

Some thoughts on watching films

Stories are the stuff of life. They allow us to reflect on all sorts of issues at a safe distance as we engage with the characters, cry with them, laugh with them, get cross with them and generally share their experience. How they deal with the issues they come across may frustrate us, or give us new insights; cause us to laugh or cry; result in us hurling abuse at the screen or willing there to be a happy ending. And through it all we can encounter God in all sorts of unexpected places if we only take time to look.

Questions to ask yourself

What did you think of the film? What do you like most? Least?

Which incidents made you *think* or *feel* most strongly? How well did you think the film treated those incidents?

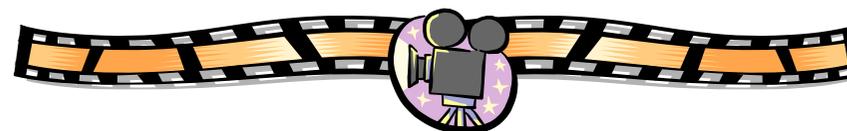
What issues did the film raise for you?

What character(s) do you most identify with and why?

Does the film have any echoes of Christian beliefs or stories from the Bible? Does it support or challenge Christian values?

Some facts about the film

- Setting of Tati's original script was Prague, but Sylvain Chomet moved it to Edinburgh, where he lives and has his animation studio.
- In the original script, the rabbit was a chicken. Sylvain Chomet thought that the chicken wouldn't work, so he changed the chicken into a rabbit.
- The pawnbroker's shop is called "Brown and Blair", a clear reference to the last two Labour Prime Ministers. The shopfront is modeled on the real Duncanson & Edwards pawnbrokers on Edinburgh's Queen Street.
- When the Illusionist is performing at the Scottish pub, one of the patrons in the foreground, near the middle of the frame, is the famous "Young Girl and Old Woman" optical illusion.
- The film was nominated at the 2010 European Film Awards and 68th Golden Globe Awards. It was also nominated for an Oscar in 2011 for Best Animated Feature Film, but lost out to *Toy Story 3*.
- After watching the film Jonathan Meville of *The Scotsman* wrote: "Edinburgh's skyline has never looked so good, and if the city didn't exist it would be hard to believe somewhere so beautiful was real: if locals aren't inspired to take a walk up North Bridge or down Victoria Street after this, they never will be."
- The island referred to in terms of the coming of electric light is Iona.
- The magician in the film is clearly based on Tati himself and it wasn't until 2002 that his daughter, Sylvia, gave permission for the script to be produced. However, she couldn't contemplate the thought of another actor portraying her father, so animation was suggested as a possible alternative.



**A chance to watch films together.
An opportunity to discuss the issues raised.
A time of friendship, food and fun.**

3rd Apr Precious
8th May Creation
5th Jun Keeping the Faith
3rd Jul Never let me go
7th Aug The Illusionist (2010)
4th Sep Lemon Tree

**Films start at 5:30pm
Followed by food, coffee and conversation**

**10 Bletchingdon Road
Islip**

**Further details from Jonathan (Ox 842214)
Email: info@spiritualityonscreen.org.uk
Web: www.spiritualityonscreen.org.uk**

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The Illusionist

The Illusionist, made in 2010, is based on an unproduced script written by French mime, director and actor Jacques Tati over fifty years earlier, in 1956. Although some controversy surrounds Tati's motivation for the script, it is believed it was written as a personal letter to his estranged teenage daughter, Helga Marie-Jeanne Schiel. Tati had met Helga's mother, Herta, when she and her sister were working with him in music-hall theatre in Paris during the German Occupation. When Herta became pregnant, Tati's formidable sister Nathalie, a wealthy businesswoman, advised him not to marry. Eventually, Herta was persuaded to sign a legal document releasing the performer from his duties as a father in return for money and she left the country with her baby, going on to marry another man.

Tati's treatment of Herta and her child was the scandal of theatrical circles in Paris and he was shunned for a while by many of his former colleagues at the Lido de Paris. Sadly, the shame surrounding his decision to drop Herta is thought to have prevented Tati from making any attempt to contact his daughter. Yet, if we are to believe the sentiments expressed in the film, he longed to have known her.

