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Heartbreak, Pop. 1

The Match Factory Girl's long fuse

BY STEVE ERICKSON

IRIS, A FACTORY GIRL IN HELSINKI, MEASURES her desolation in the daylight by the number of matchbooks that pass her on the assembly line, and at night by the empty soda bottles that pile up beneath her dancehall seat as she futilely waits for a man's invitation. It doesn't take more than five or ten minutes of Aki Kaurismaki's new *The Match Factory Girl* to establish the joylessness of Iris' life. Even the small moments that might give her pleasure have become either so much a part of her bleak routine or such a transparently empty distraction from that routine that she just cries through Marx Brothers movies at the local theater. After work she goes home to her parents, who take her paycheck and treat her as a servant while they watch kids Iris' age shot down on TV in Tian An Men Square; Iris sets the dinner table

ground or an orange on the table — images of isolation — have emotional implications that are difficult to imagine in Bresson. When she finally gets herself picked up in a club, dancing with her head on the shoulder of a man who's indifferent to everything about her but the possibility of sex, Iris glows for a moment with a fleeting flawed loveliness, lit from within by hope. That we know the dance is really hopeless only makes the moment more devastating.

SINCE I'M MORE THAN HAPPY TO SEE MINIMALISM fade into oblivion as the cheap aesthetic it always was, I feel odd championing a movie like *The Match Factory Girl*. Yet perhaps because Kaurismaki's art comes from a time and place where minimalism is not an aesthetic but a way of life, where reductiveness is not an intellectual vanity but reality-ground zero, his movies have the effect for which Western minimalism always presumptuously flattered itself: that of expanding one

vision rather than narrowing it. In the brief exchange of just a few words between Iris and her brother, we suddenly understand that the "father" to whom she's been bringing home her pay is not her father at all, and suddenly everything about her situation takes on new meaning, even though nothing more is made of it. In Kaurismaki's minimalism, the unspoken always feels like a secret rather than a surprise package where the surprise turns out to be that there's nothing in it. The Finland of *The Match Factory Girl* — strangely deserted, with life always lived indoors — is within spitting distance of history even as it has so long declared itself inviolate to history that it mistakes spiritual inertia for political transcendence.

The monumental events of 1989 may be bubbling underground, threatening to come up through the kitchen floor any minute and disrupt the country's precious neutrality once and for all, and everyone's terrified by the prospect. They're glued to their TVs as though to keep history boxed and under glass.

Compared with the lifelessness around her ("I'm pregnant," Iris announces to a co-worker; "Really?" the other woman answers, dropping her cigarette and walking away), Iris seems more alive for her pathos; and because she seems more alive, she's also infuriating. As portrayed by Kati Outinen, she's internalized her own plainness to the verge of being grotesque. Her eyes shine out of huge dark circles and her mouth is perpetually fixed in a slash of defeat. The movie knows this about Iris, as it knows that all its characters' silences are open to more than one interpretation; the truly appalling thing about the man who takes her home for the night only to then dump her is not simply the cruelty of his rejection but that, leaving her some money on the table, he probably thinks he's being a good guy. Finally Iris, who knows so little of the world or love, even infuriates herself. At that point the inertia is as unacceptable to her as it is to us.

Much has been said of Kaurismaki's "economy" and "perfection," the way every second of the film is necessary and stripped of superfluous. But this misses how cockeyed his visual sense and timing really are. If anything, he often

tends to linger a moment longer than he needs, or to cut things off a moment sooner than you expect. And because it's often the big scenes that are clipped and the small ones that are extended, the rhythm of the movie is not only as unpredictable as its emotional tenor but becomes the language of emotional volatility. *The Match Factory Girl* haunts not because its austerity is true to an aesthetic but because it approximates the slow sizzle and dim glow of a long-burning fuse, at the end of which a psyche waits to blow up. When Iris stirs a box of rat poison into a glass of water, studying its dissolution with as much dispassion as she gives the boxes of matches that pass her on the factory conveyor belts, we wait wearily either for her to drink it or for someone to burst onto the scene and save her; what we don't expect is that it's Iris who

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bursts in on herself, in time to make the world her victim. And after she's finished, what we remember isn't the casualties who more or less get what they deserve but the random stranger in a bar who just happens to touch her at the wrong time. The smile on her face as she fatally spikes his drink, rendering one destiny inevitable even as she forecloses any other, is as close to beatific as anybody in the world of this movie is ever likely to come.

