



# PIERRE ETAIX : FRANCE'S FORGOTTEN COMIC GENIUS

Though a collaborator of legendary French director Jacques Tati and renowned screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, Pierre Etaix – influential clown, illusionist, circus performer, writer, actor and Oscar winning director – remains one of his nation's most cherished, but little known, treasures.

By Frank Bren.

The odds are that you have never heard of Pierre Etaix, nor seen his films. Longtime friend Jerry Lewis describes Etaix as "one of the great forces" of twentieth century film comedy. Variety called him "one of the leading film comic creators on the world scene", while for the Sydney Sun-Herald "there are comedians good and bad, and there are artists like Pierre Etaix, who [is] something like pure oxygen compared with air." In short, he has remained the world's number one cine-clown since 1965. Etaix is alive and well and living in Paris yet, despite his many international awards, he has somehow "vanished" from the film scene since 1971. One of his shorts (Insomnie) is a classic of the vampire genre, another (Happy Anniversary) won an Oscar in 1963, and his relatively small output - much of it written with his friend, the prolific and highly regarded screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière - remains absolutely timeless.

At the moment, cinephiles in France are up in arms over the potential loss of Etaix' films. A bizarre legal mess, involving alleged legal misconduct compounded by unfortunate decisions made by Etaix and Carrière, threatens to quarantine these movies from public view for another nine years. This has led to a vigorous campaign at the website [www.lesfilmsdetaix.fr](http://www.lesfilmsdetaix.fr), which hosts an online petition of more than 2200 signatories from all walks of life, each commenting on what Etaix' movies mean to them. Woody Allen and other notables signed a paper petition to make the movies available, and to restore their ownership to the two authors. But time is running out. Even if the filmmakers eventually win their rights, a sluggish legal process may outlive them, as Etaix is now 79-years-old and Carrière is 76.

Despite his advanced years, Etaix is enjoying something of a revival. International distributors, including one from Australia, are eager to re-release his films. A new book, *Etaix Draws Tati*, has just come out showing hundreds of his drawings and designs that helped to create iconic French filmmaker Jacques Tati's 1958 classic *Mon Oncle*. Last year, special screenings of Etaix' considered masterpiece *Yoyo* (1964) - from an impeccably restored print were triumphs in Cannes and at the Cinematheque Francaise, and had distributors vying for the rights.

Still, the general public amnesia - outside of hardcore cinephiles - around this filmmaker is amazing, stemming partly from the unavailability of his films and from his refusal to release them to video or television. But just who is Pierre Etaix?

## FRANCES EARLY COMIC GIANTS: LINDER, TATI, ETAIX...

France has produced three outstanding filmmaker-comics in what we call the tradition of "burlesque" cinema: Max Linder (1883-1925), Jacques Tati (1907-1982), and Pierre Etaix (b. 1928). Burlesque cinema is best personified by the works of legendary actor/filmmaker Charlie Chaplin (who acknowledged Max Linder as a major influence), the pioneering Buster Keaton and The Marx Brothers, the physical and verbal elasticity of Jerry Lewis, and even Hong Kong's Jackie Chan, whose films reveal a great admiration for Keaton. Typically, such comics want total control and - like Jerry Lewis, Chaplin and Keaton - are extremely articulate about their craft, which is not all just about being funny. Etaix says that he doesn't laugh so much watching Keaton as feel a certain ecstasy - as if landing in an ideal universe.

## THE APPRENTICE : WORKING WITH JACQUES TATI

For Pierre Etaix, it mostly began with the circus and famed filmmaker Jacques Tati. By 1954, in his native Roanne, the 25-year-old Etaix was a nascent clown, inspired to that end since childhood by the visiting Pinder Circus, and by the small-gauge films (starring Laurel & Hardy, Harry Langdon, Chaplin and other "old" comedians) shown by his parents. He worked in local amateur theatre, while training in the plastic arts, learning

stage magic, playing musical instruments, performing acrobatics, and achieving other accomplishments vital to a clown's armoury. As all clowns know, to juggle comically you have to do it well. Later commentaries on Etaix by those such as Maud Linder (daughter of the aforementioned comic pioneer Max) attest to the staggering range of Etaix' clowning and performing skills.

