

REVIEWS



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From Lebanon comes *The Insult*, an Oscar nominee that pulls its punches



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Photo: Cohen Media Group

MOVIE REVIEW



The Insult

DIRECTOR

Tony (Adel Karam), a fortysomething right-wing Christian car mechanic in Beirut, is watering his plants when he answers the door. It's Yasser (Kamel El Basha), the sixtyish Palestinian

Ziad Doueiri

RUNTIME

112 minutes

RATING

Not Rated

LANGUAGE

Arabic

CAST

Adel Karam, Kamel El Basha, Camille Salameh,
Diamand Bou Abboud, Rita Hayek

AVAILABILITY

Select theaters January 12

foreman of a construction crew that's working on the street outside. He wants Tony to fix a drainpipe on his second-floor balcony, but the mechanic shuts the door in his face. The days pass, but the dispute that started with the drainpipe only gets worse. Yasser calls Tony a prick,

Tony tells the foreman that the Israeli leader Ariel Sharon should have wiped out the Palestinians when he had the chance, and before long the two are in court, with Tony suing Yasser for damages and a formal apology over a couple of cracked ribs. But both men are so convinced that they're right that they at first decline to hire lawyers.



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As *The Insult* would have it, the situation is uniquely Lebanese. But the more salient points made by this recent Best Foreign Language Film nominee are dulled by one-note characterizations. The most obvious problem is Tony, a bullheaded, humorless, and unlikable sectarian; by the 10-minute mark, viewers may find themselves wondering why his pregnant wife, Shirine (Rita Hayek), hasn't already left him, and the 100 or so minutes that follow don't offer any evidence as to why she shouldn't. The comparative saintliness of Yasser's pride doesn't do diddly-squat to balance out the equation, neither do the various medical subplots introduced by director Ziad Doueiri (*The Attack*) and co-writer Joelle Touma, or the traumatic backstory offered to Tony late in the film. Whatever *The Insult* intends to say about the contentious social situation in Lebanon—or in any nominally secular society in which ethnic and religious antagonism is kept in check by social niceties and laws—is disarticulated by the phoniness of its central conflict. And although Doueiri may be trying to speak directly to the bigotries of his tiny, diverse country's Christian population, he pulls his punches whenever it counts.

Instead, *The Insult* derives most of its energy from its sideline incidents and the flamboyant arguments of Wajdi Wehbe (Camille Salameh), the right-wing lawyer-turned-politician who becomes Tony's attorney as the case turns into a national media circus; in the sort of heavy-handed coincidence that typifies the film, Yasser's pro bono lawyer (Diamand Bou Abboud) turns out to be Wajdi's daughter. Doueiri has a loose and slightly messy camera style, preferring to shoot with what appears to be

a minimally rehearsed Steadicam. As a result, the movie often brings to mind the later films of David O. Russell, right down to the non-existent eyelines. That the film has reportedly been met with some controversy at home likely says something about the contentiousness of the issues involved. But regardless of its high aims, most of what *The Insult* offers—unlikely last-minute reveals, argumentative lawyers, stone-faced judges—is the stuff of a diverting, junky courtroom drama.

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