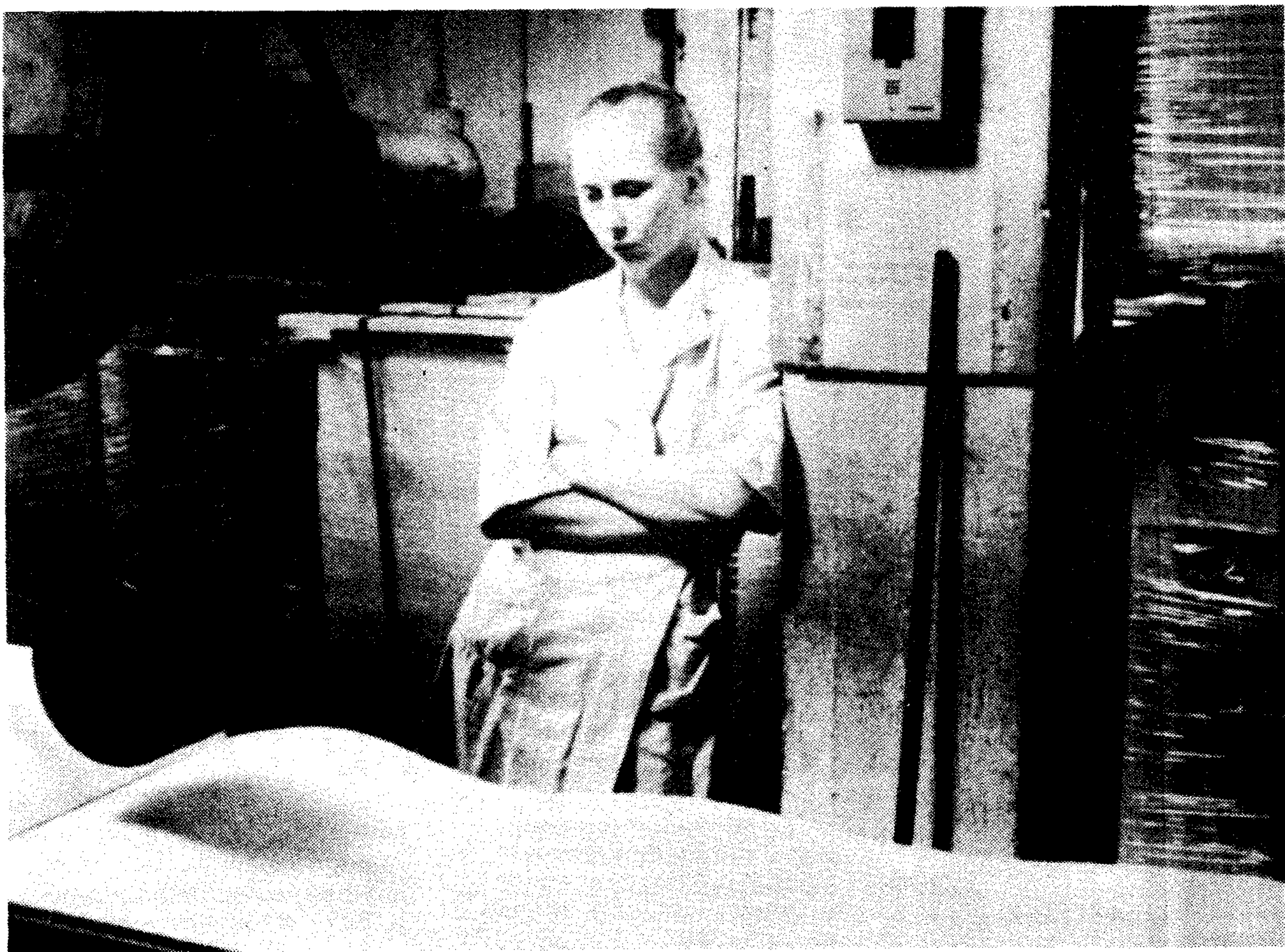


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Where have all the flowers gone: Match maker Kati Outinen.

# GRIM FAIRY TALE

**THE MATCH FACTORY GIRL.**  
DIRECTED BY AKI KAURISMAKI.  
FRI/9-THURS/15 AT THE ROXIE, SF.

BY CHUCK STEPHENS

**B**ALANCED BETWEEN the bluntly schematic and the sweepingly universal, Aki Kaurismäki's *The Match Factory Girl* is a film so artfully emptied-out you could watch it twice and still see everything, and almost nothing, in it. As film narrative, this 70-minute Finnish masterpiece is so slight it seems to dissolve upon conclusion. But as a darkly funny gender parable, it's as psychoanalytically rich as anything by the Brothers Grimm.

Iris (Kati Outinen), the film's wilted heroine, is a flower that's never seen the sun (this is Finland, after all). Pallid, defeated, her nose rubbed red and raw, she lives in the shadow of all that surrounds her. Her days are spent on the assembly line, her nights preparing dinner in her thankless parents' dingy flat.

Occasionally, she makes doomed forays to a dumpy dance hall. When finally she meets a guy — a disturbingly bearded zombie named Arne — he promptly impregnates and abandons the delicate Iris.

With the ticktock logic of an age-old fable, Iris eventually goes looking for a little low-key payback. Her succinct and inspired responses to the mandates of adversity make for a reasonable chain of retribution — if an altogether disquieting bedtime story. The New York Times observed that the film moves from “heartbreaking” to “outrageously funny,” but the film's delightful first half seemed to me quite rollicking, each new bit more comically grim than the last. Kaurismäki appears to have had just this sort of mixed reaction in mind: a pivotal scene finds Iris weeping inexplicably over some off-screen Marx Brothers shenanigans at her local cinema.

Even when it seems that there's nothing much happening (half the time?), little things mean a lot (a fancy chicken leg, a dime-store

romance, silence). The director's love of didactic, deceptively single-minded compositions recalls the austerity of Robert Bresson and, especially in the film's sudden reintroduction of Law and Order, Jack Webb. In vibrant counterpoint, Kaurismäki's constant cameraman, Timo Salminen, is a master of the strategically deployed Ugly Color: Every green is the shade of rot on bologna slices, every pink a repellent gash. Clanging against the color scheme, Kaurismäki loads a joyfully irritating sound track with Finnish schlockabilly, velveteen crooners, and a smudge of symphonic something the press credits list as “Tchaikovski.”

Kaurismäki, like his homeland, has a well-known love of the culture of alcohol. *The Match Factory Girl* sometimes feels similarly intoxicated: It's stiff, hilarious stuff. But it's also a fairy tale with a hangover instead of a happy ending. Anyone who mistakes the moral of this woman's story for “empowerment” probably needs another drink. ●