In 1954, Etaix saw Mr. Hulots Holiday. The much loved and highly influential film confirmed Tati's reputation, and was a thrilling discovery for Etaix. Tati - who debuted in 1949 with the feature film *Jour De Fete* - had arrived seemingly from nowhere as a breath of fresh air in the then arid comedy scene of French cinema. It was the outcome of Tati's gradual rise through amateur revue, professional music hall performances and short films before and after World War Two. When Pierre Etaix heard Jacques Tati speaking on radio about his admiration for skilled illustrators, the young clown-come-actor - also talented with the pencil - impetuously gathered a portfolio of his artwork and settled in Paris, finally gaining access to Tati by late 1954 when he joined the Mon Oncle creative team.

Mon Oncle became Etaix' film school. He worked as an on-set go-fer, and also took on the roles of storyboardist, gagman, assistant director and uncredited player. Descriptions of Etaix' work on the film can be found in David Bellos' dense and highly readable book, *Jacques Tati. His Life And Art*, which is a rare instance of anyone writing anything at all in English about Etaix. Sadly, the book details a vindictive side of Tati in his near complete brushoff of Etaix when the young man left him in 1959 to become a clown and music hall artist in his own right. The wrench clearly hurt Etaix, who would never talk of Tati other than in terms of admiration, and as a master. On the other hand, it must have galled Tati to see his protegee pick up a Prix Louis Delluc (a prestigious movie award for the best French film of the year) in 1963 (as Tati had done ten years earlier) and an Oscar that same year! Worse, Etaix would make three features before Tati could follow up his own Oscar success (*Mon Oncle*) with a new film, *Playtime*, which finally surfaced in 1967.

In 1961, however, Tati temporarily "forgave" Etaix by hiring him at the last moment for his extraordinary music-hall show, *Jour De Fete a l'Olympia*, an unpredictable mix of filmed and onstage action with the setting of a village fairground (reminiscent of Tati's film *Jour De Fete*) spilling over from the stage into the auditorium. "When Tati was preparing *Jour De Fete a l'Olympia*," says Etaix, "I was performing a 'number' in a music hall - Tati knew about it, but never, because of our break, thought that I might perform with him, much as I wanted him to propose it. But eventually, on the day before, he asked me!"

Tati's show absorbed many of Paris' variety acts as his agents combed the city's music halls and clubs. They saw Etaix perform, but made no contact. Finally, out of interest, Etaix went to watch the final rehearsals of *Jour De Fete a l'Olympia* at the theatre, sitting quietly at the back. That's when his moment came. "Curiously," he explains, "at that moment, Tati was on the stage, asking his secretary, 'Have you telephoned Etaix?' She said, 'Yes, but they told me that he had left.' I said, 'No! I'm here!' Tati looked astonished, and said, 'You are so quick!'"

It wasn't a complete thawing between the two, but Tati at least broke the ice and gave the nervous Etaix a prominent position in the programme. It clearly gives Etaix pleasure to remember this period - and so it should, after he'd ground away almost anonymously for years in the smaller venues of Paris. For the first time, Etaix experienced laughter - and gales of it - at an entirely heady new level. Etaix' act - which was in pantomime and featured simple recalcitrant objects like his chair and the buttons on his jacket - attracted the attention of film producer Paul Claudon, himself a fan of yesteryear's film clowns. And that's where Etaix' cinematic career began.

## **A PARTNERSHIP FORGED : WORKING WITH JEAN-CLAUDE CARRIERE**

As Tati had so irrevocably changed Etaix' life, Etaix would have a similar effect on screenwriter Jean-Claude Carriere, though theirs was definitely a partnership, as opposed to a master-apprentice relationship. Now 76, Carriere looked set to become a professor of literature when Tati entered his life in the late 1950s. Tati had a contract to novelise his two Hulot films, *Mr. Hulots Holiday* and *Mon Oncle*, and was looking for the right novelist. Carriere got the job, while Pierre Etaix would illustrate, and the two formed an instant friendship. Publisher Robert Laffont issued both books in 1958, with the latest re-editions in 2005.

Since then, Carriere has worked with some of cinema's finest talents, writing screenplays for the likes of Volker Schlöndorff, Milos Forman, Louis Malle and Andrzej Wajda. In the theatre, he worked for thirty years with the renowned Peter Brook, most notably on the epic production of *Mahabharata*. Then there was legendary Spanish

film director Luis Bunuel (*That Obscure Object Of Desire*, *The Phantom Of Liberty*, *The Discreet Charm Of The Bourgeoise*), who chose Carriere as co-scenarist for his 1963 film, *Diary Of A Chambermaid* (with Jeanne Moreau) on the basis of the work that he'd done with Etaix. Bunuel adored Keaton's and other films of that ilk.

