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CAPSULE REVIEWS

An artist shown on the edge

There's a guerrilla aesthetic to "Dirty Hands" that suits its subject. Los Angeles native David Choe, an illustrator and muralist whose clients include Sony Pictures, Levi's and Toyota, is at heart a graffiti artist, school dropout and world traveler. Filmmaker Harry Kim, a fellow Korean American who has known Choe since they were teens, followed him for eight restless, eventful years.

The resulting documentary is alternately illuminating and dull, energetic and repetitive. Fans of Choe's work — stylized, vibrant, ornate and vulgar — will appreciate the inside look at the self-described man-child, but his struggles to grow up are more tiresome than compelling.

Stealing was a career choice for Choe, who professed indifference toward legitimacy while hustling for recognition. He disdains the world of capital-A art but has been embraced by the gallery scene (his latest exhibit, "Nothing to Declare," opened April 23 at Lazarides in L.A.).

Using his own footage, animation and childhood home videos, Kim follows no particular chronology in shaping his portrait of the artist. At its best, the film captures Choe's nighttime stealth spray-painting on Los Angeles freeways and streets, and his adventures in the Congo, where he went in search of dinosaurs.

Choe's humor can be sly, but his expletive-rich ramblings often put the viewer on the wrong end of a one-way conversation. The film spends far too much time on his relationship woes. Yet even as he deals with multiple mental disorders, he's capable of extreme clarity. "I get paid to be myself," Choe



MANCHURIA: Lawlessness rules in "The Good, the Bad, the Weird."

acknowledges. —SHERI LINDEN

"Dirty Hands: The Art and Crimes of David Choe." MPAA rating: Unrated. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. Playing: At Laemmle's Sunset 5, West Hollywood.

Treasure hunt in 1930s Manchuria

Perhaps it's unsurprising that a restless genre shopper such as South Korean filmmaker Kim Jee-Woon — who's dabbled in comedy ("The Foul King"), horror ("A Tale of Two Sisters") and noir ("A Bittersweet Life") — would cram as much iconography, movement and mayhem as he could into his self-described Asian western "The Good, the Bad, the Weird."

So not only do we get (in titular order) a taciturn bounty hunter (Jung Woo-sung), a sadistic gang leader (Lee Byung-hun), and a resourcefully buffoonish thief (the comically versatile Song Kang-ho) all individually chasing after a treasure map in the unforgiving plains of 1930s Manchuria — where their status as exiled Koreans only bolsters their renegade ways — but Kim throws in the Japanese army and Chinese bandits as well.

Action set pieces move from train shootout to marketplace shootout to horseback-jeep-motorcycle shootout before the inevitable three-way showdown, which blessedly requires everyone to briefly stand still.

Knives, explosions and knockabout humor have been added to taste. As vigorously staged as it is — sometimes confusingly, with camera-torquing flair and impressive stunt work — the urge to thrill grows wearisome. Were audience members to be included as a collective character, they'd be "The Tired."

—ROBERT ABELE

"The Good, the Bad, the Weird." MPAA rating: Unrated. Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes. At the NuArt, West L.A.

True love, on the clock

The independently made "TIMER" is a high-concept romantic comedy with all the makings of a starry studio vehicle. Thankfully, it eluded the big-budget assembly line, allowing writer-director Jac Schaeffer to infuse her funny and charming feature debut with a more singular vision than those of its often overcooked competitors.

"TIMER" asks the in-

triguing question, "What if an implanted wrist timer could tell you exactly when you'd meet your one true love?" At the center of this notion is Oona (Emma Caulfield), a lovely, turning-30 orthodontist stuck with a rare blank TIMER. In the film's slightly cloudy rulebook, that means Oona's soul mate has yet to succumb to a TIMER implant (a romantic demerit in this parallel universe), causing her to pursue those "lacking" men. Oona's dating focus shifts, however, when she meets drummer Mikey (an endearing John Patrick Amedori), a younger, unmade-bed of a guy with four months left on his TIMER. Although clearly a mismatch, Oona tempts fate with Mikey, surprising them both in the process.

The movie contains wonderfully real interactions, hip dialogue and a terrific supporting cast that includes Michelle Borth as Oona's salty stepister and BFF, JoBeth Williams as Oona's happily remarried mom and Desmond Harrington as a sweet young widower with a TIMER aversion.

Make time for this one. —GARY GOLDSTEIN

"TIMER." MPAA rating: R for language. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. At Laemmle's Monica 4-Plex, Santa Monica.

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Large advertisement for Al Pacino's performance in 'Scent of a Woman' with quotes from Roger Ebert, Joe Morgenstern, and Keith Price. The word 'FUNNY' is written in large letters, and 'ABSURD' and 'EXCELLENT' are also written in large letters.