



Berlinale FILM CAPSULE: The Other Side of Hope (Kaurismaki, 2017): Finland

Description

Posted by [Larry Gleeson](#).

Writer/Director Aki Kaurismaki served up a full platter of entertainment with *Toivon tuolla puolen* (*The Other Side of Hope*) during the 67th Berlin International Film Festival at the Berlinale Palast Theater. Tackling the migration and asylum bureaucratic processing issues of the day, Kaurismaki serves up quite a treat with *The Other Side of Hope*.

The film opens in the dark of night in a shipping harbor complete with fog horn blasts and heavy equipment operating including a dock loader transferring coal from ship to shore. The black, glistening bituminous coal shimmering in the light as it is being piled is magical this night. Emerging from the center of the pile a rounded shape with two spherical orbs projecting light are visible. Soon a human form emerges.

A cut is made to a businessman, Wikstrom, played by Sakari Kuosmanen primping himself for what appears to be another day. Yet, on this day, Wikstrom has decided to leave his wife, who comes into frame with a full head of curlers, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, attired in a cheaply-made, tropical floral robe. Wikstrom places his wedding ban on the table and exits. The woman reached for a gin bottle pouring herself a double taking a mouthful to wrap up the scene.

Using these two main protagonists, Kaurismaki embarks on a story showcasing two very different lives. Wikstrom, a haberdasher of sorts peddling ties and men's shirts, drives a black luxury sedan listening to Western music while the coal refugee, Khaled, a Syrian asylum seeker, portrayed by Sherwan Haji, takes a coin-fed shower releasing the black soot from his skin's pores. These men are on different trajectories. Khaled tries to do the right thing by finding the nearest police station in Helsinki to seek political sanctuary status from Aleppo. Despite his best efforts Khaled is denied sanctuary and decides to stay in the country illegally as many in his predicament seem to be doing. Wikstrom is hustling at a private, high-stakes poker game winning enough money to purchase outright an old, seemingly well-established restaurant in one of the remotest areas of Helsinki.

The restaurant undergoes several incarnations – each one bringing more laughs from the audience

than the previous one. Wikstrom has developed very solid rapport with the chef and head waiter and takes to heart almost every one of their suggestions. Khaled, on the other hand, has been living on the streets and has made friends with a hip and funky group of rock-n-rollers. As luck would have it, or, maybe it was a form of divine Providence, the Wikstrom finds Khaled sleeping in the back of his restaurant and winds up giving him a bed and a job. With the help of the Wikstrom's connections, Khaled is reunited with his sister and manages to find a way to stay in the country.

Hats off to Kaurismak. He wields quite a powerful wand in *The Other Side of Hope*. Bringing the main protagonists together after nearly forty minutes and having the story and its characters gel in a believable manner is no easy task. Quite the opposite. Tiina Kaukanen rapid fire costume changes aids immensely in the humorous attempts to find a working restaurant motif. I would be amiss not to mention the uber strong production design managed by Mark Lwoff and Misha Jaari. Director of Photography, Timo Salminen, captures the telling mise-en-scene with various lighting sets ranging from very low-key sets to more traditional tungsten indoor lighting set ups.

An interesting note: Eevi Kareinen handled the casting while serving as the Assistant Director.

In the end, Kaurismaki brings these two characters together – the practical businessman and a refugee seeking a life free from Syrian war for him and his sister. Along the way, he provides plenty of comic relief in this heart-warming and life-affirming tale of pragmatism and redemption. An exceptional film in light of the present migration dilemma and one I recommend highly without reservation.

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