The plot itself revolves around a struggling illusionist who visits an isolated community and meets a young lady who is convinced that he is a real magician. As the director says, "It's not a romance, it's more a relationship between a dad and a daughter."

The Story

The story is set in 1959 and is told with only a few brief snatches of heavily accented and often indistinguishable dialogue. The eponymous illusionist, Tatischeff, is an elderly gentleman struggling to keep up with the ever more fast-paced world. Failing to find work in Paris, he moves to England, along with his few belongings and a bad-tempered white rabbit. In England, he performs in front of a crowd of two, where moments before the theatre had been jam-packed full of the raucous fans of rock band Billy Boy and the Britoons. Despite his wounded pride, he adopts a nothing-to-lose attitude and continues plying his trade at yet smaller gatherings in bars, cafés, and even private parties.

He eventually accepts the invitation of a drunken party patron, taking a long, slow journey to a remote Scottish island. The small village's pub has only recently been wired for electricity, and he and his rabbit are appreciated for a time. Living modestly in a room above the pub, the illusionist encounters a young girl named Alice who is enthralled by his tricks and kind gestures, including a gift of new red shoes, and believes him to possess actual magical capabilities. Competition from more modern forms of entertainment follow the illusionist even to this idyll, and he soon moves on.

Alice follows him to Edinburgh, where he performs at a modest, out-of-the-way theatre. They move into the Little Joe Hotel, a haven for other performers on their way out - a trio of acrobats, a ventriloquist and a clown. He begins to wither away, doing ever more demeaning jobs, while at the same time 'magically' providing her the expensive gifts she longs for. She takes care of him, cleaning the apartment and cooking food, as well as offering some to the neighbours. The girl's affections even tame the rab-

bit, but the illusionist's increasingly meagre wages, lavished on a series of gifts for Alice, lead him to pawn off his magic kit and secretly take on more demeaning jobs. The other traditional performers become similarly depressed and destitute.

Unable to muster the courage to tell his starry-eyed admirer the truth about his fading trade, the illusionist continues giving until he has nothing more to offer. Alice meanwhile discovers the affection of a handsome young man, and once he sees them walking together, the illusionist opts to leave her with money and move on. His final message is a letter that says "Magicians do not exist." Alice subsequently moves in with her new boyfriend.

Things to reflect on

Relationships

As outlined above, the story is believed to have arisen out of an unfulfilled relationship. Are there similar relationships in your own life which you long to have had but, for whatever reason, never worked out? What would you want to say to that person if you had the chance?

Being believed in

The isolation of Alice's small village has created a young girl ready to believe in what most would perceive as a harmless piece of entertainment. The film contrasts her open-minded acceptance of Tatischeff's powers with the illusionist's growing frustration with life. And he isn't the only one. The clown almost commits suicide and the ventriloquist turns to alcohol. It is only his relationship with Alice that keeps the illusionist from giving up altogether. His devoted one-person audience is his reason to keep going. Similarly, we also need someone to believe in us and offer their support. Who has that been for you? And who are you able to encourage and support by your belief in them?

Change

Much of Tati's work is nostalgic, based on the premise that "old is good; new is bad". In this case, the illusionist finds it very difficult to cope with the changes to the world going on around him. He just longs for everything to be as it used to be. How much does his story resonate with you? How well do you cope with change? And what has that to say to the church? Is the church being left behind? Or, in moving forward, how does it cater for those, including maybe you, who like things as they used to be?

Stories without words

The story is portrayed beautifully yet uses very few words. What might we learn from films such as this in terms of getting the message of the gospel across to people without getting bogged down in too many words?

The illusion of perfection

In the end, despite the bond between them, the young girl moves on, leaving the illusionist behind. Throughout our lives, there will always be times when people let us down, and we let them down. None of us is perfect and we all make mistakes. We hurt the people we love, and they do the same to us. Despite our best intentions, and all of the illusions we try to create, no human being is perfect.