

THE ILLUSIONIST

Original Script – Jacques Tati

Director/Adaptation/Character Design – Sylvain Chomet

Producers – Bob Last/Sally Chomet

Release Date: 12/25/2010 (NY & LA) | TRT: 80 min | MPAA: Rated PG

THE ILLUSIONIST was written by the world famous Jacques Tati between 1956 and 1959. “The story was all about the irrevocable passing of time and I understood completely why he had never made it. It was far too close to himself, it dealt in things he knew all too well, and he preferred to hide behind the mask of his seminal character Monsieur Hulot. You could tell from the start it was not just another Hulot misadventure, all the heart-on-sleeve observations made that crystal clear. Had he made the movie - and I’ m certain he had every camera angle already worked out - it would have taken his career in a totally different direction. He is actually on record saying THE ILLUSIONIST was far too serious a subject for his persona and he chose to make the classic *Play Time* instead”.

Aside from a few structural shifts there was only one major change to Tati’s original treatment Chomet insisted on: “The story originally took place between Paris and Prague and I wanted that changed to Paris and Edinburgh. I went to Prague but just couldn’t picture the action taking place there. And I had fallen in love with Edinburgh when I presented *The Triplets of Belleville* at the Edinburgh Film Festival. I found the city a very magical place - something about the constantly changing light - and my wife Sally and I decided to move there to set up a studio. I had lived in Montreal when making *The Triplets of Belleville* and there is a very Canadian feel to that movie. I believe it’s important to live in the same environment you are trying to animate because your inspiration is then all around you.”

He continues, “There is also the story strand that takes place in a remote village where the community gets electricity for the first time. I thought that isolation would fit one of the Scottish islands more than a hamlet outside Prague. I initially looked at Mull, which led me to the Isle of Iona, its small neighbour in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland. When I read their local history I was astounded to discover that at exactly the same time the Tati story is set (1959), the islanders had a party to celebrate the arrival of electricity from the mainland. So that moment was 100% historically accurate. Also during the same time period the community would virtually be untouched by outside civilization, which made Alice’s naivety work in context. It also made perfect sense for *The Illusionist* to be playing in these last outreaches of vaudeville, too.”

ANIMATION TECHNIQUES – 2D VERSUS 3D

The main challenge for producer Bob Last was to help build and recruit the studio talent, and put in place a specialized pipeline of departments and communication to meet the animation style Sylvain Chomet insisted upon. And that demanding style was mainly based around 2D animation. Chomet remarks, “1960s vintage Disney is my absolute favourite animation period. *The Aristocats* and especially *101 Dalmatians* sum up the energy and artistic roughness you just don’t get from CGI 3D computerized animation. My insistence on hand-drawn 2D graphics comes from the fact the technique gives a more ethereal charm to the art, ensuring the story is always a pleasure to behold, even during moments of inaction. The

strength of 2D in my opinion is it vibrates and it's not perfect, just like reality in fact. Imperfections are important when you are dealing with a story about human characters. It adds to the realism, makes it even more potent. And 2D is created by humans. CGI is good for robots and toys less for humans. I want to see the work of an artist on the screen not a machine whose visuals are too neat, shiny and clean. I prefer me and my pencil - not me with a laptop! Something indefinable is lost designing with a computer. When I draw, aesthetically pleasing things comes to life with a magical quality and visual power."

Bob Last adds, "That complex richness to the animation lines is exactly what gives Sylvain's work its extraordinary edge. The problem was the lack of available 2D animation talent because the conventional wisdom at the moment is everything has to be 3D. However, what with Disney making a big deal about going back to the hand-drawn style with *The Princess and the Frog*, the time is right for worldwide audiences to rediscover the classic pleasures of 2D animation and the subtlety that style brings to the table."

Animation director and assistant director Paul Dutton points out the production had to search far and wide for talented 2D artists. "While there is a small animation tradition in Edinburgh, it wasn't a pool we could draw on for Sylvain's specific requirements that THE ILLUSIONIST had to be in the vintage *101 Dalmatians* vein. There was also the fact that a lot of animators who were doing hand drawing for years had long since moved on to the computer animation industry. So we really had to scour Europe, visiting many cities, before we found our team. Some were old school animators with forty years of experience. Others were recent graduates driving buses in Germany to make ends meet because of the lack of available positions. We eventually built up to a crew of 80 people in the core studio and they all delivered amazing work. The lead studio was eventually augmented by over 100 creatives working in other studios".

CREATING THE ILLUSIONIST

The first job the Django Films personnel had to do was make an Animatic of the entire script for future design reference. "Usually just a storyboard and a few sketches are required," explains Jean Pierre Bouchet, the Lead Composer responsible for assembling and finalizing all the elements of the finished product. "But Sylvain wanted a moving Animatic pushing the tones and character design to try and give a really strong impression of what the overall aim was. The Animatic took a year to do, quite a long time, but there's no question it speeded up the actual production in real terms."

Once the Animatic had been completed and the narrative and artistic levels set, the animators were each given specific characters to work on. Producer Bob Last explains, "Because of the complexity of each of our characters' performances we had to devise ways of splitting up the workload by performance and character rather than by shot, which would be the normal method. For example, Laurent Kircher was the lead animator on The Illusionist character. This created all manner of logistical problems but it allowed us to push the bar regarding fine-tuned detailing."

