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THE MAN WITHOUT A PAST

(MIES VAILLA MENNEISYYTTÄ)
(FINLAND-GERMANY-FRANCE)

A Sputnik (Helsinki)/Pandora Film (Cologne)/Pyramide Prods. (Paris) production in association with YLE TV-1, Eila Werning. (International sales: Bavaria Film Intl., Germany.) Produced by Aki Kaurismäki.

Directed, written by Aki Kaurismäki. Camera (color), Timo Salminen; editor, Timo Linnasalo; production designers, Markku Patila, Jukka Salmi; costume designer, Outi Harjupatana; sound (Dolby Digital), Jouko Lumme, Tero Malmberg; assistant director, Nadja Delcos. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing),** May 22, 2002. Running time: **97 MIN.**

M Markku Peltola
Irma Kati Outinen
Nieminen Juhani Niemela
Kaisa Nieminen Kaija Pakarinen
Anttila Sakari Kuosmanen

With: Annikki Tahti, Anneli Sauli, Elina Salo, Outi Maenpää, Esko Nikkari, Pertti Sveholm, Matti Wuori, Aino Seppo, Janne Hyytiäinen, Antti Reini.

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By DAVID ROONEY

Few if any contemporary filmmakers succeed in ennobling the luckless proletariat with the rich humanity, warmth, humor and morality that Aki Kaurismäki brings to his characters. Continuing along lines explored in 1996's "Drifting Clouds" — arguably the best of the wave of '90s Euro films about unemployment — "The Man Without a Past" centers on one man whose life and memory are taken from him, who starts over from scratch to find love, self-esteem and a place in the world. Pairing the dramatic trajectory of vintage melodrama with the Finnish director's customarily deemphasized, amusingly deadpan style, this may be a small film in commercial terms, but it's an enormously satisfying, superbly crafted one that should extend Kaurismäki's devoted following.

Story takes place on Helsinki's non-urban outskirts, where marginalized people struggle against unemployment and homelessness in an environment of economic failure and uncaring bureaucracy. Kaurismäki masterfully elevates his characters above this canvas of societal wretchedness, applying his peculiar brand of throwaway humor even to the most depressed situations, such as a man living out of a dumpster.

Title character (Markku Peltola) is brutally beaten and robbed by thugs soon after arriving in Helsinki by train. Pronounced dead in the hospital, he calmly sits upright, bandaged like a mummy, straightens his broken nose and walks out. Two young brothers find him later on the riverbank with no memory of anything before he was attacked.

The boys' mother, Kaisa (Kaija Pakarinen), runs a tight ship in the container shed where they live, keeping strict control of her husband (Juhani Niemela). While the family

clearly has little to spare, Kaisa cares for the amnesiac until he's well enough to find his own similar housing, rented out on the sly by pompous security guard Anttila (Sakari Kuosmanen).

Dining on Salvation Army handouts, the man meets Christian soldier Irma (Kati Outinen), who gives him clothes and a little work around the thrift store. She encourages him to pull himself together, but he is unable to get help from the unemployment center because of his lack of a name or other data. Walking Irma home one night, the amnesiac steals a chaste kiss, and a quiet romance takes shape.

At the same time, the man discovers he has an entrepreneurial spirit. Having rescued a broken-down jukebox, he invites the lifeless Salvation Army band (Marko Haavisto and Poutahaukat) to listen to his selection of old-time rock 'n' roll, R&B and blues records suggesting they expand their repertoire and reach out to new souls. Soon their audience is dancing in soup lines and he's booking the band riverbank gigs, with the store supervisor (Finnish music star Annikki Tahti) dusting off her girlhood talents to be guest vocalist.

A flash of recognition leads to the man rediscovering his welding skills, and a job offer. But while attempting to open a bank account, he is involved in a robbery and arrested for refusing to give his name, resulting in a hilarious duel of police and legal wits between the investigating officer (Pertti Sveholm) and the man's speech-impaired lawyer (Matti Wouri).

When police circulate his photo and ask for help in identifying him, his wife (Aino Seppo) responds from a distant town, revealing he left in search of work. Insisting he respect the sanctity of marriage, Irma sadly bids him farewell. But his return home uncovers the full details of his past, allowing him to embrace a new future.

Consistently funny and ultimately uplifting, the story has two delightfully dour romantic leads in Peltola, who began working with Kaurismäki in the 1998 silent film "Juha," and redoubtable longtime regular Outinen. Given dialogue that often has the ring of an overripe John M. Stahl melodrama — "Does a tree mourn for a fallen leaf?" — but delivering their lines always in an emotionally flat register, the solemn, subtly expressive actors come across as a wonderful kind of unglamorous Robert Mitchum-Gene Tierney duo.

That vintage-Hollywood spirit influences the look of the film, magnificently shot by veteran Kaurismäki collaborator Timo Salminen. Heightened colors are resonant of old Technicolor movies, and the deep-contrast tones and dramatic, Northern-light skies contribute to give the humble settings and characters a magnified scope and dignity.

As always, music is a fundamental tool in defining Kaurismäki's eccentric world, from melancholy accordion tunes and orchestral pieces to torchy ballads and cheesy rock. Like "Drifting Clouds," the new film also features one of the great screen canines in security guard Anttila's harmless "attack dog," Hannibal.



AN OFFICER AND AN AMNESIAC: Markku Peltola and Kati Outinen star in "The Man Without a Past," from Aki Kaurismäki.