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Agada

(Agatha)

(SOUTH KOREAN-COLOR)

Variety 11.27.85
London, Nov. 18.

Produced by Pak Jong-ch'an for Hwa Jon Film. Directed by Kim Hyeon-myeong. Screenplay, Ji Sang-hak, from a story by Yu Hong-jong; camera (color), I Seog-gi; editor, Hyeon Dong-chun; music, I Pil-weon; sets Kim Byeong-su. Reviewed at the London Film Festival, Nov. 17, 1985. Running time: 97 MINS.

With: I Bo-heui (Agada), Yu In-chon (Father Da-du), Kim Weon-seob (Hyeon-uk, Agada's boyfriend), I Gyeong-heui (Jeong Yeo-sin, Father Da-du's mother)

A painterly eye on the part of the film's director, a subtle shifting of narrative time sequences and strong performances from the principals save "Agatha," which might have degenerated into an irritatingly melodramatic oriental "nun's story."

Although the conflict between commitment to a religious calling and the desire for sexual fulfillment is not the most trendy of subjects these days, seeing Roman Catholicism taken seriously as a personal code of conduct and — in of all place, strongly Buddhist South Korea — is striking.

The film's action revolves around the young woman of the title who, about to take the veil, hesitates long enough to return home to nurse her dying father. His death sets off a series of crisis which eventually unhinge Agatha. The young priest of the village church struggles against his passion for Agatha, finally deciding to enter a Carmelite monastery to free himself from her.

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Fighting against her own passion, Agatha lets herself succumb to another admirer, a highly Westernized businessman, by whom she has a child. He too abandons her, for his previous fiancée, and Agatha is talked into turning her child over to them.

This final blow deadens Agatha, leaving her mute and without memory. Eventually she is taken back to her hometown where memories of happier times reawaken her religious calling. We last see her fallen prostrate in front of the church altar.

Despite the sometimes excessive melodrama, director Kim Hyeon-myeong has largely dignified the plot by an intelligent use of visual imagery and poetic conceits. The natural landscape, beautifully photographed, shifts tellingly as the characters' anguish grows.

Whether one reads the film as a criticism of repressive values which menace human health and happiness or as an acceptance of those strict values as the only sure refuge from human suffering, the treatment is moving, the images haunting.

What is lacking is more sustained reference to Korean society or of the Buddhist approach to life with which to contrast the effects of Roman Catholicism on the heroine. A real clash of cultures might have made the film less dependent on melodrama and denser thematically. As it is, it is one woman's descent into hell and her redemption by being reunited with the only force which hasn't actively abandoned her, God. —*Guid.*