



Le Havre

Director: Aki Kaurismäki
Country: Finland/France
Date: 2011

*A review by Kenneth Turan of **The Los Angeles Times**:*

Finnish writer-director Aki Kaurismäki polishes his style of deadpan absurdism to a hilarious gloss in this tale of underdogs united. Buster Keaton isn't dead, he's alive and well in Finland, where under a new identity he pursues his own particular brand of deadpan absurdism to wonderful effect. If the name Aki Kaurismäki doesn't mean anything to you, it should, and "Le Havre" may be the film to make it happen.

An international festival favorite since at least 1990's "The Match Factory Girl," the Finnish writer-director (who won the FIPRESCI international critics award at the Cannes Film Festival this year) has never gotten much traction with American audiences. But "Le Havre" — which is Finland's foreign-language Oscar nominee though it's in French, shot in that celebrated port city — might turn that around.

A droll ode to the downtrodden and dispossessed, "Le Havre" joins Kaurismäki's unmistakable stylistic flourishes with two things that are relatively new to his repertory: an overt social conscience and a sweet-natured fairy tale sensibility.

The story of a ne'er-do-well shoeshiner who gets involved with an on-the-run young African migrant, "Le Havre" above all adheres to Kaurismäki's aesthetic of expressionlessness: His actors must convey what they're feeling without changing the look on their faces.

If you get on the writer-director's wavelength, this sensibility has a euphoric effect that is heightened by faux-serious lines like, "money moves in the shadows," "the Mediterranean has more birth certificates than fish" and "your bill is as long as the Congo River."

Also amusing are Kaurismäki's constant references to cinema of all kinds. Character names like Arletty, Marcel and Becker refer back to classic French cinema, brief interludes evoke international spy thrillers, "Casablanca" and more and the aura of silent movie melodrama hovers over it all.

"Le Havre's" protagonist, Marcel Marx (André Wilms), was a character in Kaurismäki's previous French-language film, 1992's "La Vie de Bohème." A Paris bohemian no longer, he lives the hard-knock life with his loving, sad-faced wife Arletty (Kaurismäki regular Kati Outinen) and another familiar figure, the director's dog Laika.

While Marcel and Arletty are scraping to make ends meet and dealing with a sudden illness that takes Arletty off to the hospital (where her friends read to her from Kafka to cheer her up), something happening in another part of town unexpectedly affects them.

On the Le Havre docks, a truck-sized container is found to be filled with dignified refugees from the African nation of Gabon. One of these, a boy named Idrissa (Blondin Miguel), flees from police and hides out around the docks until a chance meeting with Marcel rescues him from despair.

A young man of infinite politeness who is as expressionless as his liberator, Idrissa needs to get to London to join his mother. Marcel, touched by the plight of a fellow underdog, agrees to help.

That assistance involves a whole range of wacky characters like the shopkeepers in Marcel's neighborhood and rocker Little Bob (Roberto Piazza), the poor man's Johnny Hallyday. Then there's Marcel himself, making a bold attempt to convince French officialdom that he is the albino in Idrissa's immediate family.

Arrayed on the other side are a neighborhood denouncer (former Truffaut star Jean-Pierre Léaud) and the film's most enigmatic character, police inspector Monet (the prolific Jean-Pierre Darroussin).

Dressed in black from head to toe, with an occasional dash of red on his tie, Monet is feared as the best investigator on the force but is quick to insist that "I am ruthless toward crime, but I don't like to see the innocent suffer." Where might his sympathies lie? Where indeed

Another classic Kaurismäki characteristic very much in evidence is his vivid and idiosyncratic use of color. Working with his regular cinematographer Timo Salminen and French set designer Wouter Zoon, the director does wonderful things with a pastel palette and loves to put unexpected visual accents where you least expect them.

So there is the random red dish towel in the family kitchen, an unexpectedly bright yellow door jamb and, in a magnificent visual non sequitur, a moment when all-in-black inspector Monet walks somberly into a local bar holding an enormous pineapple. It's as outlandish as it sounds and another reason to celebrate Kaurismäki gone crazy one more time.

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