

**ely
film
society** = **the
notes**

**march
2015**

latest news

Ely is to have a second membership film society. Allison Morris is starting the Babylon Film Club, which will screen recent arthouse releases at Babylon Gallery on Waterside, as distinct from EFS's wider-ranging brief of selecting classic and lesser-known world cinema. The two are not related in any formal way. Membership is £40 for 10 films; look out for their leaflet. The first film is **Boyhood** on 27 March.

The Match Factory Girl

Aki Kaurismäki,
Finland 1990

**+ 2 local
shorts**

Written, directed and edited:
Aki Kaurismäki.
Cinematography:Timo Salminen
Art Direction: Risto Karhula
Set Decoration: Kari Laine

Kati Outinen Iiris
Elina Salo Mother
Esko Nikkari Stepfather
Vesa Vierikko Aarne
Reijo Taipale The singer
Silu Seppälä Iiris' brother
Outi Mäenpää Iiris' co-worker
Marja Packalén The doctor
Richard Reitinger Man in the bar



Character is habitual action, said Aristotle. You can have what you want or you can have your reasons for not wanting it, ran a psychotherapy koan from the 1970s. "I always start with everyday realism, everyday situations, and I try to go darker and darker and in the end, it's melodrama", says the director. "Even the light has changed: in the beginning, the light is quite normal and in the end, there are big shadows."

All these are in play in Aki Kaurismäki's distinctive films. *The Match Factory Girl* is the third in his "Underdog" trilogy, following *Shadows In Paradise* [1986] and *Ariel* [1988], and stars his long-term collaborator Kati Outinen, who has appeared in most of his films including the most recent, *Le Havre* [2011].

Simon Hattenstone (who is actually a huge fan) wrote in the *Guardian* of his films: "They are dark and joyless, starring men who look like walruses and women who look like rats". This is unfair on Outinen's extraordinary face, which alternates between fragile and glacial. We see a lot of it here, and the way she uses it justifies Kaurismäki's

assertion that “the eyes talk, not the face. That would be overacting. If they don’t smile or wave their hands, they are hired”. He loves the expressive power of silent cinema: in the same interview he avers that “Chaplin and Keaton were the best of all time. Both of them. I particularly like the pale silence of Keaton”. (He made a silent film, *Juha*, in 1999).

Outinen plays Iiris, who lives in the shabbier end of Helsinki, works on the production line of the titular factory and lives a grim life straight out of one of Hans Christian Andersen’s more-avoided fairy tales. Her idle parents exploit her, her social life is wretched and friendless. Like Cinderella, she gets to go to the ball - or rather the nightclub - transformed by a covertly-purchased dress, but rather than the smitten prince, she is picked up and bedded by slimy Aarne, whose rumpled suit, white flat and sullen company she mistakes for sophistication and adoration. She falls pregnant but instead of the comfort of parenthood, she finds herself dumped and then miscarrying after a car accident in the street. What to do? After moving in with her brother the chef with hipster ambitions (the only other sympathetic character in the film), a trip to the chemists provides a solution, a plan of action and eventually some sort of levelling of the score.

So far, so much the melodrama. To grasp why this film works, we need to admit (Kaurismäki is no overt moralist but his aim is true nonetheless) that we LOVE the misfortunes of others. In a world of hypocrites and bullies, the one honest person wins, and we are with Iiris all the way. She has a long way to go, but at the end she’s got there, after her fashion. Revenge is a dish served very cold indeed.

Did I say how beautiful this film is? For it is actually a film about the pursuit of pleasure, and the world in which Iiris moves has an otherworldly quality that allows all these things to happen and please us obscurely as they do so. There is very little dialogue; it takes 13 minutes for the first word to be spoken. Words get in the way; nobody needs to explain what we can clearly see. The cinematography is often dark and moody, with an odd palette like old Kodachrome: juicy reds, sour greens and soft blues. Sunlight is flatly pale, interiors glow amber with low-wattage bulbs that cast shadows, neither comforting nor dingy, though dinginess is never far away. This is “Scandi-noir” long before it became

Aki Kaurismäki



born 4 April 1957, Orimattila, Finland

Feature films: *Crime and Punishment* 1983, *Calamari Union* 1985, *Shadows in Paradise* 1986, *Hamlet Goes Business* 1987, *Ariel* 1988, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* 1989, *The Match Factory Girl* 1990, *I Hired a Contract Killer* 1990, *La Vie de Bohème* 1992, *Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatjana* 1994, *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* 1994, *Drifting Clouds* 1996, *Juha* 1999, *The Man Without a Past* 2002, *Lights in the Dusk* 2006, *Le Havre* 2011

mainstream and fashionable.

This lack of modern garish cheer has led Kaurismäki-watchers to talk of this otherworld as “Aki-land”. Though the film was shot in 1989 (including TV news footage of the Tiananmen Square bloodbath), in Aki-land it is perpetually thirty years earlier. Kaurismäki has spoken of how much he hates modernity for the sake of it, especially modern cars. It is excluded here wherever possible: only in Aki-land is a longline red cocktail dress an object of utter desire and a powder-blue Ford Anglia a symbol of rebel street-cool. The interiors are big on Formica in flat 1950s colours, and the soundtrack (little dialogue but a lot of music) leans heavily on crooner ballads of shallow romance, or sub-rockabilly coffee bar anthems. Only in Aki-land is a good night out a dance hall with a band fronted by a smoothie in a seersucker suit.

We can dwell on these things since the camera is never distracted by the urge to move along, to find something “interesting”. Shots are mostly static or modest zooms, nobody gets followed, and indeed a surprising (to Hollywood-jaded eyeballs) amount of critical action in the film is actually off-

shot, unseen. The director justifies this lack of motion flippantly as making life a lot easier when he has a hangover, but it is a key element in holding the audience’s eyes on what we need to see to follow the story.

The Match Factory Girl is propelled by details, the things that matter to Iiris as she tries to hold her small pleasures tight: the purchase of the red dress; the shelf of shabby paperbacks; the fiddling with banknotes. (We see no sex, no death, no blood: altogether too easy for a director as hard-eyed as Kaurismäki, who claims to hate all his films - and he’s made a lot - once he’s made them). Food and drink, always the simplest and most vital pleasures, tell much in this film. The stringy soup; the tomatoes on toast; the lingeringly devoured plate of icecream; the cairn of orangeade bottles in the dancehall that silently tells its own story; the uneaten cakes set out for Aarne’s cringe-making visit (they all smoke instead); the oddly-proffered orange in the hospital; and finally the austere unlabelled bottle of water, its red cap glinting in the kitchen’s sour light. “Come and eat” is the last thing Iiris says.

It is hard not to be moved by *The Match Factory Girl* - Iiris’s letter to Aarne after the pregnancy test is a deep well of personal insight only implied elsewhere - but for all that it is a comedy. A deeply callous and eerily quiet comedy, sure, but it allows us to laugh at the poor stuff of which humanity is made, and the worse things we are proud to do ever afterwards. Iiris is a moral person: she does what she does to get what she knows is the least she deserves. As she disappears at the end, leaving the camera trained on the dismal interior of the match factory, there’s a part of us that says: *well done you*. Isn’t there?

two local shorts

Before our feature, which runs only 68 minutes, we will be showing two short films made by pupils of Kings School Ely, **Brainstorm** and **Gallery of Portal Mirrors**. They will be introduced by Steve Merrell from the school.

NEXT MONTH’S FILM IS
DIVA (Jean-Jacques Beneix, France 1981)
Monday 20 April

www.elyfilmsociety.com

www.meetup.com/ely-film/

