

[The Illusionist](#) directed by Sylvain Chomet



Reviewed by [Dave Porter](#) August 2010

Adapted from a script by Jacques Tati, this movingly affectionate portrait of vaudeville life during the inter-war period can lay claim to be an animation masterpiece.

Chomet has lovingly created a nostalgic homage to the sad and lonely lives of stage performers who drift from one rundown theatre and boarding house to the next, and for whom in the end the magic has literally gone.

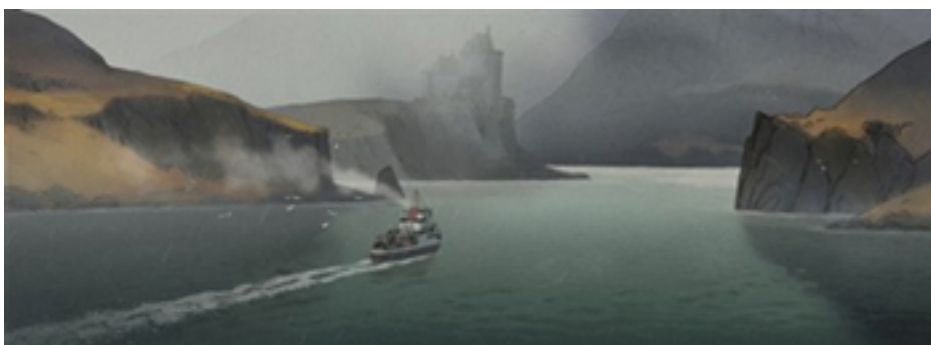
For anyone familiar with Chomet's other cinematic prodigy, *Belleville Rendez-Vous*, you may be surprised at such a straightforward tale. Gone are the absurdist elements which gilded *Belleville*; what we have instead is a touching avuncular relationship between an ageing magician and a sweet-hearted parlour girl from the Highlands.

Chomet has been resident in Edinburgh for some years and this is where the protagonist fetches up after leaving his native France. On the way, he makes a herculean trip to a Scottish highland village, where the young girl is smitten by his magic tricks. This is less highland fling,

however, than highland flung to a remote way of life where the switching on of an electric light bulb is seen as more a magical moment than anything the illusionist can lay claim to.

There are some hilarious comic moments in the film's early section, which gradually give way to knowing satire and, ultimately, baleful reflections on lost lives.

As an outsider Chomet allows himself remit to poke some sly digs at British life. Edinburgh is meticulously recreated in every pre-war detail but it's the shop signs which impart to the film a tart flavour. The camera pans past a Mac Donnalds restaurant, and later the illusionist visits a pawnbrokers by the name of Brown and Blair.



But there is genuine love in Chomet's depiction of Edinburgh and the Highlands – the film is a perfect gift to the Scottish tourist board. Music hall misfits wander through the capital like ethereal ghosts until the same city eventually swallows them up. The illusionist becomes suitably disillusioned, working nights in a garage to make meagre ends meet.

Ultimately the magic fails to work anymore and the only thing left for him is to vanish himself from the cityscape.

But hope remains. The parlour girl meets a young intellectual and sees a new life ahead, far removed from the drudgery she had seemed destined for, while the illusionist sets off once more on his travels seeking that last bit of magic.

Showing at the [Cornerhouse](#) until 2 September 2010