Katara Doha Film Institute Cinema Presents

MASTER OF MODERN COMEDY

JACQUES TATI
Presented with the support of the French Embassy in Qatar and the Institut Français du Qatar

17–20 March, 2014
Katara Drama Theatre, Building 16

Katara’s Strategic Partners
We at the Doha Film Institute are proud to provide our audiences in Qatar and the Gulf region the opportunity to experience the work of beloved French director Jacques Tati with this exciting retrospective.

Since they first appeared on screens around the world, Tati’s films have generated critical acclaim as well as some of the most robust laughter imaginable. A master of visual comedy whose meticulous approach to slapstick has been merrily celebrated for more than 50 years, Tati also provides a clever, humanistic critique of modern life that is as relevant now as it was in the period immediately following World War II.

Come and laugh along with these classics of French comedy. Whether you are seeing Tati’s films for the first time, reliving cherished moments of mirth, or introducing your youngsters to some of the best comedy world cinema has to offer, we’re sure your Tati experience will be one to remember.

– Doha Film Institute Programming Team
‘Jacques Tati has a feeling for comedy because he has a feeling for strangeness.’ – Jean-Luc Godard

by James Quandt

Much has been made of Tati’s Russian lineage – early in his vaudeville career, he shortened his real name, Tatischeff, for the music-hall marquee – and the story of his family, which is rife with transcontinental conspiracies and kidnappings, might help explain his sense of precariousness in the world. Tati shrugged off all suggestions of Russian influence on his character or his comedy, however, and after a frustrating apprenticeship in his family’s business of picture framing, fled the comfort of his bourgeois home in the suburbs of Paris and took up with a group of bohemians and artists. Exploiting a contemporary national mania for sports, he developed a mime act involving tennis, soccer, fishing and horseback riding, which was to serve as a compendium of gags for his movies.

Between stints on the stage, Tati appeared in short films by major French directors like René Clément and Claude Autant-Lara, then in 1947 directed his own film, ‘L’École des facteurs’ (‘The School for Postmen’), in which his ungainly frame becomes a force of grace, skittering into a jitterbug or racing to catch a departing plane on an antiquated bicycle. Tati’s first feature, ‘Jour de fête’, made two years later, maintained the setting, premise and jokes of the short film, and established the director’s reputation for deadpan virtuosity and technical experimentation. Tati plays a village postman who sees an American newsreel championing the super-efficient US mail system. His attempts to modernise his own delivery methods make for high-velocity comedy, including a blissfully funny sequence in which a drunken Tati cycles his bike into a hedge at night. Though Jean-Luc Godard sees in the film’s affectionate postwar portrait of “la France profonde” the birth of French

Scatter-Brained Angel: The Choreographed Chaos of Jacques Tati
neorealism, and while others sniff a whiff of Vichy values in its celebration of traditional agrarian values, 'Jour de fête' is beloved for its flurry of gags, many of them recalling the music hall or silent cinema, and for its evocation of a place and time seemingly immune to modernity.

Four years later, in 'M. Hulot's Holiday', Tati introduced the character who would be central to the rest of his career. Tati placed at the centre of the film's meticulously choreographed and cruelly observed chaos the figure who would become his eternal alter-ego: Monsieur Hulot, a bourgeois man in a mackintosh, too-short pants and striped socks. The absurdly angular Hulot advanced like a starched ostrich, tilting his way into one mishap after another, serenely causing damage and distress. Tati was himself prone to gaffes and misunderstandings, as either instigator or victim – his meetings with the Pope and Charles de Gaulle, for instance, turning into miscued comedies. He transformed his own intimacy with error into Hulot's aptitude for debacle, perhaps most memorably characterised by French film theoretician André Bazin as the acts of a 'scatter-brained angel'.

It is in 'Holiday' that Tati's status as both popular comedian and as formalist master emerges. Both a pivotal work in film history – many critics cite it with Michelangelo Antonioni's 'Story of a Love Affair' and Robert Bresson's 'Diary of a Country Priest' as the work that ushered in the modern cinema – and a classic of screen comedy, 'Holiday' leaves one not knowing whether to fall about in the aisles or study for a degree in semiotics. There have been many comedies about the hell that holidays can be, but none as transcendentally hilarious as this. M. Hulot's seaside vacation begins badly, at a train station where a series of unintelligible announcements sends holidaymakers scurrying from one platform to another, upstairs and down, back and forth as one mad organism. (An abiding theme in Tati is the behaviour of the group, such as the American tourists in 'Playtime'.) It took four years for Tati to make 'Holiday' and it shows: each accident and casualty is meticulously achieved, often through the exacting and peculiar use of sound; the chaos that Hulot innocently unleashes is orchestrated with phenomenal precision.

