

Document Citation

Title	A Jacques Tati program
Author(s)	William K. Everson
Source	<i>New School for Social Research (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	1979 Jul 18
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Tati, Jacques (1909-1982), Seine-et-Oise, France
Film Subjects	Jour de fête (Holiday), Tati, Jacques, 1949

A JACQUES TATI Program

With only a relative handful of films to his credit over a 35-year career, Jacques Tati is not as well known as he deserves to be. He has been lionised by the intellectuals, and certainly over-analysed. Like another French comedian of the same period, Pierre Etaix, he owes a good deal to traditions of silent American comedy and to Buster Keaton in particular. He has never denied or hidden this, although he has many additional and unique qualities of his own. Perhaps one thing working against Tati is that his later films ("Mon Oncle" etc.) tend to be both long and slowly-paced; they're a delight the first time around, but don't reward repeated viewings the way the Keaton films do. Tonight's two films, neither of them widely shown, illustrate quite different aspects of Tati's persona and style.

SYLVIE ET LE FANTOME (Andre Paulve Productions, 1945) Directed by Claude Autant-Lara; Screenplay by Jean Aurenche from the play by Alfred Adam; Camera, Philippe Agostini; Music: Rene Cloerec; English subtitles; 90 mins.
With: Odette Joyeux, Francois Perier, Jacques Tati, Louis Salou, Pierre Larquey, Julien Carette, Jean Desailly.

It may not be totally true any more than a bad NY Times review can kill an art-house picture, but it was certainly true in late 1950, when this film was very belatedly released. It received an awful review, which not only went out of its way to heap scorn and derision on the film, but didn't even mention Jacques Tati either in the review itself or in the cast list. It had a brief first run at the now defunct Beverly Theatre, had a week's second-run in 42nd Street, and then disappeared. The Times seemed particularly incensed that the director of "Le Diable Au Corps" (which we plan to run soon) should waste his time on whimsy, quite overlooking the fact that into this "whimsy" Autant-Lara puts the same sensitivity and poignancy that marked "Le Diable Au Corps", "Douce" and his more serious films. It is a lovely, subtle little fantasy about the pain of growing up, but with a good deal of delightful comedy too, and some very fine playing - ranging from Odette Joyeux's wistful Sylvia to the bravura barnstorming ham of Louis Salou, and the graceful, elegant pantomime of Jacques Tati, playing in silence, as the ghost. Not the least of its appeal is a literally haunting and very lovely score by Rene Cloerec, played on what appears to be a particularly emotional flute. I don't want to say too much about the film because it is slight, gentle and fragile (as that heartless NY Times review showed); the more that is left for the audience to discover, the better.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

JOUR DE FETE (1949; U.S. release in 1952, as "The Big Day"); Directed by Jacques Tati; written by Tati (with Henri Marquet and Rene Wheeler); Produced by Fred Orain; with both English titles and narration; 74 mins.
With Jacques Tati, Guy Decombe, Paul Frankeur, Santa Relie, Maine Vallee, Rafai, Beauvais, Deicassan, and people of the town of Severe-sur-Indre.

Tati's first feature as writer-director-star is his least elaborate, in some ways his best, and quite certainly a charming blueprint for what was to come. In this the influence seems to be only partially from Keaton, and far more from Mack Sennett -- although a Sennett refined by Tati. It manages to be unsubtle and vigorous, and yet at the same time have a kind of elegance, while the satiric jibing both at American efficiency - and American documentaries that boast of that efficiency - certainly transcends slapstick and the sight gag. It was a huge success in Europe and England, where (like "Tawny Pipit") it was recognised as a celebration of the simplicities of rural life. Here it was liked, but the critics seemed to take its rural background merely as a necessary stage for its brand of comedy. It got good but hardly rapturous reviews, stayed around a little longer than "Sylvia", but then it too disappeared, never to re-emerge. (Tati later adopted the policy of allowing only his current theatrical release, or an official reissue between new releases, to be on show at one time. This was rather frustrating to later Tati aficionados, who wanted to go back and study the earlier work. He has just done some touching-up on "Jour de Fete", incorporating some new use of color, and this new version should be in release shortly). "Jour De Fete" (produced by Fred Orain, who also produced "Sylvia") is presented in its "American version by Borrah Minneovich". Publicity at the time slyly suggested that Minneovich (composer-musician-comic-impresario) had actually worked with Tati on the film, but this was not the case. The "Americanisation" fortunately does not represent any tampering other than a slight shift in some of the narration, which in the original was occasionally taken on by the townspeople. Since the film is essentially pantomimic, the occasional use of subtitles and the dominant use of a French-accented narration in English does no harm nor even represents much of a change from the original. It's slight, but both charming and funny and has the added asset of brevity.

William K. Everson

Program finishes 10.44 approx., and will be followed by a brief discussion period.

Please note: since I will not be here for the last two programs, they will start promptly at 7.30., without introductory comments. Notes will be issued as usual.