

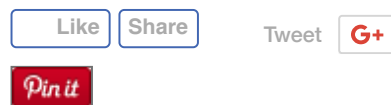


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HAPPENSTANCE

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

It's a promising premise: The most seemingly insignificant gesture or random accident can produce infinite repercussions. In fact, the original French title--Le Battement d'Ailes du Papillon--suggests that the fluttering of butterflies' wings over the Atlantic could eventually kick up a tsunami in the Pacific. A comforting notion, it suggests that people and things are all connected; and that justice, though delayed, will overtake the bad guys. In Happenstance, however, these fertile ideas don't quite jell into a satisfying film.

Director Laurent Firode's first feature tracks a group of seemingly unrelated folk over the course of a long day, showing how their lives carom off one another. In the kickoff, store clerk Irene (Audrey Tautou, in a role that preceded her career-making turn in Amlie) learns from a fellow metro passenger that today, according to her horoscope, she'll 'meet the love of her life.' As it happens, he's Younes (Algerian singer Faudel), the dude in the opposite seat. After Irene gets off the train, fragmented incidents multiply: A heartless security guard boots an ailing clochard from a parking garage. Irene's roommate ousts her from the apartment so she can rendezvous with a long-lost lover. An adulterous husband is pushed by his clingy girlfriend to unload his wife. As these characters randomly interact, every encounter bears a consequence that weaves into a complex pattern of events that ingeniously culminates in the union of Irene and Youne. (Curiously, Amlie also underscores the role of chance in people's lives.)

The fun is in watching how the pattern plays out. Example: A lowlife leaves a shopping bag at a metro stop. Suspecting a bomb, cops force the train to bypass the station. By happenstance, a guy in the train intended to get off at that station to meet his former girlfriend--who now believes she's

been jilted when he fails to show up. But she's being 'punished,' in a sense: She's the very woman who selfishly evicted Irene so she could use the apartment as a love nest. The jilted girlfriend then unleashes a series of events that circuitously drive Irene into the arms of destiny. Midway through the movie, a cabbie spells out Firode's premise when he recounts a story showing how the grand events of his life have hinged on a series of accidents.

Unfortunately, the film's production values aren't up to its intellectual ambitions. The camerawork's pedestrian; a persistent yellowish hue suggests lighting by a 40-watt bulb. French cinema has long disdained perfect features, but can't we have actors with more cinematic presence? Audrey Tautou monopolizes all the beauty here--with her huge eyes, Asian hair and Snow White skin, she's on the order of a natural wonder. Given little to do except listen, though, she's one extended reaction shot, but maybe in her case just existing within camera range is enough. As for Faudel, he may be an icon in the world of Algerian rai music, but here his principal scene involves a truly disgusting payoff to that security guard from earlier on who's not only mean to clochards but prejudiced against Algerians--a scene which does little to showcase his talents. The other players appear too sporadically to attain character-hood. Though fancifully constructed, Happenstance is principally the visualization of a concept, and in the end, more of a moving board game than a movie.

--Erica Abeel

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