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CRITIC'S CHOICE

Pickpocket

Jia Zhangke's touching and accomplished first feature (1997), cast entirely with nonprofessional actors, is somewhat uncharacteristic in that it's basically a character study. Set in Jia's Chinese hometown (Fenyang in Shanxi province), it focuses on a rather pathetic pickpocket who runs a small gang of younger thieves. His profession makes him an outcast and his romantic and social possibilities are steadily shrinking. Though the film lacks the epic sweep of Jia's subsequent features (*Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*, *Still Life*), it imparts much about the provincial town, and it's so impressive in its own right that I can understand why some prefer it to his later work. In Shanxi with subtitles. 113 min. ➡ Fri 1/25, 8 PM, Northwestern Univ. Block Museum of Art. —**Jonathan Rosenbaum**