DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2026/27 SEASON

IT WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT

(Language: Persian, Azerbaijani)

Director:	Jafar Panahi
UK Release:	5 December 2025
Running time:	103 minutes
Presented by:	Dorchester Film Society, 14 October 2026

"Early in 2023, the Iranian regime lifted, without warning, the 20-year ban it had placed on director Jafar Panahi, which prevented him from leaving the country and attempted to prevent him from making films (he made them, instead, in secret). He'd been interrogated, imprisoned. He'd been on hunger strike. Once freed, he made *It Was Just an Accident*, again in secrecy. Much of it, for practical reasons, was shot in enclosed vehicles. Panahi was able to safely travel to this year's Cannes Film Festival to premiere the film, where it won the Palme d'Or.

This week, he was sentenced in absentia to a year in prison and a travel ban for "propaganda activities" while he was promoting the film abroad. It is that constant, needless cruelty, the perpetual hover of the authoritarian hand, that casts its sickly shadow over *It Was Just an Accident*.

Mechanic Vahid (Vahid Mobasseri), while working away in his shop, hears the unforgettable squeak of the prosthetic leg of the man who tormented him in prison. He follows the man (played by Ebrahim Azizi), kidnaps him, drives him out to the desert, digs a pit, and throws him in. But his cries of innocence can't be smothered by the dirt. Vahid's conscience kicks in. He was blindfolded the entire time they were together. Can he be sure this is the right man?

Scenes here are often shot from a distance, set against the wide and sparse horizons of car parks and vacant streets. However, those who inhabit such frames look claustrophobic, near-buckled over by the weight of what they've suffered through, and by the volcanic anger that's been left to brew inside their lungs and their fists.

It's a film of overwhelmingly visceral emotion; impossible, then, to separate from what we imagine Panahi must feel himself. And yet, so often, we'll see characters clamber over each other and wheel around their limbs like they're in a Buster Keaton comedy.

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It Was Just an Accident is funny. It challenges us to have the fortitude to laugh in the face of darkness, a kind we can hardly afford to distance ourselves from in a country where artists like **Kneecap** and **Sally Rooney** have increasingly faced the threat of censorship for their own outspoken support of Palestine.

Vahid sets out to find others victimised by the same man, in the hope that one of them might confirm his identity. His unconscious body is stuffed into a locker in the back of a van, carted around town for a morbid kind of show and tell. Shiva (Mariam Afshari) is interrupted in the middle of a wedding photography shoot, where the bride, Golrokh (Hadis Pakbaten), happens to be a former detainee.

Hamid (Mohamad Ali Elyasmehr) works at a local pharmacy. Elyasmehr, a carpenter by trade, captures with commitment the way trauma can slam back into someone's body like a lightning bolt. Many of the cast here, as is often the case in Panahi's work, are non-professionals, karate referees and taxi drivers.

What do they do with a man they think, but can't be certain, was the source of such endless brutality? What does it take to rid themselves of what Shiva calls the unsilenceable voice "ringing in my head"? Is what happened to them a river that can simply never be uncrossed? Everywhere there is fear, everywhere there is silence. Yet, in Panahi's striking, unexpected tale of revenge, Vahid ends up where we'd least expect – outside a hospital, with a box full of pastries bought for his own torturer."

Clarisse Loughrey, *The Independent*, Thursday 4 December 2025

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"You could watch the Iranian film *It Was Just an Accident* as a slow-burn revenge thriller or as a cautionary tale for political martyrs. It's a story of an incidental road collision in which a family man runs over a dog on a dark night road, causing the driver, Eghbal (Ebrahim Azizi), to encounter a mechanic, Vahid (Vahid Mobasseri). The twist? Their previous meeting was as bully and victim during an Iranian-regime dragnet.

… *It Was Just an Accident* (*Un simple accident*) is a French-Iranian-Luxembourgian co-production that won the Palm d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival because its story feels timed to activist chic. Introducing the West to the totalitarianism that some Westerners envy of late, director-writer Jafar

Panahi simplifies life under autocracy to "What if?" details — the personal struggles, lingering trauma, and social distrust of a tight-knit group.

