

Fear and Trembling

France / Japan 2007 107 min

Credits

Director	Alain Corneau
Writers	Amélie Nothomb Alain Corneau
Cinematography	Yves Angelo
Film Editing	Thierry Derocles

Amélie	Sylvie Testud
Fubuki	Kaori Tsuji
Monsieur Saito	Taro Suwa
Monsieur Omochi	Bison Katayama
Monsieur Tenshi	Yasunari Kondo
Monsieur Haneda	Sokyu Fujita
Monsieur Unaji	Gen Shimaoka
Amélie enfant	Heileigh Gomes
Fubuki enfant	Eri Sakai

Synopsis

Tokyo, the present. Amélie, a Belgian born in Japan, returns to Japan for a year-long post as corporate translator. She is assigned to the office of Mr Saito, under the supervision of Fubuki Mori. Amélie attracts suspicion from the workforce and is frequently criticised by Saito but appears to find an ally in Fubuki.

Amélie discovers that she was denounced by Fubuki, who feels threatened by Amélie's initiatives. She attempts to reason with Fubuki, but finds herself increasingly forced to take on duties for which she is not qualified. Her inevitable failures lead to punishments and demotion. Determined not to be beaten, Amélie completes her contract, and returns to Belgium where she embarks on a career as a writer.

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into similar territory. The questions this film raises are similar to those posed by *Lost in Translation*: does the study reveal more about Japan than we already knew or are we simply in the realm of easy stereotypes played for western laughs? The film has many charming - and comic - moments; but ultimately it provides a narrow perspective on Japanese culture: we see little beyond the office walls of the Paris-based set, a marked difference from Coppola's project, filmed entirely on location, and celebrating popular Japanese culture in all its garish glory.

Sue Harris, Sight & Sound



In Alain Corneau's "*Fear and Trembling*," French actress Sylvie Testud, playing a transplanted Belgian who tries in vain to assimilate herself into Japan's corporate culture, crafts a truly incredible performance, learning Japanese specifically for this production. Testud and Corneau (and original writer Amélie Nothomb) give us a quintessential "fish out of water" nightmare about trying desperately to succeed in a job that proves impossible, with co-workers who sabotage instead of help.

Testud, an elfin-faced gamine who has been equally effective playing waifs or murderers, here plays a real-life character, novelist Nothomb, born in Kobe, Japan, and a resident there until the age of 5, returned there after college, able to speak perfect Japanese and bent on citizenship.

Hired as an interpreter for the huge Yumimoto Corporation of Tokyo, Amélie soon manages to run foul of her bosses by showing too much initiative, by inventing work for herself and, most puzzlingly, by speaking perfect Japanese -- thereby discomfiting visiting guests and clients, who would prefer that Westerners not know what they're saying. She is ordered to pretend she knows no Japanese, (a conundrum for an interpreter) starting a spiral down to workplace hell.

Amélie makes her worst enemy in her immediate superior, the beautiful and unusually tall Fubuki Mori. As that enmity grows and Amélie's lot worsens, the film becomes increasingly nightmarish -- without ever losing its comic touch, equivoque or sense of reality.

Alain Corneau, a jazz musician before his filmmaking career, obviously has an affinity for both suspense and music, and this film indulges both gifts. As Amélie's humiliations mount Fubuki finally reassigns her as a bathroom attendant -- we wonder if she'll crack or run amok. And the brilliantly chosen background score, Bach's "Goldberg Variations" played on the harpsichord by elevates Amélie's tale and emotions.

In *Lost in Translation*, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson beguiled audiences with culture-clash riffs. But though this is a more compact and enclosed film, it's also more entertaining. With Mike Judge's 1999 *Office Space* it's one of the screen's most cuttingly funny and moving looks at office life. Amélie's plight becomes so extreme, her trials so impossible and the agony-ecstasy of her torment by Fubuki so excruciating that the film also achieves a kind of Zen detachment. It's a comic nightmare that soothes spirits in the age of the computer and the culture of the samurai.

Chicago Metromix, Michael Wilmington

The observational humour certainly recalls Sofia Coppola's recent excursion