



The other side of hope

Director: Aki Kaurismäki
Country: Finland
Date: 2016

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

The movies of Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, with their deadpan drollery and aquarium light, have long been a habit-forming pleasure. But increasingly they are something else, or something more. The issue of migrants and refugees from the Middle East may still be something from which cinema mostly averts its gaze. Not Kaurismäki's cinema. With his previous film *Le Havre*, and this very sympathetic and charming new work, *The Other Side of Hope*, Kaurismäki has made refugees his focus – and done so without appearing to change style or tonal tack. His humane comedy, with its air of unworldly absurdity, has absorbed this idea, but not undermined its seriousness in any way, in fact embraced it with almost miraculous ease and simplicity.

He has an unselfconscious directness and avoidance of cynicism or defeatism, at once unsentimental and yet almost childlike. Recently, I wrote about the rerelease of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 movie *Fear Eats the Soul*, about a middle-aged German woman falling in love with a Moroccan migrant worker, noticing for the first time how Kaurismäki had surely been influenced by the cool, comic tableaux that Fassbinder created for his rickety barroom scenes. Yet maybe he has absorbed something else:



It is a movie that takes two plot strands: the refugee from Aleppo and this refugee's unlikely rescuer, a former travelling rep dealing in men's shirts who is making a determined effort to break into the restaurant business.

Sherwan Haji plays Khaled, a young mechanic from Syria who finds his way into Finland by stowing away on a container ship full of coal. Kaurismäki contrives a somewhat bizarre moment when Khaled emerges from a heap of this coal, almost

Keatonesque in his inscrutability. He calmly makes his way to shore. It has something of the beginning to Kieslowski's *Three Colours: White*, the same tinge of unreality. But Kaurismäki is in no way soft-peddling Khaled's experiences in the interests of comedy. There is hardship, heartbreak and racist violence in store for Khaled, as well as official heartlessness.

Meanwhile, Sakari Kuosmanen plays Wikström, a guy whose marriage has collapsed and whose sole possessions appear to be a grim lockup garage in the middle of town and a big, old-fashioned car in which he travels from city to city attempting to talk the gloomy proprietors of clothes shops into buying his shirts. One of these, played by Kaurismäki regular Kati Outinen, has a drily amusing speech, declining the chance to buy out the whole business on the grounds that she is retiring to Mexico to "dance the hula-hula" – an oddly Polynesian thing to be doing in Mexico. But an extraordinary adventure in a casino gives Wikström a new career direction and a chance to help Khaled.

Kaurismäki's kind of mannered, controlled comedy might just induce alienation in the hands of another film-maker, but here it is quite the opposite. However ridiculous the story is, and its intensely managed ridiculousness is part of the attraction, there is always sympathy, a lightness of touch. We have sympathy for Khaled, and for Wikström, and we believe in their sympathy with each other.



There is a scene in a refugee reception centre between Khaled and an Iraqi man, Mazdak (Simon Al-Bazoon), who has befriended him and gives him very important advice on how to behave. It is not just a matter of fitting in and learning the language, he says. It is all about being cheerful, happy, smiling. People like this are those who will be allowed to stay; the sad ones get sent home. But not all the time, he counsels him: don't smile in the street or you just look crazy. Happiness, cheerfulness, laughter itself – these are commodities that must be carefully handled for an asylum-seeker. Too little and officialdom won't like you,

too much and your plight will not seem sufficiently sad, damaging your “deserving poor” status.

Kaurismäki's own comedy is as finely balanced. The refugee is not treated with the solemn, distanced language of news or documentary, but with the expertly judged comic quirk that at first seems mannered and inauthentic but actually gives us a poetic way of relating to the character as something other than a case study, a human richness and paradoxical realness, in a language which provides a way of imagining the inner life.

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