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Japanese island town to comfort the ill. Dr. Akagi (Emoto) invariably diagnoses his patients with hepatitis, a not surprising consequence of the subpar wartime living conditions, but the inhabitants generally react by calling the good doctor either a quack ("Dr. Liver") or a miracle worker.

Akagi is neither—he is just an ordinary lonely and confused older man. Without a family to care for (his wife is dead; his son, Ishiro, has been lost

to the war), he decides to devote himself to halting the epidemic. A handful of the island's other fringe personalities join Akagi in his quest. And, as in *The Eel*, the emotionally bruised male protagonist has a troubled younger female helpmate who comes to adore him: Sonoko (the cheerfully earthy Aso), a career prostitute in rehabilitation.

Emoto is given few lines, but he skillfully rearranges his mournful, well-worn face as Akagi navigates his unstable surroundings. That world, as plainly laid out by Imamura, who cowrote this script, is by turns riotously bawdy, desperately cruel and unexpectedly kind. *Dr. Akagi* is not another triumph for its creator; it only fleetingly touches the depths of Akagi's soul or the pulse of his times. But it does impart a haunting, post-modern sense of disorientation and sadness that's hard to shake. (Opens Fri; see Index for venues)—*Nicole Keeter*

Dr. Akagi

Dir. Shohei Imamura. 1998. N/R. 128mins. In Japanese with subtitles. Akira Emoto, Kumiko Aso, Jyuro Kara, Jacques Gamblin, Masanori Sera.

Despite containing often jarring, unflinchingly graphic visions of sex and violence, Shohei Imamura's films usually maintain a typically Japanese surface tranquility. Most recently, the director's Palme d'or-winning 1997 film, *The Eel*, laid bare the flashes of elemental discord that course through everyday life, with powerfully dramatic results. In the less concentrated, more baldly chaotic *Dr. Akagi*, Imamura uses his customary approach to fashion a thoughtful, almost tender portrait of one person striving against the unknown.

The film is set toward the end of WWII, and its lasting image is of the title character in frantic motion, his white suit and bow tie flapping as he races through his

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