



Isak (Joachim Calmeyer) sits at his kitchen table, while Folke (Tomas Norstrom) observes from his high chair. IFC FILMS 2003.

Loneliness

Companionship

KITCHEN STORIES (Norway, 2003): Written, directed and produced by Bent Hamer, in co-operation with Jorgen Bergmark. Cinematography, Philip Ogaard. Lighting, Knut Haraldsen. Editor, Pal Gengenbach. Sound, Morten Solum. Production design, Billy Johansson. Costumes, Anders Lund. Music, Hans Matöhisen. Starring Joachim Calmeyer and Tomas Norstrom, with Bjorn Floberg and Reine Brynolfsson. IFC Films, 2003. Not rated. 91 minutes.

This leisurely paced, observant film reminds me of the Cold War comedies that slipped under the Iron Curtain to be seen and adored in the West during the 1960s. My favorite, which I did not see until the late 1970s, was Milos Forman's early short film, *The Firemen's Ball* (Czechoslovakia, 1968). Set in a Czech town in the late 1960s where the local firemen are celebrating a retirement and striving to hold a local beauty contest, the film takes a lingering look at the foibles of ordinary folks caught in the wheels of inane social engineering.

Like Forman's film, Bent Hamer's *Kitchen Stories* is funny because it turns a similar dry eye to the observation of a ludicrous, fictional Swedish research project on the kitchen habits of Norweigan bachelors. Inspired by a truly boring documentary on Swedish motion studies of housewives in the kitchen, *Kitchen Stories* begins with the sight gag of a small caravan of pastel Swedish sedans pulling strange little oval house trailers across the border into Norway. They congregate in the rural farming area around Landstad, where there is a surplus of single men. (I think the surplus itself is a joke, but I'm not sure.)

The only background information that might be needed to enjoy this droll film is a little history. During WWII, Sweden took no part in the war, while also-neutral Norway resisted Nazi Germany and paid for it during an unpleasant occupation that lasted from 1940-45. Also, in the post-war period, home science was actually a big deal in Sweden.

Turns out some local Landstad bachelor farmers have agreed to allow researchers into their homes to tally every move they make in the kitchen, day or night. They cannot refuse to let them in, nor can the efficiency experts talk or interact with their subjects in any way.

But already Isak (Joachim Calmeyer) is

having second thoughts. He misunderstood the terms of his agreement and thought he would receive a real horse — his beloved old horse is dying — for his participation in the project. So when Folke (Tomas Norstrom) drives his car and trailer into the farmyard on a blustery, late winter day, Isak leaves the door unlocked. But when he discovers a wooden toy horse on his doorstep, Isak drops out of sight for several days.

The only way Folke knows Isak is in the house is that Isak's tractor-driving neighbor, Grant (Bjorn Floberg) comes by to see him nearly every day. The two men are friends, but they don't talk to each other. These taciturn men may be comfortable with the silence between them, but Folke has to compensate by playing Swedish pop music in his cozy trailer. Folke also receives care packages from a doting elderly aunt that include his favorite food and drink, while Isak doesn't eat anything in the kitchen, and when he does, he turns off the lights so Folke can't watch.

Folke complains to his superior in the agency, Malmberg (Reine Brynolfsson), that Isak rarely uses the kitchen and asks to be given a new assignment. Malmberg will have none of it, so Folke is stuck.

Nothing much happens for the first third of the film, but gradually the distant relationship — Folke sits on a very high chair in the kitchen above Isak — thaws. Tentative friendship between them does not suit Grant, however, and when the men test, then plunge into, the waters of friendship, he unhappily watches them through the kitchen window, feeling left out and displaced.

Juxtaposed acts of observing and being observed reiterate the idea that when we take the time to notice those around us — our neighbor, for example — we learn more about ourselves. The virtues of a quiet film such as *Kitchen Stories* come as slowly as sap rises in the spring. But before the film is done, I think you will be touched and warmed by the way two lonely people become happier because they have communicated and shared their lives with each other. I was.

Layered and lovingly complicated below its uneventful surface, *Kitchen Stories* opens Friday at the Bijou. **EW**

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