LAID UP THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS FROM some minor surgery, I took advantage of the situation to moan forlornly for favors at friends on the telephone and put the world on hold. It's amazing how many movies you can watch when the world's on hold and you have a VCR. Having ripped through all three *Godfather* films in one day and left with a roaring headache for my trouble, I then turned to Westerns, their stoic, genial brutality seeming somehow appropriate to my spliced-and-diced anatomical situation. And loath though I may be to provoke the Ford and Hawks purists out there in Readerland, and taking away nothing from *My Darling Clementine*, *The Searchers* and *Red River*, nothing gave me as much pleasure as Simon Wincer's 1989 *Lonesome Dove*, six hours plus and leaving me wishing for more. Robert Duvall's lusty existential ex-Texas Ranger is his greatest performance, but from the depths of my anesthesia daze the revelation of a second viewing — I last saw it a few years back — was Tommy Lee Jones' obsessed, stormy Woodrow Call at the epic's center. Wound as tight as the noose around a man's neck, he uncoils only once, when he sees a soldier beating the boy who Call won't admit is his own son. He leaps on his horse, rides furiously the length of the city street, and proceeds to thrash the soldier within an inch of his life before Duvall steps in to save his friend from committing murder. A crowd of townspeople stare agape. Recomposing himself, with the soldier at his feet gurgling blood in the dust, Jones slowly mounts his horse and explains to the onlookers: "Can't stand rude behavior in a man. Won't tolerate it." Expansive and elegiac, romantic about its code even as it's mercilessly unromantic about what life in the West really was, "a hell of a vision" as Jones himself says, *Lonesome Dove* is simply one of the greatest Westerns ever. My one complaint is that it's too damn funny and made me laugh a lot, something my incision tolerated about as well as Woodrow Call does rude behavior. **LA**



to the sound of massacre. When she finally makes a desperate lunge to change her life with the purchase of an expensive red dress, we instinctively know the ramifications are going to be huge, because the tension of her life's monotony, which has been building since the movie began, demands release. The ensuing trajectory already has an exit sign marked Heartbreak, Pop. 1.

By Iris' lights, however, she's been living in the land of heartbreak her whole life, so any road out is better than staying where she is. The truth is, the only two things not predictable about *The Match Factory Girl* are that you won't be able to get it out of your head later, and that heartbreak isn't quite the end of the road after all, a much loonier destination waiting just beyond it. Finnish director Kaurismaki, whose previous movies include 1986's *Shadows in Paradise* and 1988's *Ariel*, released a statement with *The Match Factory Girl* to the effect that he's been in such a surly mood about life in general he wanted to do a film that would make Robert Bresson look like David Lean. But for those of us who would just as soon hurl ourselves off a cliff as watch a Bresson film, this is misleading: Kaurismaki has more heart than that. Though the entire dialogue of *The Match Factory Girl* could be printed in the space of this review, and though Iris' expression is barely mutable throughout (the only thing she says in the first half-hour is "Glass of beer"; the only thing said to her is "Whore"), the nuances of a letter on the

Dance with a stranger: A time and place where reductiveness is reality's ground zero

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THE MATCH FACTORY GIRL

Written, produced and directed by AKI KAURISMAKI
Starring KATI OUTINEN, ELINA SALO, ESKO NIKKARI and VESA VIERIKKO
Released by Kino International At Laemmle's Monica