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Author(s)	David Stratton
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I HIRED A CONTRACT KILLER

(FINNISH-SWEDISH)

A Villealfa Filmprods.-Swedish Film Institute co-production, in association with Finnkino, Esselte Video, Megamania, Pandora Film, Pyramide Films, Channel 4. (Intl. sales: Christa Saredi Sales, Zurich.) Produced, written and directed by Aki Kaurismäki. Camera (Metrocolor), Timo Salminen; editor, Kaurismäki; production design, John Ebden; sound, Timo Linnasalo; production manager, Klaus Heydemann; assistant director, Pauli Pentti. Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing), Sept. 13, 1990. (Also in New York Film Festival.) Running time: **79 MIN.**

Henri Boulanger . . . Jean-Pierre Léaud
Margaret Margi Clarke
Harry (the killer) . . . Kenneth Colley
Vic Serge Reggiani
Department head Trevor Bowen
Secretary Imogen Clare
Landlady Angela Walsh
Pete Nicky Tesco
Al Charles Cork
Miller's boss Michael O'Hagan
Receptionist Walter Sparrow
Guitarist Joe Strummer
Harry's daughter Ette Eliot

(In English)

In his second feature this year, an English-language pic set in London and toplining Truffaut actor Jean-Pierre Léaud, prolific Finn director Aki Kaurismäki cheerfully pokes fun at cinematic clichés. Results are mixed, at best, as the director doesn't come up with dialog or situations quite funny enough.

Kaurismäki fans (who seem to be growing in numbers) will be pleased if not overwhelmed by this new effort, which, if not one of his best films, is still good enough to warrant international exposure in specialized venues.

Following up this year's "The Match Factory Girl," "I Hired A Contract Killer" has a plot that has seen service in Hollywood pics of the past. Solitary type

Léaud has worked for 15 years as a clerk at the office of Her Majesty's Waterworks until he's dismissed (and given a gold watch that doesn't work) because the public facility has been privatized.

With no one to turn to, Léaud attempts suicide, but when he sticks his head in a gas oven, a gas strike commences. So he withdraws his life savings and gets a cab driver to take him to a seedy bar where he announces he needs to hire a killer, and arranges to have himself bumped off.

Not surprisingly, immediately after the contract is signed, his

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life changes. He starts to drink and smoke, and he meets a girl who sells roses in pubs. Now he's in love and wants to live, but the h.q. of the hired killer's boss has been demolished, and the killer, himself dying of cancer, is hot on his trail.

The plot has no surprises, but the film is tolerably amusing because of Kaurismäki's offhand sense of humor and taste for bizarre characters. The oddest of those is Serge Reggiani, who runs a French-style hamburger stand apparently in the middle of a famous London cemetery.

The early scenes are funny, too, with Léaud well cast as the somewhat strange loner whose phone book contains only two numbers (the company that fired him and a deceased aunt).

But the level of invention isn't fully maintained, and pic remains spasmodically amusing rather than captivating. Though obviously shot quickly and economically, it looks very good, with fine use of London locations.

Margi Clarke ("Letter To Brezhnev") is adequate as the flower-seller. Kenneth Colley is quite memorable as the dogged, terminally ill contract killer who reads the Financial Times. There's also an in-joke reference to Turkish film director Ali Ozgentürk. — *Strat.*