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HONEY BABY

(GERMANY-FINLAND-LATVIA-RUSSIA)

A Stamina Media, MDR, Twenty Twenty Vision (Germany)/Marianna Films, YLE TV1 (Finland)/Eho Filma (Latvia)/Slovo Films (Russia) production. (International sales: Stamina Media, Halie, Germany.) Produced by Ulrich Meyszies, Mika Kaurismaki. Co-producers, Thanassis Karathanos, Janis Vingris, Elena Yatsoura, Sergey Melkumov.

Directed by Mika Kaurismaki. Screenplay, Ulrich Meyszies, Kaurismaki, Eike Goreczka. Camera (color, widescreen), Timo Salminen; editors, Karen Harley, Kaurismaki; music/songs, Nikki Sudden, Henry Thomas; production designers, Jorgis Krasons, Peter Weber; costumes, Patricia Puisy; sound (Dolby Digital), Paul Jyralaa; associate producers, Jacques Driencourt, Henry Jacob, Claudie Ossard; assistant director, Bohdan Graczyk; casting, Rick Pagano, Alla Petelina. **Reviewed at Karlovy Vary Film Festival (Horizons), July 7, 2004. Running time: 115 MIN.**

With: Henry Thomas, Irina Bjorklund, Helmut Berger, Kari Vaananen, Helena Gorbunova, Katerina Golanova, Aleksandrs Radzevics, Bela B. Felsenheimer, Kai Wiesinger.

(English, Russian, Latvian dialogue)

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By LESLIE FELPERIN 2004

A freewheeling road movie that meanders across Germany and Latvia into deepest Russia, helmer Mika Kaurismaki's "Honey Baby" weaves back and forth between the commercial fast lane and the arthouse off-ramp. Although graced with many felicitous touches, not least an authentically felt sense of place, pic too often takes wrong turns. Still, toplineer Henry Thomas ("E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial"), gamely performing his own songs for his rocker role, lends a charismatic presence, as does co-star Irina Bjorklund ("Me and Morrison"). Pic looks set for globetrotting fest play, less robust theatrical prospects and eventual cult status on DVD.

Story begins in an unnamed German city where heavy-handed cross-cutting introduces the two leads. Broke and desperate for the money to go home, washed-up American singer-songwriter Tom Brackett (Thomas) accepts an offer from his slimy agent (Bela B. Felsenheimer) to tour Russia and the Baltic States.

On the road to Kaliningrad, Tom meets Russian Natascha (Bjorklund), who's on the lam, having dumped her glowering Central European mafia don fiance, Karl (Helmut Berger), at the altar. Natascha is being chased by Karl's thugs and so she steals Tom's two most prized possessions, his Russian Gaz-13 "Tchaika" sports car and his Gibson guitar. But after listening to his CD on the car stereo, she falls in love with his music — pic's first hint that the narrative is based on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Tom hitchhikes to Kaliningrad where he finds Natascha waiting, offering her services as tour manager. Inevitably, the odd couple's bickering morphs into attraction, stimulated by vodka and a bout of nocturnal skinny-dipping. He learns she was raised on a bee farm and nick-



A TASTE OF HONEY: *Henry Thomas stars in "Honey Baby," from helmer Mika Kaurismaki.*

names her "Honey Baby."

Cheesy, quasi-hardboiled narration by Tom occasionally points out the blindingly obvious. But film also injects some artery-clearing wit, as when Tom and Natascha find he's been replaced by a Tom Brackett impersonator.

Losing the car and all their money and possessions in an escape from Karl's thugs — although Natascha somehow manages to generate a new wardrobe — the two, by now deeply in love, join a Russian circus. This section goes too far in repping a slice of Slavic whimsy; it's painfully reminiscent of Sergei Bodrov's 2002 Venice clunker, "Bear's Kiss."

Last, slow-grinding act increases the Orpheus references. As with his previous features "L.A. Without a Map" and "The Last Border," Kaurismaki displays a genuine affection for beautiful losers and unlovely, unloved outposts of civilization. His C.I.S. is a gray zone with unexpected splashes of beauty, peopled by interesting, non-pro faces. And as expected from a director who showed such a passion for music in his docu, "The Sound of Brazil," "Honey Baby" sports an eclectic, well-chosen soundtrack.

Unfortunately, the most crucial musical component is the weakest: The folk-inflected downbeat ballads Tom sings, written by Thomas and Nikki Sudden, are mediocre at best, and Thomas' off-key voice never convinces. Otherwise, both main thespians offer nice turns, the striking Bjorklund once again proving to be one to watch.

Nicely modulated lighting by Timo Salminen, regular d.p. for both Kaurismaki brothers, niftily complements gritty production design and coats pic with a magical glow. Sluggish pacing could be cured by losing 10 minutes at least.