



The Main Feature

Season 44 – Issue 14 – Screening 10 April 2025

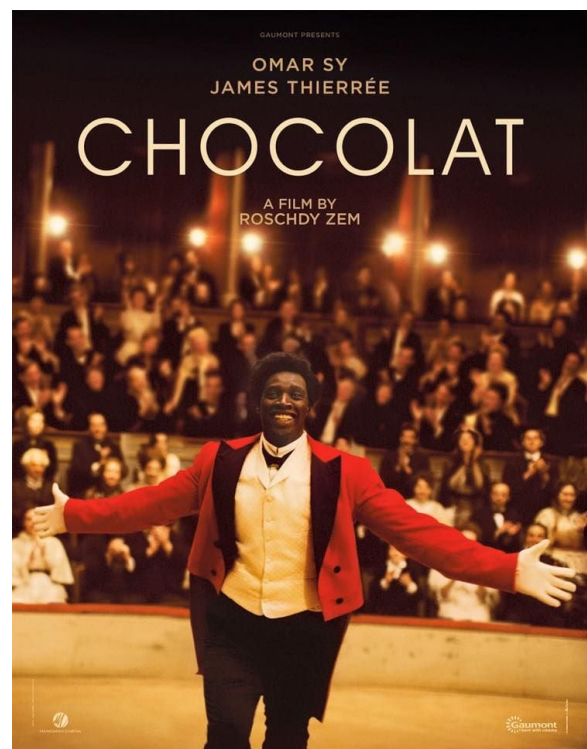
Chocolat

France, 2016 119 mins Certificate 12
In French/with subtitles

Director	Roschdy Zem
Writers	Cyril Gely, Olivier Gorce, Gérard Noiriél, Roschdy Zem
Cinematography	Thomas Letellier
Music	Gabriel Yared
Production Designer	Jérémy D. Lignol

Cast

Omar Sy	Rafael Padilla/'Chocolat'
James Thierrée	George Footit/'Footit'
Clotilde Hesme	Marie Hecquet ('Miss Educational')
Olivier Gourmet	Joseph Oller (Nouveau Cirque de Paris)
Frédéric Pierrot	Théodore Delvaux (Owner, Delvaux Circus)
Alice de Lencquesaing	Camille



Our presentation tonight tells the story of Chocolat, the first black circus artist in France. The film is very loosely based on the real life of Rafael Padilla, the son of a slave from Cuba, who was himself indentured to a Spanish farm before escaping to the circus and eventually finding himself the toast of Paris society.

The film begins in 1897, at a low-rent travelling circus in Northern France. George Footit attempts but fails to impress the owner, Mr Delvaux, with his rather tired slapstick act. At the evening show he sees "Kananga" a gangly, exuberant black "cannibal" who struts the ring and frightens and enchants the paltry audience. Footit proposes a partnership with the performer, devising an act based on a white authoritarian clown and a black scapegoat, to be re-named Chocolat. They are so well received that the director of the Nouveau Cirque invites them to join his famous, 1,500-seat Parisian establishment. They are an immediate success and Chocolat in particular becomes well-

known. Such was his impact as a performer that "être chocolat" remains a French synonym for being fooled, often in a public and humiliating manner.



However, the envious wife of his previous employer divulges Chocolat's illegal status and he is arrested and tortured in prison. Before Footit helps secure his release, Chocolat shares a cell with a Haitian intellectual who berates his stereotypical and humiliating ring persona. Chocolat may be celebrated as a star but increasingly he is made into a racial caricature (as one poster advert tellingly shows). Jealousies multiply between the duo and with other Nouveau Cirque performers, and Chocolat eventually

tires of playing the slapped-about foil. Encouraged by his lover Marie (a widowed, well-connected nurse) he joins a theatre to play the first "authentically black" Othello, confronting the racism of French society and his own dramatic limitations, whilst grappling with his crippling gambling debts.

Chocolat is portrayed as a gregarious and charismatic extrovert who enjoys the trappings of success, with a penchant for liquor and an eye for the ladies but an increasingly toxic gambling habit. The actor Omar Sy has previously appeared at the club in *The Intouchables*, a well-received film (score 8.29, January 2014) where he plays an ex-con caring for a wealthy paraplegic. The notes (see <https://wncc.org.uk/pdf/680.pdf>) record that he topped the poll in the newspaper 'Le Journal de Dimanche' for the most popular French personality in 2012 when the film was released.

James Thierrée – who as Charlie Chaplin's grandson should know something about clowning and slapstick - plays Footit as a morose introvert, viceless but joyless, a perfectionist who struggles with Chocolat's free-wheeling approach to their act. Both actors were nominated for Césars (the French Oscars) with Thierrée winning for supporting actor. The film also won best production design for the sumptuous Parisienne sets.

Chocolat was a modest hit in France (grossing \$11.8m from 1.9m admissions) but Switzerland aside (gross \$1.1m) made little impact elsewhere. It does not appear to have been theatrically released in the UK or North America. It was retitled *All Out* for some markets, presumably as there are several recent films with a similar title to *Chocolat*, but that seems a remarkably clumsy choice unrelated to the content (well, it makes me think of England on the first morning of an Ashes test in Australia).

