

'3-Iron' plays out Korean Bonnie and Clyde fantasy

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WHAT: '3-iron.'

RATED: R: Some sexual content. (In Korean with English subtitles.)

WHERE: Del Mar Theatre, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 35 minutes.

VERDICT: B+.

By MORTON MARCUS Sentinel CORRESPONDENT

Kim Ki-duk's latest film "3-Iron" is an absorbing love story that plays as a fantasy. Or is it a fantasy that plays as a realistic love story? Kim's last film was the popular "Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring," a Buddhist parable set in a monastery floating on a lake deep in the Korean mountains. "3-Iron" is set in the chaotic urban world of present day Seoul.

What the films have in common is their oblique vision of the difficulties of living a satisfying life in the modern world.

A young man named Tae-suk breaks into peoples' homes when they're away and lives in them for a few days, "paying" for the food he takes by doing the owners' laundry and repairing their appliances.



One day, he breaks into the home of Su-hwa, an unhappy housewife who is regularly beaten by her husband and unbeknownst to Tae-suk is in the house observing him as he does the laundry, fixes a bathroom scale, and practices golf in the back yard with her husband's 3-iron. When she reveals herself to him, Tae-suk silently leaves the house but observes Su-hwa's bruised face before he goes. Later, he returns to see the husband slapping Su-hwa. He attacks the husband with the golf club and rides off with Su-hwa on his motorcycle.

That's the beginning of "3-Iron," and I won't reveal any more of its labyrinthine plot except to say that the young couple do not ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. Tae-suk continues to break into houses, and Su-Hwa mutely accepts her new life with him. This love story is more like Bonnie and Clyde than Cinderella and Prince Charming, although much less violent and larcenous than the American classic.

Then is it a story of two lost souls beset with real problems to which their chosen life is prone? If so, that life takes some strange turns that are not at all realistic.

One of the strangest yet still believable aspects of the film is that the couple never talk to one another. More to the point, they talk to no one, but go through their days in complete silence. The other characters talk and usually reveal more about themselves than they would like us to know, but Tae-suk and Su-hwa refuse to speak, and in so doing show their alienation from the world around them and maintain a certain innocence. Their silence also moves into the realm of symbol and parable.

Seeming to bear out the notion of parable, traditional Korean rituals and practices enter the film at several points in the form of burial rites and martial arts pursuits, but, despite the continued presence of the golf club, director Kim doesn't seem as concerned with pointing out detrimental Western influences on Korean life as he is with exploring the influences dream and reality have in shaping our lives.

Perspective is all. So, for example, the film can be viewed as a fantasy taking place in the wife's mind. In that view Tae-suk represents a better life, and certainly he performs in that capacity as gentle, patient lover as well as rescuer, all of which are the antithesis of her husband.

Furthermore, the idea of a dream lover is borne out by the film's last image.

But what if this is Tae-suk's story? He is identified as a college graduate who has chosen to be a criminal, if a fairly innocuous one.

Are his house-breaking acts a protest against the acquisitive life which a prosperous South Korea is following? Is Tae-suk merely a harmless sociopath who occasionally wields a golf club as a weapon?

It's a matter of roles and perspectives. If the film is Su-hwa's fantasy, Tae-suk is the ideal lover, but if it's Tae-suk's, the film depicts the social disintegration of modern-day Korea. Many details and incidents in the film tantalize the viewer with other interpretations.

One way or another, "3-Iron" remains open-ended and encourages the audience to pursue a number of possible meanings, as if our lives are too complex and too mysterious to be reduced to a single explanation—and that, in the end, may be the only answer to be found in this intriguing film.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27 every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m.

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