Transposed from the beach to the city in Tati's subsequent films – 'Mon oncle' (1958), 'Playtime' (1967) and 'Traffic' (1971) – the hapless Hulot became a bumbling signifier of individuality, introducing what Bazin called “a disorder of tenderness and liberty” into the sterile, standardised postwar world of urban Europe. Little is divulged about Hulot – from film to film, he seems to have no job, no home, no discernible personality or origin – and Tati's bland features and beige dress intensify this sense of neutrality. Hulot is that rare thing: an icon of unfinishedness, made indelible by his air of anonymity. The narratives of these films are themselves 'ghosts' – barely there, mere floating motifs on which Tati hangs his gags and shapes his vision – and their soundscapes are awash in little cries of delight or dismay, floating phrases and nonsensical fragments in various languages and accents, of noises and pronouncements whose source is often unrevealed. Language and sound seem freed of solidity; and place, too, becomes chimerical, quite literally in 'Playtime', when Paris is identifiable only when its famous monuments are briefly reflected in glass doors.

Winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, 'Mon oncle' was an enormous international success. In this brilliant, hyper-designed satire about the impersonality, tedium and sterility of modern life, Tati plays the uncle of the title, whose sister is married to M. Arpel, a plastics manufacturer. The Arpels live in a white horror of hygienic perfection, with a pristine yard, an arsenal of gadgets, and a fountain shaped like a fish that brings to mind not
nature, but rather the factory that produced it. Bringing chaos into this cold, soulless place with its forbidding gate and garden, Tati’s character delights his nephew with his aptitude for accidents. Tati coordinates some of his best gags – malfunctioning garage doors, a very long car trying to manoeuvre into a small parking space, a house that looks like a human – to comment on the way modern life traps humanity within its contrivances.

Tati’s satires champion humanity over mechanisms and individuality over uniformity, but their mise-en-scène determinedly (and delightedly) subjugates humans to decor, design, architecture, mazes and machinery; and none more than his masterpiece, ‘Playtime’. A work of inexhaustible invention, this film cannot be seen too often. Look at or listen to one thing, and you’ll miss something else unfolding in another part of its teeming screen and soundtrack. M. Hulot, affectless as ever, wanders through a modernist maze of glass and steel, encounters a group of American tourists, and finds himself at the opening of a chic nightclub, which, in what is perhaps Tati’s greatest set piece, collapses, quite literally, into anarchy. Decor and design predominate in Tati’s densely composed images of modern Paris; the chairs in the nightclub brand the undraped backs of the women with their insignia.

When ‘Playtime’ failed to recoup its immense costs, Tati’s career began a downward slide that ended in the sad, shambling ‘Parade’, a 1974 film made for Swedish television. Jacques Rivette proclaimed ‘Playtime’ ‘a revolutionary film’, and perhaps it was both too revolutionary in its abstraction and strangeness to be an international success, and not radical enough for the culture emerging in France from the political and social upheavals of 1968. Tati’s last success, ‘Traffic’ (1971), sought to retrench, with M. Hulot as a car designer whose company sends his latest creation, a camper car decked out with all manner of ridiculous gadgetry, in a convoy from Paris to the Amsterdam Motor Show. Pursued by the company’s brash American publicist, Hulot heads north into an endless series of accidents and misfortunes.

Tati, then, is as easily bracketed with high-minded cinéastes like Godard and Bresson as he is with the more populist comic genius of Buster Keaton and Mack Sennett. Like Antonioni, Tati transformed the way we see urban space and architecture, and he made us keenly aware of the interchange between the human and the mechanical or automatic. (Once, when all five elevators
Tati’s first feature film, which had its premiere at the Venice International Film Festival in 1949, introduces several elements that the director continues to explore throughout his career. Perhaps chief among these is the immaculately choreographed slapstick for which Tati is so deservingly loved, with Tati himself taking the central role as the clumsy catalyst for a string of near-disasters. Reduced reliance on dialogue – a hallmark of both ‘M. Hulot’s Holiday’ and ‘Playtime’ – is explored here, especially in the central character’s garbled mumblings to himself.

It’s fête day and François, the local postman, is hard at work, delivering the daily mail on his bicycle. Among the fair’s attractions is a film reel that portrays how the post is handled in America – and the space-age methods of the modern US Postal Service inspire François to step up his game and start delivering parcels in the lazy town ‘à l’américain’, with truly hilarious results.