From the time that they met, Etaix and Carriere hit it off with their shared passion for "golden age" movie comedies, particularly those of Laurel à Hardy. As Carriere put it, he never conf used comedy with speed. Laurel & Hardy were masters of taking their time, which perfectly suited Etaix and Carriere's first essays on small gauge (8mm) films, followed by their first commercial shorts for producer Paul Claudon, the man who had discovered Etaix on stage at Jour De Fete a l'Olympia. They first made *Rupture*, and then the Oscar-winning *Happy Anniversary*, both in 1961, before embarking on a joint career that would take them through to 1989's *I Write In Space*. As cowriters cross-pitching gags and storylines, retaining only those that they both find amusing - then and weeks later - their process continues today when it can, as Carriere works constantly abroad on projects with other filmmakers. Carriere's eclectic career is thus anchored with three entirely different directors: Bunuel, Brook and Etaix.

## **FIVE FEATURES OF PIERRE ETAIX :**

### **THE SUITOR (1962)**

Released in 1963, Etaix' debut feature, *The Suitor*, took everyone by surprise. It was the *Amélie* of its day - it broke box office records in France and was hugely popular worldwide, including in Australia, where it played in Sydney and Melbourne's arthouse cinemas for eight to nine weeks each, winning rave reviews in the process. It charmed hardened reviewers like Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, for what that critic had believed was a lost art: "old" comedy whose dialogues are primarily gesture and well-constructed chain gags.

In 1962, well before it was released in France, the newspaper *France Soir* called *The Suitor* "the most clandestine film in Paris. It's made by an unknown, starring the same unknown, who is supported by other unknowns. Who is this Etaix?

33 years, dark brown, a Southerner (born in Roanne) ... he can do anything - play the violin and piano, draw... he' s done everything - painter, glass designer, humourist, illusionist, clown."

The plot of *The Suitor* is wonderfully silly and full of sight gag classics, or as *Time* magazine said of the film, "it's a sight gag soufflé". The main character, a man in his 30s (and probably a virgin), is an only child in a well-to-do household in Paris, buried eternally in studies of the constellations or other meaningful matters. His parents urge him to find a wife. Like a man from Mars, with no such experience, he wanders the streets of Paris studying dating and mating rituals on the streets, in nightclubs, and at pavement cafes ... with hilarious results. Besotted with a TV singer who resembles Marlene Dietrich, he goes to the Olympia theatre where she performs. While waiting to see her, he amuses bystanders with the jacket-and-buttons routine that the real Etaix performed there the year before. Eventually disappointed, the suitor finally returns home to find true love. This plot description, however, hardly prepares you for the magic of this film. The more ecstatic critics (for example, Georges Sadoul) called for the celebration of "the birth of a new comic!"

### **YOYO (1964)**

Thanks to his hit debut, Etaix' next film justified a much bigger budget, and the result was *Yoyo*, considered by many to be his masterpiece. Much deeper than *The Suitor*, and extraordinarily beautiful to look at, *Yoyo* is a love letter to the circus, and a film buff's paradise, with its discreet homages to Max Linder, Keaton, Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. It moves from the late 1920s through to the 1960s, the first third focusing on a bored millionaire (Etaix) who lives in a sumpluous castle, constantly dreaming of his lost love - a skilled horsewoman who left him years earlier for the freedom of circus life. Servants and entertainers do their best to distract him to little effect, the best example of which comes with a wonderful striptease scene, the unlacing of a boot, which is given an erotic charge by the rousing jazz score of Jean Paillard. The millionaire hires a passing circus for his own entertainment, and discovers that their leading horsewoman is... his lost love. The circus' youngest clown is their son, Yoyo. Then follows the stock market crash, and the fate of the adult Yoyo (Etaix again), who eventually becomes a rich and successtul clown. But is he really happy?

