

A Finn Scans A Rock Scene Both Tragic And Screwball

By ANNE ROSTON

ON A RECENT HOT SUMMER evening, Mika Kaurismäki, the independent film maker from Finland, arrived at a midtown cafe in New York to talk about his film "Zombie and the Ghost Train." The film, set to open on Wednesday at the Public Theater, is a tragicomedy about a rock-and-roll musician who destroys himself with alcohol. Ordering a Pellegrino, Mr. Kaurismäki braced himself for the inevitable comment. "You're disappointed I didn't order at least a beer?" he asked.

In his 13 years as a film maker, Mr. Kaurismäki, who is 39 and is the older brother of the better-known director Aki Kaurismäki ("Match Factory Girl," "La Vie de Bohème," "Leningrad Cowboys Go America"), has avoided stereotypes. He has jumped among genres, from comedy and the love story to the documentary and action-adventure.

"I have avoided developing one style," he said. "If you become too trendy as a director, it can be very bad for you."

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screwball. As the film maker Jim Jarmusch, the director's friend, said, "Mika doesn't play it safe." Written, edited and produced by Mr. Kaurismäki, "Zombie" tracks, mostly in flashback, what seem certain to be the last days of a B-list bass guitarist with impossibly skinny black-jean-clad legs and the nickname 'Zombie.' The story, the director said, is based on a real character who died at 26.

"Three musicians I knew died from some kind of self-destruction," he added.

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zombies here go to see the movie," he said, "I'd be rich."

Being an internationalist is important to Mr. Kaurismäki, whose earlier films have played at festivals and in art houses in this country and abroad. He studied film in Munich for five years and speaks six languages, though much of his recent work has been in English, with perhaps a lick of Portuguese. Two examples are "Amazon," starring Rae Dawn Chong, and "Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made," starring Sam Fuller and Jim Jarmusch. An earlier film, "Helsinki Napoli All Night Long" (1987), was made in Berlin using Italian and Finnish. Mr. Kaurismäki is currently shooting an English-language film, about the relationship between a female prisoner and a male prison guard, in Philadelphia.

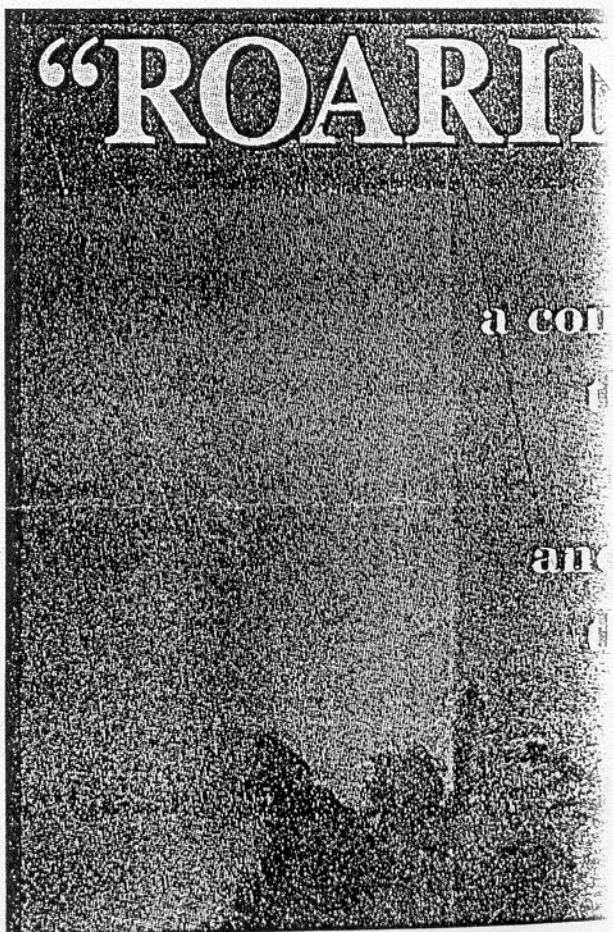
All of his films deal with outsiders, and he said that he feels like a bit of an outsider himself because when he was growing up his father's work caused the family to move often. Being a film maker hasn't made him feel any less a stranger in his home country. Finland has a population of five million and American movies are the most popular. For that reason, only about 10 Finnish feature films are made each year, most of them sponsored by the Government.

