



It Was Just an Accident: Jafar Panahi explores the morality of violent revenge in his deserving Palme d'Or winner

The Iranian director's politically-charged revenge thriller asks nuanced questions about the nature of trauma and oppression with a blackly comic story informed by his own experiences with imprisonment

It Was Just an Accident

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With Palme d'Or winner *It Was Just an Accident*, Iranian master Jafar Panahi delivers a cogent, morally ambiguous revenge tale whose targets are unremittingly sadistic but whose vengeance-seekers are rather more elastic in their reasoning than most.

It's rare and fascinating to see so clearly inside the psyche of a filmmaker shaped by the harshest of authoritarian regimes and in the eye of the storm of its cultural repression. Director Jafar Panahi's films are wise, principled, passionate, and most pressingly, reveal him as a filmmaker of moral clarity and furious, often blackly comic political statement.

In his latest, a beatific long shot opens on a man who will come to be nicknamed 'Peg Leg' for his squeaking prosthetic limb (Ebrahim Azizi). The man, preoccupied by his pregnant wife and child in the car, has accidentally run over a stray dog before his car stalls out altogether, leaving him stranded in a small town. This happenstance sees him recognised by a mechanic's assistant called Vahid (Vahid Mobasseri, giving a nuanced, interior performance of unspoken steeliness). With dawning horror, Vahid twigs that this motorist is the same man who, as a state prison official, cruelly tortured him and many others under lock and key by the extremist government. Motivated at first by sheer hatred, Vahid barely hesitates before fetching a shovel and nearly brutally murdering the man; he thinks better of it, but the queasy encounter leaves him in search of whatever form of rough justice he can find. He soon finds himself driving around in a van with an abducted man, and is slowly joined by a small clutch of former prisoners from different walks of life – all of whom are equally set on vengeance.

Within this framework, Panahi explores the moral justification and satisfaction of potential violent retribution against one's oppressive captors. It's an understandable philosophical question to set out for a man who has, himself, been arrested and imprisoned multiple times, subjected to physical and psychological torture, and banned from making films altogether in his home nation. He has spoken before about *It Was Just an Accident* being based in the variety of horror stories told to him by the prisoners and victims of the regime that he met while incarcerated. With a desire to amalgamate and bring some of those experiences to life,

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Panahi creates vivid Iranian characters whose actions express the reverberations of trauma and repression.

Vahid interacts and argues with each of the former prisoners on his van journey, and each presents a different, complex story wherein they fell afoul of the authorities. One, a woman soon to be married (Hadis Pakbaten) is cautious; another, a recklessly angry man (Mohamad Ali Elyasmehr), doesn't even mind that they can't totally positively ID Peg-Leg, and is happy to treat their quarry as collateral damage nonetheless. This is a revenge thriller that stays true to its genre while also maintaining its one-of-a-kind political statement; you always feel in safe hands with Panahi's sturdy, layered storytelling.

"What's most important now is our country and the freedom of our country," Panahi said after accepting the Palme d'Or. "Let us join forces. No-one should dare tell us what kind of clothes we should wear, what we should do, or what we should not do." It was a remarkable moment for a filmmaker who few expected would even manage to travel internationally to attend Cannes – he hadn't been since 2003, even while his films have been screened there – nevermind be present to accept perhaps the most coveted honour in cinema.

Filmed with his usual understated but accomplished handheld – wonderfully compact and self-assured in spite of the film being made in secret – Panahi melds the personal and political in the most subtle and searing of ways. An enquiry into whether political violence on this scale should ever justify extralegal killing, or indeed whether an eye for an eye is precisely the approach that's needed, *It Was Just an Accident* is a dark film indeed. It does, however, find levity in Vahid's ad-hoc, deeply amateur crew, who at one point run out of petrol and are forced to push their kidnapping van to its destination. It also sees the sparkles of humanity and warmth in people who are otherwise capable of towering monstrosity. Without tipping its hand at key moments, Panahi asks us what we are willing to tolerate in the name of maintaining a civilised world – particularly when the powers-that-be are anything but civilised.

By Christina Newland Sight and Sound
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