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Owl and the Sparrow

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By JAY WEISSBERG

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Uncle Tran Le Minh (Nguyen Hau) is the boss of a bamboo factory, where he's put young ward Thuy (Pham Thi Han) to work. After one berating too many, she grabs her Barbie knapsack and runs away to the big city, befriended by a couple awfully nice street kids who advise her on how to survive.

While peddling roses, Thuy meets zookeeper Hai (Le The Lu, "Buffalo Boy"), who introduces her to the baby elephant his superior is planning on selling. The young man and the little girl develop a bond, strengthened by the parallel Gauger draws between the homeless orphan resisting returning to her uncle and the beloved elephant unwilling to be shipped away from where it belongs.

Thuy ends each day at a soup cafe, where she pals around with the young boy (Hoang Long) manning the stall. Air hostess Lan (Cat Ly), another customer, takes an interest in the little flower seller and invites her to stay at her hotel until she has to fly back to home base. Recognizing Lan's loneliness, Thuy plays matchmaker between the stewardess and the zookeeper, an unlikely couple considering Lan's jet-set sophistication and Hai's more limited outlook.

Though the pic definitely borders on sentimental, Gauger saves it from sappiness with inventive handheld lensing and rapid edits that give the whole a more cutting-edge look than the subject seems to warrant. A montage at an orphanage, which plays like an infomercial for Vietnamese foster kids, could easily be excised.

As scripeter, Gauger makes Lan an unexpectedly three-dimensional figure through brief character

notations (her clandestine affair with a pilot, her banter with the hotel staff). And what is there about scenes of stewardesses running through an airport, music swelling, that always makes the heart pound with guilty pleasure?

Perhaps best of all is Gauger's use of the streets of Saigon, presenting a bustling, vibrant setting for the action and grounding it all in an omnipresent reality. Engaging thespians also carry the story, especially Ly, so strong in Ham Tran's "Journey From the Fall" (Tran is credited here as executive producer). Blow-up from DV can't hide digital origins, but overall look more than holds up on the big screen.

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