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FRIDAY NIGHT FILMS

MR. HULOT'S HOLIDAY

Much the same sort of visual satire that we used to get in the "silent" days from the pictures of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and such as those is supplied by the Frenchman, Jacques Tati, in his gay MR. HULOT'S HOLIDAY, which exploded with merriment last evening....

M. Tati, a music hall comedian, is not entirely unknown in these parts, having put in one charming appearance a few years back in a little film called JOUR DE FETE. But the modest distribution of that picture was nothing to what it deserved, so it still remains for many moviegoers to make the acquaintance of M. Tati through his new film.

What they will find in this comedian is a long-legged, slightly pop-eyed gent whose talent for caricaturing the manners of human beings is robust and intense....

There is really no story to the picture. That is usual with M. Tati's films. The whole thing is simply a series of comic mix-ups and casual caricatures, revealing how solemnly and strenuously people go about the job of enjoying themselves.

The dialogue, in French and English, is at a minimum, and it is used just to satirize the silly and pointless things that summer people say. Sounds of all sorts become firecrackers, tossed in for comical point. Music is used for commentary. The gags are played mainly to the eye.

As the picture's author and director, as well as its energetic star, M. Tati goes in for wild invention and occasional piracy....

But they are none the less funny confusions....

From M. Tati's arch performance there emerges a comic character--the amiable butter-fingered nitwit bouncing around a summer hotel. And from several of the other performers--notably Nathalie Pascaud as a blond, Andre Dubois as a retired Army person and Lucien Fregis as the hotel manager--there come glints of human nature that are humorous and memorable.

Perhaps MR. HULOT'S HOLIDAY extends a bit longer than it should. As such things do, it inclines to repetition. But most of it is good, fast, wholesome fun.

Bosley Crowther,
N. Y. Times, June 17, 1954

Because Jacques Tati, a tall, mild-eyed, angular Gallic comedian, works completely in pantomime, he has been often compared to Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and other great clowns of the silent cinema. Actually, the aptest comparison would be to a particularly well-intentioned bull in the proverbial china shop. M. Tati is utterly unable to turn around without upsetting something or somebody. His slightest gesture creates chaos. When he tries to be helpful, the results are catastrophic. Even walking on tip-toes, as he generally does, he leaves a trail of destruction in his wake. He is the kind of man who is forever at odds with the world--machinery misbehaves, objects are always in the wrong place at the wrong time when he is around, the most docile animals invariably act up whenever he appears. As a result, humans tend to run from him. Not that they dislike him or suspect his motives. It's simply that bitter experience has taught them that propinquity breeds disaster.

Tati seems to have only this one string to his bow, but he uses it masterfully. American audiences who have seen him before, as the harassed postman in JOUR DE FETE, know just how masterfully. Prior to that he made a series of comedy shorts that never came to this country. Certainly his latest film, MR. HULOT'S HOLIDAY, is completely within the shorts tradition, consisting of nothing more than a series of hilarious and sometimes brilliant gags built around MR. HULOT'S misadventures at a beach resort in Brittany. There is no attempt at a formal story, no dizzying climax, no final triumph....

In and around all this activity are crowded delightful, slightly satiric vignettes of other, more readily recognizable resort residents: the surly waiter, the cheery old lady, the retired colonel, the businessman perpetually at the telephone, the inevitable bridge players. Since mere form is the least of Tati's worries, he often permits them little gags of their own....

There are even some non-gag scenes that appear to have been included simply because Tati liked them; for example, a charming sequence in which a tiny tot buys two ice cream cones...

Ideas seem to flow from Tati in a cataract. Like a cataract they are rarely neat or tidy, but their effect is cumulative. By the end of the film, even though Mr. Hulot's fellow guests at the Hotel de la Plage are understandably relieved to be rid of him, the chances are that they--like the audience--will miss him just a little. Jacques Tati is the kind of performer who grows on one.

Saturday Review, May 19, 1954