Due to its restoration by Francois Ede, this is probably the first Etaix film that we will be able to see. Co-starring Claudine Auger, it is crammed with wonderful gags and certain autobiographical detail. Like a few classics, it fared badly at the box office the first time round. But not for American comic actor and director Jerry Lewis. On April 7, 1965, Lewis flew into Paris to play scenes in *Boeing Boeing*, a Paramount comedy directed by John

Rich. This was a contract job, delaying work on Lewis' own film, *The Family Jewels*. Just before returning to the US, he called his friend, Robert Benayoun, the *Positif* film critic who had long championed his movies in France. Benayoun immediately urged Lewis to see *Yoyo* before it disappeared. Etaix' name meant nothing to Lewis but, intrigued, he went to see it at *The Marbeuf Cinema*. *Yoyo* blew him away. Lewis immediately called the startled Etaix and demanded to meet him. They arranged a hasty rendezvous at *The Ritz*, and as Etaix later said of Lewis to writer Michel Lengliney: "Right away, he said something extraordinary! 'After seeing *Yoyo*, I know that I've known you for a very long time. I've been getting discouraged with my own work, but tonight you restored my courage." Lewis' viewing of *Yoyo* kicked off a friendship that has lasted 43 years...

### **SO LONG AS YOU' RE HEALTHY (1966)**

This was a "portmanteau" film of three shorts on a similar theme - namely the pains of living in a modern society. It's as close as Etaix has come to a Tex Avery style gag-fest, and was often accompanied by his short film *Insomnie*, a realistic spoof of the vampire genre in which a young man with insomnia reads a vampire novel in bed. It was shorter but funnier than Roman Polanski's own admirable spoof, *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967).

### **THE GREAT LOVE (1969)**

*The Great Love* took on a theme similar to Billy Wilder's famous Marilyn Monroe vehicle *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). Etaix's film is set in Tours, where his debut short film *Rupture* won attention in 1961 at the city's annual short film festival. In *The Great Love*, a young man settles for an easy life by marrying the daughter of a wealthy industrialist. The domestic routine dulls his senses until one day he hires and fails for a new secretary. It's not what he does about it, but rather what he dreams he might do about it that drives the laughs. The film's greatest scene has ambulant beds prowling country roads carrying him and other dreamers with their imagined lovers. It won the *Grand Prix Du Cinema Francais* (an award that no longer exists) at the end of 1969.

### **LAND OF MILK AND HONEY (1971)**

This was recently described as surprisingly modern, but at the time, certain critics seemed to take Etaix' "bad taste" movie as a personal affront, with some lashing out at the director personally, and never seriously questioning his motives and apparent change of direction. Accompanying wife Annie Fratellini on a singing tour in various locations throughout France, Etaix and a documentary cameraman shot more than twenty hours of footage of the French at play, accompanied by audio interviews. Another look at modern living (as in *So Long As You're Healthy*), but distilled over eight months from a huge amount of film and audio footage into a comprehensible comedy, *Land Of Milk And Honey* became a personal tragedy for the filmmaker and his career, as he was subjected to personal attacks well outside the brief of any critic, effectively ending his big screen career almost completely.

### **THE LATER YEARS...**

Pierre Etaix, however, has rarely been idle. He has made a few smallish films including publicity shorts, and has an excellent reputation as an author and playwright. Rene Marx' well illustrated biography, *Le Metier De Pierre Etaix*, which appeared in 1994, remains in print as a testimony to Etaix' talents, and particularly to his films. In 1971, the film company CAPAC, which produced Etaix' films, decided to stop making them anymore. At the time, Etaix and Annie Fratellini were busy on tour as clowns with *The Pinder Circus*, the same performing troupe that had inspired him as a child in Roanne. The couple appeared that year in Federico Fellini's film, *The Clowns* (1971) and in 1974 co-launched "*L'Ecole Nationale du Cirque Annie Fratellini*", one of the first circus training schools in Europe, and an important proponent in the global revival of the circus in the following decades. The *New York Times* described Etaix and Fratellini as France's "premier clown duo." Etaix' own projects, including a proposed film in the 1970s to star Jerry Lewis, were ignored. Times had changed for Jerry too, even in France where he could supposedly do no wrong. Symbolising the bad luck which has dogged him since then was Etaix' near resurrection in 1986 after having prepared an ambitious feature based on *The Bible's New and Old Testaments*, which he pitched at Cannes in 1985. Etaix' friend, Coluche - the most popular and bankable comic in France - agreed to star. But just before they co-signed a contract, on June 19, 1986, Coluche accidentally ran his powerful Honda 1100 motorbike head-on into an unseen lorry. So died both Coluche - clown and acid-tongued funnyman - and the last dream film project of Pierre Etaix. Regrettably, he has remained a missed opportunity for French and world cinema. But what he did produce should and will be restored for a new generation ... and it is unforgettable.

For more information,  
Head to [www.lesfilmsdetaix.fr](http://www.lesfilmsdetaix.fr)