Laurent Kircher had worked on *The Triplets of Belleville* with Sylvain Chomet and was more than happy to continue that mutually respectful relationship. "Before starting work on the film," recalls Kircher, "Sylvain insisted on all the animators taking life-drawing classes. That

was important to me because The Illusionist's hands had to be anatomically correct and controlled because of the magic tricks. The sleight-of-hand illusions were researched but the other magic wasn't because in animation we can do what we like. Sylvain also invited me to France to meet one of Tati's old acquaintances so I could ask all the questions I needed about his personality. Then during the first three months of production I watched *Mon oncle* and *Play Time* about ten times over to get a feel for Tati's physical movements and mannerisms. One of the most difficult scenes for me to draw was the drunken sequence because no reference existed in any of his films. So I really had to rely on my imagination for that while hoping I kept it true to his behaviour."

Kircher continues, "Another problem was the fact that Tati doesn't tell the joke in any of his films. He isn't the funny thing, the actions around him are. So I couldn't use too much expression on his face. When you look at *Mon oncle* or *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, Tati doesn't play with his face, it's more about gestures. I had to experiment a lot to get that important mime aspect into his body positions."

THE ILLUSIONIST being dialogue-free only added to Kircher's dilemma too. "What distinguishes Tati's films is the way he uses sound to amplify or contradict the images we see on the screen, adding another layer of detail which both adds to the charm and structural complexity. Most tellingly, dialogue is used not to convey information to the audience, but rather as if it was just like any other form of background noise. It is this curious aural mosaic of background sound, music and image that defines Tati's uniqueness and that was something we had to get right, too. We had to go through a lot of testing to see what worked and what didn't within this virtually silent character medium. But the fact there's no dialogue makes the audience try to understand the characters even more. Because it's not laid out for them they have to invest further and that's the true value of this type of animation." "Laurent brilliantly captured the essence of a Tati performance," enthuses Animation Director Paul Dutton. "He was such a huge fan of Tati anyway and was so focused on capturing every telling nuance. So much comic timing and passion went into his drawings. If you watch the Tati movies, he seems to be a man conflicted, stopping and starting all the time. His brain seems to be telling him to do something, but his body hesitates. And it was that kind of hesitation within his performance that proved difficult for Laurent to capture, but capture it expertly he did."

"What I began to notice as THE ILLUSIONIST was growing before me," remarks Lead Composer Jean Pierre Bouchet was that we hadn't created a caricature but a very real personality, one that audiences are going to be thrilled to see on screen again after so many years. I can now look at *Mon oncle* and THE ILLUSIONIST and see how the Tati characters in both are sort of the same but entirely different. They both seem to exist in a parallel universe and that's what everyone worked so hard to achieve."

While all the character performances are rendered in 2D animation, the 3D process was used to augment those images mainly to save time. Digital Supervisor Campbell McAllister explains. "Many of the shots use 3D animation and my job was to make them fit in with the 2D. Most of the props are 3D for example, like the car and Tati's trolley. It would have been impossible to hand draw those in such detail, especially in movement. For example, the car steering wheel is 3D but the hands driving it are 2D, so there was much to-ing and fro-ing

between hand drawn and computer animation processes.”

The Illusionist's rabbit, used in his top hat illusions, is a 2D creation, however,” notes McAllister. “He’s a nasty, aggressive and very obnoxious creature that everyone will fall in love with. He bites, growls and is a complete freak. Like the dog in *The Triplets of Belleville*, the rabbit is a very human character. I think there’s a special connection Sylvain has with animals, and the rabbit just seemed to develop without that much initial intention how we were going to do it. He’s probably the only carnivorous rabbit ever and does all these things that are more human than rabbit-like. His affection for The Illusionist is genuine even though he may not like being shoved into a hat. One of the funniest moments in the movie is where Alice is cooking a stew and The Illusionist thinks the rabbit might be its main ingredient.”

Animation Director Paul Dutton agrees. “The stew scene showcases one of the purest Tati moments, although this is one of Sylvain’s own creations. He’s got this terrible thought that perhaps his rabbit is in the stew yet he still goes through the charade of sitting at the table politely poking at it not knowing how to continue. This sequence also introduces the audience to characters that reside in the same hotel, the clown, which is one of my favourites, and the ventriloquist, and they’re all, like The Illusionist, out of their time. That’s one of the bittersweet threads in the story: a bunch of vaudevillians in relentless pursuit of an ever smaller audience. When Alice comes into The Illusionist's life, he’s just so grateful he is able to entertain this devoted audience of one.”

PUSHING ANIMATION BOUNDARIES

There was another key challenge set by Sylvain Chomet for his team of animators: “I wanted to do something that had never been done before” he explains. “When you think of the animation format you think of short scenes with lots of camera moves because usually the characters are constantly moving to fill the screen with diversionary action. I wanted the camera for *THE ILLUSIONIST* to be locked at eye-level, basically a wide-shot, like watching something on-stage in a theatre. This way you spend time with the characters as if you were standing with them in the same room. The audience can absorb the background depth and detailing, too, because the camera is not constantly roving, mainly to keep kids from getting bored. This technique was just as much of a test as making a new Jacques Tati movie from the ground up.”

Producer Bob Last concurs: “Blocking the scenes in this way is unusual territory for the animation medium. Because the camera was still, the average shot was three times longer than normal. Because it was so wide, the attention paid to detail had to be painstaking. That’s why the movie took five years to make and was a labour of love for everyone involved.”