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“**HILARIOUS!**”

A MOVIE WHOSE INTENDED PUBLIC IS THE HUMAN RACE.”

-A.O. Scott, THE NEW YORK TIMES



“



(HIGHEST RATING!)

**A DELICIOUS BLEND OF HILARITY AND HEARTBREAK.
JUST PUT YOURSELF IN THE HANDS OF A MASTER.”**

-Peter Travers, ROLLING STONE



“



(HIGHEST RATING!)

**DROLLY HILARIOUS!
THE FUNNIEST FILM KAURISMÄKI HAS EVER MADE.”**

-Glenn Kenny, PREMIERE MAGAZINE



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*A New Deadpan Comedy by
Aki Kaurismäki*

The Man
without a past



Director Kaurismäki (*Match Factory Girl, Leningrad Cowboys Go America*) won the Cannes Grand Jury Prize and the first-ever Finnish nomination for Best Foreign Film Oscar for this audience-pleasing fable in which a man must conjure up a new identity after a violent mugging leaves him with amnesia. A sweet, lyrical, oddball charmer.

FINLAND • 2002 • 97 mins • Color • In Finnish with English subtitles

Losing Memories But Gaining a Life

A.O. SCOTT

Amnesia, at least of the kind that tends to afflict characters in movies and books, is both a terrifying condition and, at the same time, an appealing one. The title character in Aki Kaurismaki's lovely new comic fable, "The Man Without a Past," certainly does his share of suffering. A metal worker who arrives in a strange city by train, he is brutally mugged on a park bench and left for dead. His face shrouded in bandages, he stumbles out of the hospital and collapses on a river bank. When he comes to he has lost, in addition to his money and his shoes, his ability to recall anything about his previous life, including his name (the final credits identify him simply as "M").

But though he is estranged from himself and set adrift in an urban Finnish landscape that is shadowed by poverty and bureaucratic indifference, the man (played with soulful deadpan by Markku Peltola) is also liberated. His hands are callused from work, and his handsome, double-thick pork-chop face has clearly weathered hardship and disappointment, but the new life he finds on the margins of society is touched by a peculiar kind of grace. He finds friendship among the homeless and destitute, a home in an abandoned shipping container, and love, with a melancholy Salvation Army worker, Irma (Kati Outinen), who ladles out free soup by day and lies awake in her dormitory at night, listening to rock 'n' roll with intent, almost religious, devotion.

Mr. Kaurismaki's previous film, "Juha," shown at the New York Film Festival in 1999, was black-and-white and silent. This one, which will be screened at the festival tonight and tomorrow and which won two prizes at Cannes in May, is full of bright color (including the glorious wind-scrubbed blue of the Nordic sky), exquisitely strange dialogue, and music. As if struggling against an innate reticence, the people in "The Man Without a Past" speak slowly and formally, and the antic poetry they utter sneaks up on you after a beat. ("Do you mind if I smoke?" the protagonist asks a luckless bank teller after the two of them have been locked in a vault. "Does a tree mourn its fallen leaves?" she replies, as though this were a perfectly logical response.)

The characters, in spite of their air of forlorn impassivity, reveal their quirks, their passions and the oddball dignity that unites them, with similar deliberateness. In addition to Irma, the man's new companions include an amiable drinker (Juhani Niemela) and his family, and Antilla (Sakari Kuosmanen), a security guard who is landlord of the shipping container shantytown and who fancies himself a ruthless and fearsome enforcer of law and order.

Unlike his protagonist, the director is clearly a man very much enamored with the past — with old music and even older movies. The man — whose taste for what he calls "rhythm music" (meaning rockabilly, blues and vintage R&B) has survived his injury — transforms the Salvation Army band into a swinging combo, with the thrift-shop manager (Annikki Tahti) stepping in to sing lead when a woman's voice is required. (If it's ever released in this country, the "Man Without a Past" soundtrack album could do for Finnish neo-traditional pop what "O Brother Where Art Thou" did for old-time American country and western). The jukebox he salvages from a junk pile fortuitously reflects his preferences: the first selection it plays is "That Crawlin' Baby Blues" by Blind



Lemon Jefferson.

Mr. Kaurismaki's cinematic reference points are similarly antiquarian, which is not to say that they are dated, or that his use of them is based on nostalgia or allusion for its own sake. "The Man Without a Past" has a sly, controlled silliness that recalls Preston Sturges and a vision of resilience and nobility in hard times that suggests Charlie Chaplin without the sleeve-tugging sentimentality, or Frank Capra without the weakness for speechifying. And like the great films of the 1930's and early 40's, it is at once artful and unpretentious, sophisticated and completely accessible, sure of its own authority and generous toward characters and audience alike — a movie whose intended public is the human race.

In a director's statement distributed with the publicity materials for "The Man Without a Past," Mr. Kaurismaki, with characteristically impish forthrightness, writes that "my social, economical and political views of the state of society, morals and love can hopefully be found from the film itself." On the evidence of this hilarious and humane movie, these views are, like those of any great artist, at once perfectly clear and not easily summarized. His ethical ideals are perhaps most succinctly expressed in an exchange between the hero and a worker from the municipal utility company who runs a cable from a nearby power line to the man's makeshift home (and later helps repair the jukebox). The electrician brusquely refuses payment, asking only the promise of future consideration in exchange for his favor: "If you see me lying face down in the gutter," he says, "turn me on my back."

THE MAN WITHOUT A PAST

Written (in Finnish, with English subtitles), produced and directed by Aki Kaurismaki; director of photography, Timo Salminen; edited by Timo Linnasalo; production designers, Markku Patila and Jukka Salmi. Running time: 97 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Markku Peltola (M), Kati Outinen (Irma), Juhani Niemela (Nieminen), Kaija Pakarinen (Kaisa Nieminen), Sakari Kuosmanen (Anttila), Annikki Tahti (Flea Market Manager), Marko Haavisto and Poutahaukat (the Salvation Army Band) and Tahti (Hannibal).

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