The film gently pokes fun at the postwar predilection for ‘progress’ and ‘convenience’ through visions of American postal workers jumping through fiery hoops on motorcycles, placing this against a charmingly lazy rural French setting, whose pace of life is best summed up in one of the film’s final lines: ‘If it’s good news, it can wait.’
‘M. Hulot’s Holiday’ is the film that brought Tati’s style of comedy to the world. From its opening sequence, in which a crowd of excited vacationers rush up and down the stairs of a train station trying to find the correct platform, all the while misled by unintelligible announcements over a public-address system, we recognise that we are in the hands of a comic master.

‘Holiday’ introduces us to M. Hulot, Tati’s iconic gauche but well-meaning Frenchman, who seems always to be in exactly the wrong place at precisely the wrong moment. For M. Hulot, the mere opening of a door is sufficient to cause chaos; one can hardly fathom what might result when he stumbles across a stash of fireworks in the darkness.

Perhaps most charming about ‘Holiday’ is its fond treatment of its many characters – each and every one of them, from mischievous children to English matrons, portrayed as both amusing and endearing. As he does in all his films, Tati proves here that the funniest thing in life is other people.

Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot
France / French / 1953
83 minutes / Colour / dcp
Director: Jacques Tati
Producer: Fred Orain
Screenwriter: Jacques Tati, Henri Marquet, Pierre Aubert, Jacques Lagrange
Cinematographer: Jacques Mercanton, Jean Mousselle
Editor: Suzanne Baron, Charles Bretoniche, Jacques Grassi
Production Designer: Henri Schmitt
Sound: Roger Cosson
Music: Alain Romans
Cast: Jacques Tati, Nathalie Pascaud, Michèle Rolla, Lucien Fregis

Les Films de Mon Oncle – Specta Films C.E.P.E.C.
Winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1958, ‘Mon oncle’ sees the return of M. Hulot to the screen, this time for a series of very funny run-ins with the superficial trappings of modern life in France.

Tati lampoons the bourgeois materialism of postwar France by contrasting happy-go-lucky M. Hulot, who lives in a rundown Parisian garret, with his affluent sister and brother-in-law – the Arpels – who inhabit an impersonal, high-modern, concrete-slab bunker, complete with not-to-be-trodden-on decorative grass, unwelcoming and uncomfortable high-concept furniture, a kitchen full of new-fangled push-button gadgets so ‘convenient’ they are nearly impossible to use and, in a very telling running joke, a gurgling fountain that is only turned on for sufficiently ‘important’ visitors.

The clue to the dissonance between these lifestyles lies in Hulot’s nephew, who prefers the company of his uncle to that of his parents and enjoys the simple, if occasionally naughty, pranks that youngsters are fond of playing. The Arpels’ condescending pity for the happily penniless M. Hulot lead them to find him a job in M. Arpel’s plastics factory and engage in some matchmaking with an arriviste bachelorette neighbour, all of which sets the stage for Tati to engage in his customary comic genius.
Playtime

Tati always displayed an ambitious streak – ‘Jour de fête’, his first feature was shot using colour film that was new, unproven – and, until 1992, unprocessable (thankfully, it was simultaneously shot in black and white). Nine years in the making, ‘Playtime’ involved the construction of a set so extensive it became known as ‘Tativille’ – complete with glass-and-steel office buildings and even a working escalator. The downside of this exercise was that it brought about Tati’s bankruptcy. On the plus side, however, the result is a magnificently imaginative cinematic treasure that is generally considered Tati’s masterpiece.

The film takes place over the course of about 24 hours, as M. Hulot meanders through the streets of a hyper-modern Paris, where he visits a trade show, engages with a group of economy-class American tourists, becomes hopelessly lost in the impenetrable maze of an office tower, and spends a raucous night in a fashionable restaurant.

The Paris of ‘Playtime’ is a cold, angular landscape of uniform grey boxes that seem purpose-built to confound its inhabitants, keep them separated one from the other and ensure an endless series of mishaps and misunderstandings – fertile ground for Tati’s brand of comedy, and an excellent setting for his bemused critique of the impersonal vibe of modernity.

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Thursday, 20 March, 7:30 PM

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France / French / 1967
125 minutes / Colour / DCP
Director: Jacques Tati
Producer: Jacques Tati, Bernard Maurice
Screenwriter: Jacques Tati, Jacques Lagrange
Cinematographer: Jean Badal
Editor: Gérard Pollicand

Production Designer: Eugène Roman
Sound: Jacques Maumont
Music: Francis Lemarque
Cast: Jacques Tati, Barbara Dennek, Rita Maïden, France Rumilly, France Delahalle, Valérie Camille, Erika Dentzler, Nicole Ray, Yvette Ducreux, Nathalie Jem

Les Films de Mon Oncle – Specta Films C.E.P.E.C.
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