

FILM REVIEWS

It Was Just an Accident

Produced by Jafar Panahi and Philippe Martin; written and directed by Jafar Panahi; cinematography by Amin Jafari; edited by Amir Etminan; production design and costumes by Leila Naghdi; starring Vahid Mobasseri, Mariam Afshari, Ebrahim Azizi, Hadis Pakbaten, Majid Panahi, Mohamad Ali Elyasmehr, and Georges Hashemzadeh. Color, 105 min., Persian dialogue with English subtitles, 2025. A NEON release, www.neonrated.com.

It Was Just an Accident, the eleventh feature of Iranian auteur Jafar Panahi, which received its American premiere at this year's New York Film Festival, may be his finest film to date—although this suggestion will surely invite vigorous contestation among his devotees, who will rise in defense of any number of personal favorites. But few would dissent from the notion that *Accident*, which won the Palme d'Or at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival, is a riveting and remarkable addition to a distinguished oeuvre. And with his trophy case already glistening with the top prizes from the Berlin (2015) and Venice (2000) film festivals, Panahi surely must be seen as one of the formidable figures of contemporary cinema.

Panahi's previous ten features are plainly divisible into two distinct phases. Among the first five, increasingly accomplished expressions of humanistic, social realism, two in particular stand out: *The Circle* (2000), co-written with Kambuzia Partovi, and *Crimson Gold* (2003), written by Panahi's mentor, the legendary Abbas Kiarostami. The former addressed the plight of marginalized women in the Islamic Republic; the latter, a subtle, sophisticated social commentary framed around a robbery-gone-wrong yarn, anticipates in part, if in a radically different context, Sidney Lumet's late-career triumph *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007).

The Circle and *Crimson Gold* are distinguished not only for establishing Panahi's international reputation but also because they got him into hot water at home, despite the fact that to all but the most sensitive eyes they are only gently transgressive. Each was promptly banned in Iran—and his troubles would soon mount from there. In 2010, Panahi was arrested, along with his friend and fellow filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof, among others. Speaking in his own defense at the time, Panahi accurately insisted, "I have chosen to make films that are engaged socially rather than politically." Neverthe-

less, the court imposed a would-be career-crushing twenty-year ban on filmmaking, and a prohibition against traveling abroad—the first of many harrowing encounters with the repressive regime, punctuated by arrests and detainments and with the looming shadow of a six-year prison sentence hanging over his head.

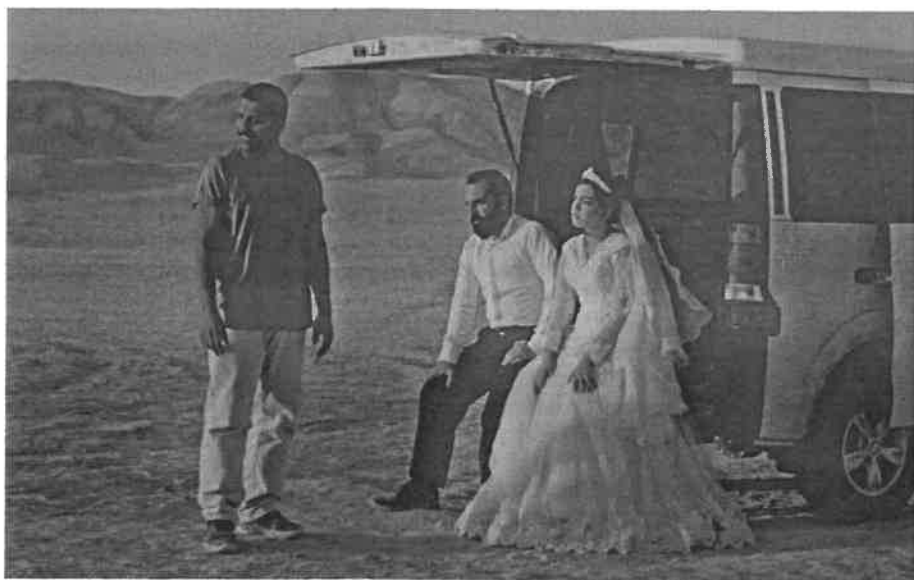
Panahi's subsequent five features were thus shot on the sly and smuggled out of the country. These furtive productions, in which the writer/director also appeared as himself, reflected metanarratives informed by the circumstances of their production. Standouts from this set include *Closed Curtain* (2013), made in close collaboration with Partovi, and *3 Faces* (2018), featuring the prominent Iranian actress Behnaz Jafari. In contrast, *It Was Just an Accident* marks a return to a more traditional narrative fiction film, if with Panahi's penchant for documentary-style shooting, use of nonprofessional actors in key roles, and a large number of scenes shot within moving vehicles—three enduring attributes that show the influence of Kiarostami.