That can make things difficult for someone like Mr. Kaurismäki, who wants to make films independent of the state and for a wide audience. (The most financially successful Finnish film director of all time, Renny Harlin, makes his movies, including "Cliffhanger" and "Die Hard 2: Die Harder," in Hollywood.)

"Of course, you can't do a film in Finland without state subsidy," said Kirsi Tykkyläinen of the Finnish Film Foundation.

For "Zombie," which had a budget of about \$400,000, Mr. Kaurismäki received assistance from the foundation, but also from the German television broadcaster ZDF and two French sources, Canal Plus and Pyramide Distribution. Making films in English may broaden Mr. Kaurismäki's international appeal, but he prefers not to dwell on this. "You don't do anything for the money. You make your own movies," he said and shrugged.

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In the film, despite the intervention of his buddy Harri and his girlfriend Marjo, Zombie proves unsalvageable. The path of decline leads him from the icy void of a wintry Finland to hallucinatory anonymity in the alleys of Istanbul.

Matti Pellonpää, one of Finland's premier actors, plays Harri, but Silu Seppälä and Marjo Leinonen, respectively Zombie and Marjo, made acting debuts in this film. Both are rock musicians in Finland (Mr. Pellonpää is a member of the Leningrad Cowboys and Miss Leinonen's soulful Janis Joplin-like voice can be heard at one point on the soundtrack) and can be found in Corona, a combination rock bar, pool hall and movie theater in Helsinki, partly owned by Mr. Kaurismaki. Although the film is in Finnish and uses insiders from the Finnish rock scene, and though alcoholism is often thought of as a particularly Nordic problem, Mr. Kaurismaki thinks "Zombie" should find an audience internationally.

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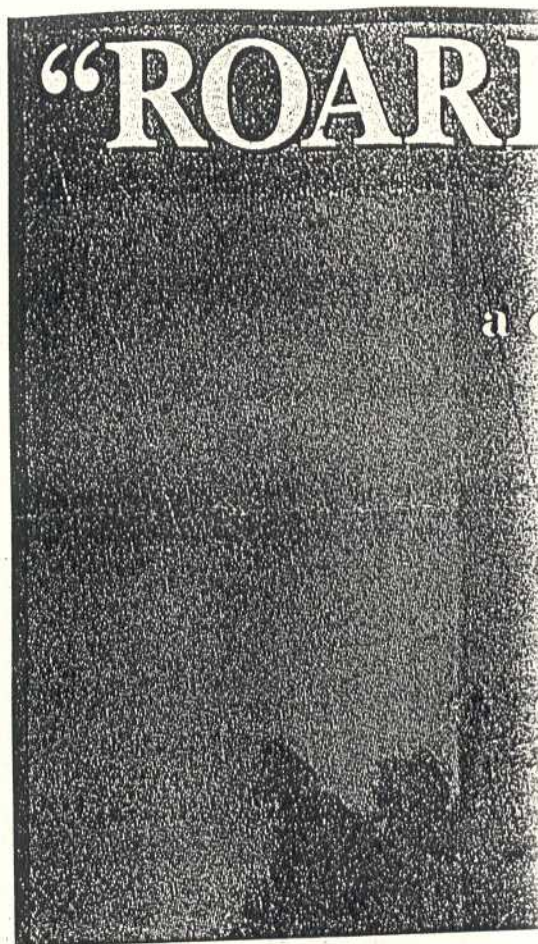
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Mr. Kaurismaki already has the respect of well-known independent film makers. In addition to Mr. Fuller and Mr. Jarmusch (who says he has a capped tooth named Mika, the result of a production wrap party for "Helsinki Napoli All Night Long"), Wim Wenders and Eddie Constantine, who appeared in Jean-Luc Godard's "Alphaville," have been in his films.

Now he can only hope for acceptance from American audiences. After "Zombie" will come "Tigrero," which is scheduled to open at Film Forum in the fall. But finding a niche here has been hard for Mr. Kaurismaki. For one thing, he is often confused with his brother. Another problem is that his idiosyncratic style and use of many languages makes it difficult to build a steady audience.

That doesn't mean, however, that his films aren't expressly Finnish. "He makes connections with different cultures," Mr. Jarmusch said, "but he comes from one that is very distinct — and that can't be eradicated. It's in his soul." □

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