

Owl and the Sparrow

Bottom Line: This award-winning drama is a real audience charmer.

By Justin Lowe

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Ten-year-old newcomer Pham Thi Han turns in a captivating central performance.

Los Angeles Film Festival

Stephane Gauger's keenly observed debut feature, "Owl and the Sparrow," takes verite-style filmmaking to the streets of Saigon. With a captivating central performance by 10-year-old newcomer Pham Thi Han and an empathetic story line depicting the ordeals of urban alienation, "Owl and the Sparrow" is natural festival material and should nest comfortably on a strategically positioned specialty theatrical slate. The contemporary character drama recently won the audience award for best narrative feature at the Los Angeles Film Festival.

Orphaned Thuy (Han) works in her uncle's factory, where she assists with making bamboo blinds and other accessories. Young and relatively unskilled, she is the frequent focus of his chiding reminders that he is the only family she has left. After a particularly stinging rebuke, Thuy fills her bright pink backpack with clothes and personal possessions, running off alone to Saigon and spending most of her paltry savings on the expensive boat ride.

Arriving in the big city, she has little but her own quick wits to survive on, along with the compassion of strangers. Thuy first makes an unsuccessful attempt selling postcards on the street, then joins a group of flower girls plying roses to passersby with slightly more luck.

Meanwhile, apparently single flight attendant Lan (Cat Ly) checks into a modest Saigon hotel

on a five-day layover, as zookeeper Hai (Le The Lu) tends to his beloved animals on the other side of town. Wandering onto the zoo grounds on her flower rounds, Thuy quickly latches onto Hai, recognizing him as another lonely soul, who is nursing an aching heart broken by a former fiancée.

Lan is suffering her own romantic disappointments as the secret mistress of an insensitive married airline pilot. After Thuy and Lan meet at a streetside noodle stand, Lan offers to let the homeless girl share her hotel room. Their nascent friendship inspires Thuy to play matchmaker between Hai, whom she compares to an owl, and Lan, who considers herself more like a sparrow. At the same time, Thuy's uncle searches the Saigon streets for her, while menacing municipal authorities want to put the girl into an orphanage.

Except in the final scenes, where "Owl" just manages to skirt overt sentimentality, Gauger's script effectively capitalizes on the compact cast's naturalistic acting and the city's lively immediacy to provide a realistic framework as the story brings the three principal characters together as a makeshift family. A skilled cinematographer and technician with notable experience on previous Vietnam-set productions, Gauger takes to the city streets with verve, his predominantly hand-held DV lensing infusing the low-budget film with refreshing vitality.

Han's assured, slightly whimsical turn as young Thuy is the principal catalyst for the film's substantial charm, eliciting compelling sympathy and unexpected humor from sometimes grim circumstances. Ly ventures a nicely nuanced performance, her expressive features attentively convey Lan's shifting emotions, but Lu's role registers fairly weakly.

Tech aspects are fine, with the DV transfer to 35mm holding up well.

OWL AND THE SPARROW

Annam Pictures in association with Chanh Phuong Films

Credits:

Screenwriter-director: Stephane Gauger

Producers: Nguyen Van Quan, Doan Nhat Nam, Stephane Gauger

Executive producers: Timothy Linh Bui, Ham Tran, Jimmy Nghiem Pham

Director of photography: Stephane Gauger

Music: Pete Nguyen

Editors: Ricardo Javier, Ham Tran

Cast:

Lan: Cat Ly

Hai: Le The Lu

Thuy: Pham Thi Han

Uncle Minh: Nguyen Hau

Running time -- 97 minutes

No MPAA rating

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