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Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Sparrow' scores style points

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For fans of elegant, light-footed caper movies, Hong Kong director Johnnie To's "Sparrow" is like a rich dessert. There's no nutritional value and it might make you a little ill if you ate too much of it. But in the right portion, it's sensational.

Director To is best known as a maker of violent but incredibly stylized action movies (like "Exiled," a Wisconsin Film Festival selection a couple of years ago). That makes "Sparrow" quite a departure; nobody gets shot or otherwise killed in the film.

Instead, To has channeled all his considerable filmmaking style into a delicious movie about a quartet of professional pickpockets, led by Kei (Simon Yam, who seems to be channeling Cary Grant). They seem like a carefree group, tooling around Hong Kong on Kei's bicycle like a bunch of kids. But they're also very good at what they do; in a beautifully choreographed early scene, we see the pickpockets deftly relieve several unsuspecting passers-by of their wallets in a ballet of larceny.

Then along comes trouble, in the form of Chun-Lei (Kelly Lin), a beautiful, mysterious woman who comes to each member of the team separately and charms the socks off them. Her motives are murky, but she's apparently in the employ of a master criminal named Mr. Fu who doesn't want her hanging around with a lower class of thief, and isn't shy about using his thugs to reinforce that point.

The plot is pretty thin, as Kei and his thieves try to outwit Fu and his men, with Chun-Lei the femme fatale somewhere in the middle. And To is so enraptured with how his film's visual style that occasionally it's hard to figure out exactly what's going on.

But, man, that style! The seductive charm of "Sparrow" comes not from its story, but from the hip playfulness that suffuses every scene. To is obviously deeply in love with cool classic movies like "Charade" or "It Takes a Thief," and the film is like a love letter to that era, from the exquisite visuals to the classic performances to the incredible retro score, which sounds like Henry Mancini thrown into overdrive.

"Sparrow" screened Saturday night at the Orpheum Theatre as part of the Wisconsin Film Festival. The theater's retro charm made it the perfect setting for such an old-school movie with a Hong Kong twist.