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Visuals eclipse storytelling in 'Tulip Fever'

Play invokes the best of Flemish visual art, but the corniest of Hollywood plot devices

In the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century, Amsterdam was the richest city in Europe. The Dutch Masters dominated the European art scene, and the speculative market in tulip futures expanded wantonly.

By virtue of the Dutch East India Co.'s spice trade, the Netherlands was an economic superpower. Pepper was king. Even today, Netherlanders use the word *peperduur* — “as expensive as pepper” — to indicate high cost.

Cornelis Sandvoort (Christoph Waltz), the pepper merchant at the center of the Weinstein Co.'s richly designed period romance “Tulip Fever” is one of Amsterdam's wealthiest men.

When he procures a beautiful teenaged bride, the orphaned Sophia (Alicia Vikander), from the pipe-smoking, tulip-trading, ceremonially titled Abbess of St. Ursula (Judi Dench), the three parties to the transaction are each satisfied they have benefited from the bargain.

She arrived barefoot, and now Sophia leaves the orphanage in a carriage. Her duty is clear: She must produce an heir.

But after three years of marriage, the couple can't seem to conceive. Cornelis' cringe-worthy bedside practice of noisily using the chamber pot, then rolling over to inform her that his “little soldier” is “standing at attention” doesn't help.

Essentially alone, the young wife bonds with the street-smart

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housemaid, Maria (Holliday Grainger), at whose hands she learns that the power imbalance between the idle and the ambitious does not work in her favor.

Sophia patiently endures her confinement until Cornelis com-



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missions Jan Van Loos (Dane DeHaan), an artist who is equal to his wife in youth and beauty, to paint the couple's portraits.

You see where this is going.

The lovers take the woozy, romantic risks that caused “Titanic”-loving high schoolers to swoon. (This film has an R rating, compared to “Titanic's” user-friendlier PG-13, excluding a portion of its target audience.)

If discovered, the affair will be plenty *peperduur* for everyone involved.

Sophia and Jan resolve to run away, bankrolling their happily-ever-after through a convoluted plan

that involves speculating in the tulip market. Devoting themselves to the study of tulip futures, they learn the price of rare, striped tulips — breakers — rises at the fastest rate. So they borrow to implement their foolproof scheme:

“We just need to put everything on one bulb.”

On the exchange floor, it's clear that every stratum of Dutch society mingles in the grimy casino milieu where pedigrees to exotic flower bulbs are auctioned.

We root for this reverse-Cinderella romance because we are supposed to, not because it's easy. Cornelis may be a “fatuous windbag,” but Jan has creditors pounding at his door, and his Falstaffian buddy Gerrit's (Zach Galifianakis) unreliability is epic.

Tom Stoppard, the playwright who wrote “Shakespeare in Love,” adapted the screenplay. With its missed connections, convent intrigue and *deus ex machina* ending, “Tulip Fever” reflects the Bard's influence, as well as the farces and morality plays popular in the period.

Yet the story lies flat, and is entirely eclipsed by the look of the film.

Rich and handsome, it is the movie's production design (Simon Elliott), not its flaccid exposition, that makes us giddy.

Using the painterly signatures of the period—deep Rembrandt umbers, exquisite Vermeer interiors and boisterous Hals peasant scenes, “Tulip Fever” is packed with artistic and historic references.

It is a visual love letter to a time and place Americans rarely consider, and would be complemented with a visit to the Dutch Masters in Gallery 213 of the Art Institute of Chicago. That way you can dreamily contemplate its careful detail as your mind wanders away from the dopey plot and bad choices made by starry-eyed adolescents.

Think of it as “Rembrandt in Love.”