It Was Just an Accident was made after Panahi's ban on filmmaking and travel were unexpectedly lifted, but it was nevertheless shot secretly and without permits to avoid the requirement of submitting the screenplay for approval. It is obvious to see why—the film is easily his most subversive: critical of the theocracy; cuttingly casual in its serial illustration of bribery as the common currency of everyday transactions; and, most shockingly to those familiar with contem-

porary Iranian cinema, provocatively presenting many of its female characters without head coverings. After the completion of principal photography, a rough cut was smuggled to France, where Panahi worked with editor Amir Etminan to craft the finished product.

It Was Just an Accident opens with a double entendre—there are actually two accidents. In the first, a family driving a car at night strikes a dog, leaving the vehicle in need of repair. This first accident, presented in a complex single shot that lasts close to seven minutes, introduces the film's visual style (the tactic, never showy nor gratuitous, adds to the picture's suspense) and is symmetrically bookended by the film's penultimate scene, which resolves the principal story—an even longer take centered on the same character. In general, *Accident* is both deftly and often beautifully shot; cinematographer Amin Jafari was also the director of photography for Panahi's *3 Faces* and *No Bears* (2022).

The second "accident" is an episode of random chance. At the garage where the family seeks help, the patriarch Eghbal (Ebrahim Azizi) is spotted by one of the workers in the rear of the establishment, Vahid (Vahid Mobasseri), who peers through a hexagon-shaped chain-link fence—an image that can be seen as a hat tip to the signature visual motif of Victor Erice's antifascist classic *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973). "Spotted" does not quite describe what transpires. As Eghbal enters the building, Vahid hears the very distinct



In *It Was Just an Accident*, Vahid and the other former prisoners who were tortured by a notorious agent of the Iranian regime suddenly have doubts about the identity of their captive.

walk of “Peg Leg”—the agent of the state who interrogated and abused him in prison for his participation in a worker’s strike, beatings which left scars that did not heal, literally and figuratively. Vahid, still disfigured from his beatings, never saw his tormentor. Political prisoners in Iran are invariably blindfolded and never see their inquisitors, but the distinct sound of those asymmetric footfalls seems definitive.

Impulsively, Vahid follows Eghbal from the garage, and the following day, in an impressively executed street maneuver, knocks him out, takes him captive, and brings him to a remote location where he will exact his revenge. But just as he is about to bury his victim alive, two questions arise that shape the form and the substance of the film. The first is, can he be sure he has the right man? The second is, upon reflection, what is the appropriate measure of justice? Ultimately, *It Was Just an Accident*, a riveting suspense film, is about that latter crucial question.

But the former issue must be settled. And so, with his unconscious victim held captive in a box in his van, Vahid seeks advice, looking, in particular, for another former prisoner who could provide a positive ID. In this effort, unintentionally for Vahid but quite purposefully for Panahi, he ends up collecting what amounts to a jury, and one which, by convention, represents a cross-section of Iranian society—although not so much “Twelve Angry Men” as “Six Traumatized Victims.” The first, the sage-like Salar (Georges Hashemzadeh, exceptional in his few minutes of screen time), renounces violence but, ultimately, keeps his hand in (is he equivocating or being protective?), urging Vahid to seek out Shiva (Mariam Afshari, a nonprofessional player whose confident performance anchors this movie).