There's paranoia in the way Vahid watches Eghbal with suspicion. It's similar to Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, though that amazing sense of free surveillance — the omniscience of citizenry exercising its rights — is missing. Panahi literalizes the idea of a closed society when Vahid mimics the surveillance state, demonstrating citizen trapped in patterns of vengeance and abuse. Vahid enlists the aid of once-underground resisters to help identify their former tormentor and then decide whether or not to kill him.

These long-suffering Iranians include anxious bride Golrokh (Hadis Pakbaten) and her fiancé (Majid Panahi), and wedding photographer Shiva (Mariam Afshari) and her ex-boyfriend Hamid (Mohamad Ali Elyasmehr). One couple is pledged, the other torn, both symbolizing a generation's conflict in an obviously schematic drama.

The film's humanist approach shies from offending Iran's theocracy, a kind of marketing tool that the West likes to view as courageous opposition. But *It Was Just an Accident* doesn't surge with liberationist fervor (as Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window* launched his selfish idiosyncrasies according to an implicit sense of justice). Instead, Panahi goes existential: "What will be will be," the driver's pregnant wife explains to their sad, uncomprehending daughter Niloufor (Liana Azizifay) — a figure who will recur in the film's grim roundelay as a symbol of native normalcy.

Panahi's style derives from Iran's two great filmmakers Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami, both natural avant-gardists distinguished by their different pursuits — Makhmalbaf's populism (*A Matter of Innocence*, *Salaam Cinema*, *The Silence*, *The President*) and Kiarostami's elitism (*Where Is the Friend's House*, *Through the Olive Trees*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, *Certified Copy*). As their acolyte, Panahi split the difference and won wide acclaim with his mediocre *The White Balloon*, *The Circle*, *Crimson Gold*, and now *It Was Just an Accident.*

Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami employed rigorous narrative structures that rethought the presentation of events and ideas, while Panahi's style is conventionally realistic, framing actors in extreme close-up or against a mountainous backdrop. At times *Accident* resembles the road-trip aspect of *Anora* [shown in the Dorchester Film Society's 2025/6 season] as the fractious

characters assemble and debate forgiveness and motives. Every bureaucratic exchange involves a bribe via credit card payback. And when Vahid intends his old enemy to be buried alive, Shiva cautions, "It's your ideals you'd be burying." Her hothead ex, Hamid, interrupts the discourse with wild tantrums like an unregenerate ethnic figure in a Mel Brooks movie, though without the humor. He curses "the holy war in Syria" as the source of his post-carceral misery.

Middlebrow Panahi invokes *Waiting for Godot* to raise the tone of his folksy dilemma. The shift from thriller mode to heroic-martyr mode leads to a histrionic climax — wailing about zombie identification, ISIS, and the Supreme Guide — very much like the remonstrations in World War II anti-fascist melodramas (though without the stirring music).

This manipulation of liberal sentiment appeals to the Cannes culture that always rewards progressive banalities (especially when they strike the European sensibility as anti-capitalist, anti-Western, or anti-American). Panahi's second-rate craft explicates the conflicts between activists ("Do you act before you think?"), surpassing standard anti-fascist junk like *Judas and the Black Messiah* or *One Battle After Another*. Panahi clearly tests the market for political clichés. The fundamental problem is that the unseen torture and uncertain identification of Eghbal creates an over-projection of Iranian fascism and paranoia that seems to lie within — similar to what we've seen from January 6 prosecutors and No Kings zealots. But a thriller as obviously over-projected as this one doesn't thrill."

Armond White, *National Review*, 22 October 2025

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"Directed by Jafar Panahi, *It Was Just an Accident* follows several characters as they attempt to determine if the man they're holding hostage is the same man that tortured them years earlier. It's a premise that seems to be laying the groundwork for a thriller-forward narrative, with this vibe certainly heightened by a relatively tense opening stretch, and yet Panahi, for the most part, offers up a low-key endeavor that's saddled with an episodic (and somewhat hit-and-miss) midsection – with Panahi's solid visuals and a series of strong performances generally sustaining the viewer's interest even through the picture's less-than-enthralling digressions. And though the whole thing never quite becomes as impactful as one might've anticipated (and hoped), *It Was Just an Accident*, which admittedly builds towards a fairly riveting third act,

ultimately comes off as a decent-enough drama that could probably have used a little streamlining and tightening."

David Nusair, *Reel Film* Reviews, January 3, 2026