

My Sweet Little Village

Review by Lois Wadsworth

The tolerant citizens of Jiri Menzel's Czechoslovakian village look out for their own when the big city honchos try to move in.

Pavek is a short, rotund trucker who has been saddled for years with gangly, slow-witted Otik as his crew mate. Recently, Otik has been getting on his nerves, and after a couple of accidents, Pavek decides to dump Otik once the harvest is over. The hapless fellow will be forced to work with an ill-tempered truck driver who won't put up with any mistakes. Poor Otik; in desperation, he opts to transfer to the city when a bureaucrat who wants his cottage in the country makes him a deal.

Now everyone in the village gets in on the act. Otik has been their collective responsibility since his parent's death, and it's obvious to everyone that he wouldn't be able to figure out how to live in the city. Besides, they don't want some fat cat from the city gentrifying the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, the foibles of individual villagers come to light—the doctor who recites poetry to his dog and forgets to watch where he's driving; a couple who meet on the sly and think no one knows about their adultery; Pavek's

teenage son who's hopelessly in love with his sister's beautiful schoolteacher; the teacher himself who is smitten by an eccentric artist. This is a very small village in which nothing remains secret for long, so eventually everyone is involved in everyone else's business. It's their easy tolerance for one another and for human frailty that makes this sweet little movie work so well.

Jiri Menzel was making films in Czechoslovakia during the flowering of the arts during the 1960's. His 1968 film, *Closely Watched Trains*, won the Academy Award for best foreign picture that year, the same year that the Soviet tanks moved into Prague. Other filmmakers of the Czech New Wave fled, including Milos Forman whose wonderful *The Fireman's Ball* this film somewhat resembles. But Menzel stayed on, making pictures within the politically restrictive guidelines set by the government. A city dweller, he has chosen more and more to use Czech rural life as the centerpoint of his films, dwelling on the support villagers show each other rather than the alienation of city life.

My Sweet Little Village is a relaxing film to watch—there's no

hectic bustling-about, no murderers or rapists to watch out for, no cop-car chases, no weirdness—and its light humor is genuinely affecting. For example, when the wandering artist sets up his easel and begins painting a village scene, a crowd gathers to watch. The old woman whose house he is painting wants to know why he paints it so run-down, with all its cracks and blemishes showing and the wall crumbling so. He could show it fixed up, the way she intends, she insists.

But neither the artist nor Menzel smoothes over the poverty of the village. The filmmaker doesn't paint an idealized facade on his village, he just reveals the human heart that beats beneath the work clothes and aprons of the villagers. A *New York Times* interview quotes Menzel as saying, "People have such depressing lives that in films they should be stroked a little bit. One should help them a little bit to hold their heads up high." Too bad the mainstream Hollywood types can't quite grasp the concept of human dignity and make films about ordinary folks caring for one another. Wouldn't that be refreshing?

now showing

Aristocats: Animated. A well-off feline falls in with an alley cat and his cronies. Adventure and romance a la Disney. Cinema World (342-6536).

Blind Date: Comedy. A guy chances an evening out with an unknown woman, which works out fine... while she's sober. Springfield Quad (726-9073) and West 11th (342-4142).

Children of a Lesser God: William Hurt (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*) stars as a teacher of the deaf in this adaptation of the award-winning play. Valley River Twin (686-8633).

The Color of Money: Paul Newman recreates his role as "Fast Eddie"—this time for an Oscar—from the 1961 drama *The Hustler*. Tom Cruise stars as his protégé pool shark. Shows with *Ruthless People*. Fine Arts (747-2201).

Crocodile Dundee: A celebrated Aussie adventurer, naive to city ways, is still spending time in the Big Apple. Oakway (342-5351).

The Decline of the American Empire: Eight French-Canadian intellectuals talk out their sexual memories in this cerebral comedy. Bijou (686-2458).

Lethal Weapon: Too tough L.A. cops crack down on an international drug ring. Stars hunk Mel Gibson and Danny Glover. Springfield Quad (726-9073).

My Sweet Little Village: This Czech comedy of village eccentrics and affairs satirizes the efforts of modern bureaucracy. Cinema 7 (687-0733).

Peggy Sue Got Married: A woman awakens in her past, and has a chance to alter her future life. Stars Kathleen Turner (*Jewel of the Nile*). Directed by Francis Coppola (*The Cotton Club*). Late show at the Bijou (686-2458).

Platoon: A day-by-day G.I. perspective of the Vietnam war. Directed by Oliver Stone (*Salvador*), who received a Purple Heart in 1967. McDonald (344-4343).

Police Academy 4: Those zany coppers share their expertise with a set of equally proficient civilians. Cinema World (342-6536) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Project X: Comedy. An Air Force man is assigned to a secret operation involving chimpanzees. West 11th (342-4142).

Raising Arizona: A childless couple—him con, her cop, swipe a kid to call their own. This odd comedy is by Joel and Ethan Coen, who also made *Blood Simple*. National (344-3431).

A Room with a View: A young Englishwoman, during her proper Victorian finishing, has to choose between her dignified fiancé and an unorthodox artist. Valley River Twin (686-8633).

Ruthless People: Comedy. When an obnoxious wife is kidnapped, her wealthy hubby refuses to pay her ransom. Stars Bette Midler and Danny DeVito. Shows with *The Color of Money* at Fine Arts (747-2201).

The Secret of My Success: Comedy. An ambitious college grad lands a bottom-rung job, then schemes to further his career, and romance, opportunities. Stars Michael J. Fox. Cinema World (342-6536) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Star Trek IV: More adventure for Kirk and crew. This episode brings them back to our present to help us do what we alone cannot—survive! West 11th (342-4142).

Tin Men: Comedy. The lives of aluminum siding salesmen, with a side of revenge becoming romance. Stars Danny DeVito, Richard Dreyfuss, and Barbara Hershey. Cinema World (342-6536).

—Michael Sussman

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