A commercial photographer, Shiva initially resists the enterprise, protesting that she is only now, finally, “resuming a normal life.” But, as with the others who are assembled, she finds that she must know and must act. (The camera-wielding Shiva, who espouses nonviolence but can act decisively when necessary, can be seen as Panahi’s stand-in.) Shiva’s instincts and decision-making prove critical throughout; in general, the agency of the female characters in the film, including the savvy of a small child, is notable, as well as the fact that the men in the movie seem more permanently dislocated in their lives than the women. Ultimately, Shiva and Vahid oversee a band that grows to include another victim, a naive outsider, and, necessarily, a hothead whose thirst for retribution will not be easily contained.

What follows, then, is a thriller worthy of Hitchcock (one of Panahi’s cinematic heroes). What provides *Accident* with its palpable, edge-of-the-seat tension, however, is exceptional. The stress does not derive from the classic fount of a Hitchcockian double-chase thriller: will they get caught by



In *It Was Just an Accident*, Iranian security guards who momentarily question Vahid’s revenge-seeking group prove to be more corrupt than truly threatening.

the authorities before their mission can be accomplished? This is not an unreasonable concern, in theory, for a group of people driving around Tehran having kidnapped an agent of the state. In fact, however, with one modest exception, such concerns for “getting caught” are minimal, and not of much interest to the movie. There are no police cars in the rearview mirror here; as with many underground movements, the greatest danger to the protagonists is that one of their nominal comrades might be an informer or become one. Instead, the suspense is existential and relentless; it is all about how the choices they ultimately make will affect their own humanity—a topic of increasingly intense and open debate. There is no doubt that Peg Leg’s crimes are among the most heinous imaginable (and drawn from actual experiences of Iranian political prisoners, including the practice of mock executions). Indeed, it is hard to imagine the audience member who would not understand if the group chose to take justice into their own hands. And yet, in contrast to American cinema’s laziest subgenre—the revenge thriller—*It Was Just an Accident*, instead of feeding the viewer’s easily stimulated blood lust, asks the question, Would acting on those understandable instincts make us more like them?

In two late sequences Panahi pushes that question near the breaking point: first with an unexpected plot device of convenience designed to underscore the depths of these characters’ enduring humanity, and subsequently with an extended confrontation that flirts with going over the top. In both instances, viewers are likely to reach divergent conclusions about the plausibility of some of the choices made and the sincerity of some of the sentiments expressed. But these modest wobbles do not detract from the overall strength of this extraordinary movie.

It Was Just an Accident would be worthy of the highest praise in any circumstances, but the context of its production lends the film an additional edge: it was inspired by Panahi’s most recent imprisonment, which stretched across seven months before his release in 2023. As he explained in an interview at Cannes, *Accident* was inspired by “the experience of all these people I met in prison, mixed with my own perception and experience.” Especially in that light, it is fascinating, even essential, to consider Panahi’s contribution alongside Rasoulouf’s outstanding *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024). Although they present very different stories, visual styles, and perspectives, both films are ruminations on interrogation and authoritarianism—and were made after their creators were released from the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran, the Islamic Republic’s infamous site for holding and systematically brutalizing its political prisoners. And as Panahi notes, and Rasoulouf has also similarly emphasized, “the fact of never seeing the face of your interrogator is everyone’s experience.”

It Was Just an Accident concludes with an ambiguous coda, which, given Panahi’s own experience, is all the more compelling. It starts, subtly, with the appearance of a car—innocent or ominous—positioned at the edge of the frame. What follows, in another long, suspenseful shot, lends itself to several possible interpositions. One is terrifying and suggestive of the omnipresent surveillance state; another is more abstract and internal, gesturing at a state of mind consistent with the notion that some wounds will never fully heal. But a third is humanist, and even hopeful, and consistent with Panahi’s comment that his film is looking toward that day when the theocracy finally loses its grip on power: “It is imperative for us to think about what is coming next, whether you want to call it a process of reconciliation, or forgiveness, or dialogue.”—Jonathan Kirshner

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