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 intellectualists, and certainly over-analysed. Like another French comedian of the same period, Pierre Étaix, he owes a good deal to traditions of silent American comedy and to Buster Keaton in particular. He has tried to innovate and to hide 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 (André Paulve Productions, 1945) Directed by Claude Autant-Lara; Screenplay by Jean Aurenche from the play by Alfred Adam; Caméra, Philippe Agostini; Music: Rene Cloerec; English subtitles; 90 mins.

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 Corrèze" (which we plan to run soon) should waste his time on this, quite overlooking the fact that into this "whimsey" Tati put the same sensitivity and genuine care that marked "Le Diable Au Corrèze", "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 bruvraa barnstorming has 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, planned on what Tati calls "autocad" to be "too much" but not too much about the film because it is slight, gentle and fragile (as that heartless New York Times review showed); the more that is left for the audience to discover, the better.

Ten Minute Intermission

JOUR DE FÊTE (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 Decomble, Paul Frankeur, Santa Relle, Maine Vallee, Raefa, Beaumard, 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 two jibing both at American efficiency and American docility conveys a sense of that efficiency — certainly transcends slapstick and the eight gag. It was a huge success in France 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 films critical release, or an official release 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 Fête", incorporating some new use of color, and this new version should be in release shortly.

"Jour de Fête" (produced by Fred Orain, who also produced "Sylvia") is presented in its "American version" by Borrah Minevitch. Publicity at the time may suggest that Minevitch (composer-musician-comic-impresario) had actually worked with Tati on some 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.

Program finishes 10:44 approx., and will be followed by a brief discussion period.

Please note once 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.

William E. Eversen