns—at which point the orchestra is heard on the soundtrack, and Tati watches them from the audience. What makes this sequence so incredibly moving is that Tati has created, at the very end of his career, a scene that transcends the mechanized horrors of *Playtime* and the multiple mishaps of *Traffic*. Only in the play of the youngest children—where there are no rules, no goal, and certainly no goalposts—is the conflict between understanding and misunderstanding transcended. ■

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