It is nonetheless a fascinating and compelling story, covering 20 years. The film does take some liberties (the prison and Othello episodes for instance are complete fabrications) and the treatment of racism is fairly gentle rather than stridently urgent. The film is carried by the two leads, whose characters are well-drawn and complement each other. There is a scene where their act is filmed by the Lumière Brothers for the new-fangled world of cinema: just before the end-credits the actual resulting short *The Tilting Chair* is shown.

Eugene Smith



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Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 16 April 2025
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

The Lumière Brothers



Eugene Smith's notes for *Chocolat* mention the Lumière Brothers filming the circus act as *The Tilting Chair*. Co-incidentally, the Director of the Cannes Film Festival, Thierry Frémaux, has brought out a second documentary about the brothers.

Interviewed in *La Tribune de Dimanche*, Frémaux said he remembered seeing his first Lumière film in 1982 at the press conference announcing the creation of the Institut Lumière in Lyon. He watched *La Sortie de*



l'usine Lumière and – like everyone else – he thought he had already seen it. But he was wrong – it was a genuine first for him. Since then, his mission has been to show that Louis Lumière was a great film maker, and not just an inventor.

Frémaux's first film on the brothers was in 2016 (*Lumière! - l'aventure commence* *Lumière! – the adventure begins*). It was a collection of 108 of the films made by Auguste and Louis Lumière grouped by theme (family, Paris, 1900, the world and so on) with a commentary by Frémaux himself, music by Saint-Saëns, and an appearance by Martin Scorsese, another Lumière brothers fan. The film was the most profitable in France in

2017, not because of huge audiences but because it cost only 15,000€ to make.

Lumière – L'aventure continue! (*Lumière, the adventure continues!*), out this year, draws on another 120 unseen early films made from 1895 onwards, and follows on from his earlier film, this time with music by Fauré



In the interview, Frémaux draws the distinction between Edison, who had also invented a process for moving images, and the Lumières. The latter invented the technique, the art, the concept of the cinema with the big screen, the audience and the need to expand what was offered. From this came the idea of sending operators round the world to make films to supply the new cinemas. In all they produced almost 2,000 films of around a minute each.

Frémaux commented on the durability of cinema despite its death being announced many times in the face of television, video, cable or reality television. But he believes cinema is made of solid stuff. That is all the more true after Covid closed cinemas the world over. The cinema has become a special and unique place. 'We are going to the pictures' encompasses both the physical place and cinema itself. Streaming platforms are designed to allow the 'individual' consumption of films but there are still people who want to go to the cinema to discover a work which will move them with a bunch of strangers.

A sentiment endorsed, no doubt, by members of our own club.

Michael Hipkins

Comments and reactions to: **All of Us Strangers**

No of reaction slips received = 24

Average score = 4.75

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
~		2	2	2	3	8	3	2	1	~	1

I need to process this – it has left me quite bereft. Wonderful acting.

We enjoyed the short.

A remarkable, unusual film. Very emotional and nostalgic. Worth a second viewing.

Excellent short. Main film not to my liking but well-put together

Improved massively in the second half after subtitles were turned on. Poor sound in first half spoiled the performance for me.

Too much mumbling. Subtitles would have helped in first half.

A very different film. Acting was well worth watching. The content was rather strange.

Found "time travel" very odd

Though well-acted and presented, not my sort of film.

Enjoyed the short film. For me – no more films like the main feature please.

Very slow.

Apologies but unable to hear the introduction given to the film. Maybe a microphone would have helped?

Slightly ridiculous. Heart-breaking. Almost perfect.

Quite an emotional journey.

Disappointing considering the cast. Played like a mediocre Black Mirror episode.

There are some great films about ghosts interacting with living people but this isn't one of them.

[...] This was a film promoting homosexuality by a like director. I have friends and a brother who are homosexual, I do not have a problem with this, I do not want to see films promoting it. I left after the intermission.

Not sure what was going on most of the time. Not really my kind of film.

The first half was uncomfortably voyeuristic; I wish that I hadn't seen it. No real takeaways for me.

Position	Film	Average score
1	One Life	8.80
2	Maudie	7.97
3	The Great Escaper	7.96
4	Wicked Little Letters	7.66
5	The Holdovers	7.62
6	Anatomy of a Fall	7.22
7	The Taste of Things	7.16
8	The Color Purple	6.77
9	Past Lives	6.46
10	Winners	5.88
11	Barbie	5.59
12	Slow	5.54
13	All of Us Strangers	4.75

Forthcoming attraction: 24 April 2025 – **Poor Things**



The score is brilliant. It absolutely captures the kind of semi-steam punk, fantastical, mythological, Frankensteinian... all that stuff. And yet at the heart of it, there is an emotional story... Mark Kermode

Emma Stone's performance is dazzling, but all the actors - chief among them Mark Ruffalo, who plays a ridiculous Lothario who, in Bella, finds more than he can handle - appear to be having the time of their lives. New York Review of Books

Absolutely batshit, utterly filthy and a true original: Poor Things is as good as Yorgos Lanthimos and Emma Stone have ever been. Empire Magazine