

## Pieces Fit Together in Sublime 'Chinese Puzzle'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 31, 2014 - 8:03am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Life is chaos. We in the human race can all agree on that. The new film “Chinese Puzzle” allows that chaos to happen, and the results are funny, affecting and warm. Writer/director Cédric Klapisch completes his “Spanish apartment trilogy,” bringing back the characters from “L’Auberge Espagnole” and “Russian Dolls,” to place them squarely in middle age.

The beauty of the film is that it works as a separate element, there is no need to have prior knowledge of the other films – although it probably enhances the enjoyment. Cédric Klapisch creates lives that are challenged by turning age 40 (gasp!), an odd transition point when dealing with kids, divorce and multiple locations. The story is fresh, highly comic and propels itself due to the result of the organic decisions by the characters. There are also some parallel circumstances regarding fatherhood that are neatly applied, and a twist on the mid life affair crisis, using a woman rather than a man. “Chinese Puzzle” illustrates the old saying, “shit happens.”

Xavier (Romain Duris) has established himself as an up and coming novelist, even as his personal life begins to melt down. His wife Wendy (Kelly Reilly) has remained loyal to his quest in Paris for ten years, while they have begun to raise two children. Their marriage falls apart, and Wendy moves the children to New York City after meeting a man there.



Martine (Audrey Tautou) and Xavier (Romain Duris) Work it Out in 'Chinese Puzzle'

*Photo credit: StudioCanal*

Xavier's old friends come to the rescue, as Isabelle (Cécile de France) encourages him to move to New York to be around his kids, and his camps out at her loft in Brooklyn, while she is pregnant with his child – Xavier was an anonymous sperm donor for the same sex pairing of Isabelle and Ju (Sandrine Holt). Meanwhile Martine (Audrey Tautou) is back in Paris with her single parented two kids, and begins to miss Xavier. The cultures and lives start clashing in their interaction, as pieces of the "puzzle" are arranged by Xavier.

There are some cutesy elements to these circumstances – including an arranged marriage to gain American citizenship, and fantasy appearances from famous philosophers – but the comic approach is what makes those parts of the film tolerable. This is truly a coming of age story, but not in the way that is expected. The characters surmise that the old days were "better," but the obvious and under-their-noses success that all of them have also is part of the key to the current "better days."

The glue of the film is actor Romain Duris as Xavier, and he thematically rolls up his sleeves in order to be a good father. His aim is true, to not be a distant Dad (like his old man) and to try bringing a semblance of order to his kids, after the chaos that ensued from the breakup. In this theme all the characters circle like satellites – including Xavier's son Tom (Pablo Mugnier-Jacob) – coming through their own personal life situations while participating in Xavier's dilemma. It's the maturing of friendships, family and loyalties that has to go to the next level, and they trust each other to do the right thing.

Writer/director Cédric Klapisch has Xavier running a lot, especially to transportation outlets in a symbol-of-the-journey bit. This also manufactures the notion of chaos, as the "Chinese Puzzle" title is indicative of the loss of control. The setting of New York City is also used comedically, as it is the center of the universe in chaos. The foreigner view of NYC is also properly visionary in the film, as this series has always been about the French in other locations.



Xavier's Women: Isabelle (Cécile de France), Wendy (Kelly Reilly) and Martine in 'Chinese Puzzle'

Photo credit: StudioCanal

With the number of characters to take care of, plus a whole new gang in New York City – Xavier's crummy lawyer is priceless – the character of Wendy, portrayed by Kelly Reilly, was sacrificed in the story. It's vague why she leaves Xavier in the first place, and then replaces her hard line stance with a softening that didn't make much sense. But that is a minor complaint among the richness of the other fellow travelers. Cécile de France as Isabelle knocks her mid life crisis right out of the ballpark.

Life is chaos, and age 40 is part of the walk in that park. However, if the old life-begins-at-40 is to be believed, then Cédric Klapisch has illustrated it brightly. And to quote the author John Irving, "we are all terminal cases."

*"Chinese Puzzle" continues its limited release in Chicago on May 30th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Romain Duris, Kelly Reilly, Audrey Tautou, Cécile de France, Sandrine Holt and Pablo Mugnier-Jacob. Written and directed by Cédric Klapisch. Rated "R"*



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