

Swedish Surprise

Courtesy of IFC Films

“All adults are idiots.” That’s the pronouncement made by Eva, a 13-year-old girl in 1975 Sweden, in the humorous and humane new film import *Together*. Most kids come to this conclusion sooner or later, but Eva has a particularly good reason for her disgust: Along with her younger brother Stefan and their mother Elisabeth, Eva has moved into a hippie household known as Tillsammans—Swedish for “together.” What Eva quickly recognizes, and what the movie ultimately reveals, is that this loose collection of extremists, with their close-minded food restrictions and open relationships, doesn’t have it together nearly as much as they think.

Throughout the film, the silly ideals of the adults—“Washing the dishes is so bourgeois,” one of them announces after dinner—are punctured by the kids’ sense of logic. When little Stefan is introduced to a housemate his age named Tet and the other boy explains that he’s named after the Tet Offensive, Stefan intently asks, “Are you from Vietnam?” Later, tired of the house’s enforced vegetarian diet, Stefan leads the other kids on a protest march through the kitchen chanting, “We want meat!”

For all its humor, there are darker moments here and there which paint the commune as a place of actual danger for the kids. Wine and cigarettes flow freely in a house with too many “parents” and no one doing any parenting. The result? Tet stops by Stefan’s room one night before bedtime with a glass of wine, explaining that he’s always careful not to get too drunk. When Stefan can’t fall asleep later that night, he wanders through the strange, dark house in search of his mom, and writer-director Lukas Moodysson invests the sequence with a



A scene from *Together*.

sharp sense of anxiety, as if it were part of a horror film.

The nominal leader of this house is Elisabeth’s brother, Goran, played by Gustaf Hammarsten. Soft-spoken and gentle, Goran holds strong to his ideology, but you can see his stomach start to churn when it’s put into practice. After his lover trots off to another housemate’s room for a tryst, Goran waits for her to return and tries to tell her that he’s happy for her. In the midst of his claims, he has to rush to the bathroom to vomit. The common sense of the body trumps the over-intellectualizing of the mind.

Even so, the movie never plays Goran for a fool. Aside from a clear-eyed sense of wisdom, *Together’s* main attribute is its kind spirit. Eva may think the adults are idiots, but the movie treats them as misguided souls—people who deserve a sense of familial love even if they’ve been seeking it in all the wrong ways. There are no caricatures in *Together*, which makes its observations feel all the more real. Who knew satire could be this sensitive?

That sensitivity extends beyond the commune itself. Eva and her family have come there to escape Rolf, their abusive,

alcoholic father and husband. As played by Michael Nyqvist, Rolf is hardly the stereotypical bad guy you’d find in a Hollywood drama; instead, he’s a salvageable soul—as lost in his own way as the members of Tillsammans—and the movie extends him the same empathy it does to them. One of the film’s most telling conversations takes place between Rolf and one of his plumbing clients, an older man who mistreated his family, got divorced and now spends his last days alone. “The only thing worth anything is being together,” he tells Rolf, encouraging him to reunite with his family.

The movie doesn’t claim that simply having a nuclear family ensures happiness; such an assertion would ring as false as Goran’s open relationship. But *Together* quietly convinces that the love and encouragement we all need can best be found in the sort of traditional family environment Rolf and Elisabeth, by the end of the film, have begun to restore. Those who think they can dream up alternative utopias may not necessarily be “idiots,” as Eva believes, but they’re certainly self-deluded.

—Josh Larsen

Air Terror Saves Amtrak?

By Ryan H. Sager

When Amtrak was founded in 1971 and charged with taking over America's passenger rail service, its proponents claimed the new corporation would be self-sufficient within three years. This summer Amtrak celebrated its 30th birthday and blew out the candles on the most recent \$3.6 billion in subsidies it has consumed over the past three years. The corporation also closed its eyes and made a wish: that Congress spend another \$12 billion over the next ten years on rail transport.

Given the events of September 11, it now seems likely that Amtrak will be gifted with an additional multibillion-dollar care package. With Americans wary of air travel in the wake of the terrorist attacks, Amtrak has seen a mild boost in ridership—in the first five days after the attacks, total ridership was up 17 percent—as well as a burst of new political support. It now seems likely that Amtrak will soon get \$3 billion in “emergency relief,” instead of the tough government response to dismal financial performance that was headed its way until the al-Qaeda hijackings.

Whether the new turn of events will make Amtrak politically untouchable remains to be seen. Certainly the rail service continues to be riddled with fundamental flaws. And Congress had in recent years shown some determination either to reform or reconstitute Amtrak.

Amtrak had grown increasingly frantic over the last couple of years as it faced a rapidly approaching Congressional deadline to wean itself off the government dole. After reporting an operating loss of \$944 million in 2000, the largest in its long money-losing history, Amtrak president George Warrington ordered a drastic 15

percent cut in management in July. Warrington has also floated the possibility of significant cuts in union employment, or curtailment of service. Such long-overdue streamlining has always stalled in the past due to Amtrak's extremely restrictive labor contracts and its historical reluctance to pare down its lines for fear of annoying Congressmen along the abandoned routes.

Like an old, pathetic gambler, Amtrak has spent the better part of its life claiming that it is *this close* to turning things around—with just a little more money. Kindhearted bookie that he is, Uncle Sam repeatedly declined to cut off the credit. But in 1997, Congress tried to get tough. It served notice that from then on a big guy named Rocco—also known as the Amtrak Reform Council—would be looking over Amtrak's shoulder. And if the rail service hadn't reached operational self-sufficiency by the end of 2002, Congress said it would bring out the pruning shears.

With that five-year deadline now only 13 months away, there is scarcely a soul outside of Amtrak's P.R. department who believes the company can cover the spread, even with its recently increased ridership. (The railroad admits it may actually be turning those extra riders—somehow—into *bigger losses*. The magic of government enterprise.) So what happens to Amtrak after 2002 is the multibillion-dollar question.

America's scarcely used passenger rail service (Amtrak had a total of 22.5 million passengers in 2000—less traffic than the Charlotte airport had that year) has an uncanny knack for survival. From time to time the profligate son gets



spanked by fiscal conservatives, but he can ultimately count on support from a network of mayors, governors, and Congressmen who are determined to see the Amtrak gravy train keep rolling through their districts. While train service brings relatively little economic benefit to the areas it serves, politicians have convinced themselves that the political benefits are immense, according to transportation specialist Ron Utt of the Heritage Foundation. “There are a lot of mayors who think they'd be important if they had high-speed rail service,” he says.

Amtrak deliberately cultivates patronage by maintaining a skeleton nationwide rail network, touching as many places as possible with infrequent service, even though such an endeavor is inherently unprofitable. “Amtrak has always operated under the assumption that it has to be national to get a sufficient majority in Congress to maintain its subsidies,” said Utt. “If it were to shrink to an economically viable size, it would lose Congressional support.”

Currently, the only section of rail in the United States considered to be economically viable is the Northeast Corridor between Washington, D.C. and Boston—a relatively short route serving a concentrated population. But in its efforts to remain a nationwide rail service, Amtrak maintains lines such as the one between Chicago and Janesville, Wisconsin (insti-