

Interview: Ziad Doueiri on *The Insult*

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Jose Solís



With only a handful of films to his name since making his directorial debut in 1998, Lebanese filmmaker Ziad Doueiri has become a master at creating works of art that exist in morally challenging worlds. Ask anyone who's seen his films and you're likely to get polar opposite opinions of what they're about—what they say—and what they accomplish. In *The Attack*, based on a novel by Yasmina Khadra, he set the mood for what seems to be a “traditional” exercise on grief, only to reveal layers that make us reexamine our beliefs on dramatic structures and narrators. In *The Insult*—shortlisted in the Academy's Foreign Language Film list—he examines the power of words, as two men engage in a harmful battle after an aggressive word exchange becomes something larger.

Doueiri's characters thrive in situations that seem close to us, but also distant. Watching the men in *The Insult* go to court over what we'd usually dismiss as a neighborly spat makes us think we're better than them, but ultimately the characters become mirrors for ourselves. We may not be there yet—but we're not far from them either.

Doueiri's outspokenness and his opposition to boycotting Israel for its occupation (he shot *The Attack* there) has made him a target for extreme voices in the Arab world. Thus, it was a bit of a surprise when *The Insult* was submitted as Lebanon's official Oscar entry, making the shortlist in December. The film has already won accolades in festivals all over the world including a Best Actor prize at the Venice Film Festival.

I spoke to Doueiri about the themes in *The Insult*, directing combustible scenes, and his opinions on the Oscar race.

JS: The structure of *The Insult* made me think of a ticking bomb, which in turn made me think of *The Attack*: What fascinates you about this kind of structure and making audiences anxious?

ZD: We can look at it from two angles: from a screenplay perspective and a historical one. In terms of the screenplay I always wanted to do a court drama because they make the tension very palpable by placing the protagonists face to face in a courtroom. Writing [about] *The Insult* I watched a lot of courtroom dramas, especially American ones, and realized there was a lot of tension when you had the characters in the same frame. Historically I've always been a very anxious person, anxiety that comes from inside but also from outside events. Growing up in a war you feel your life is unpredictable, at least I felt that. That there would always be something around the corner to make me scare. I've learned to find peace within myself but I've never felt outside peace, Lebanon is a country where everything can go to flames so quickly, *The Insult* comes from how a little incident can become a national incident.

JS: Does making movies help relieve this anxiety?

ZD: Certainly, I think everyone dealing with creative issues goes through this, not only in terms of anxiety. I'm a lot more radical than the way I portray myself in films, my opinions are more extreme, making films allows me to see the better side, it allows me to calm down. I'm not a radical, but my opinions can be extreme.

JS: The courtroom scenes have almost a sports match quality to them, do you find that politics have become almost like rooting for a team over another?

ZD: I've been feeling that more and more recently, it's the same in Lebanon, France and the States. The world has become more polarized, we showed the film in a festival in Valladolid recently and people in Spain felt identified with the film for the same reasons. It's an interesting period, it's definitely not a boring period; [what] we're seeing what's going on in the Muslim world, the right vs. the left is quite radical too.

JS: Is the ending of your films something you discover in the process of writing or something you need to know even before you sit down to write anything?

ZD: Before I start sketching anything I need seeds which come very instinctually. The first is the end of act two and the second one is the ending. End of act two is the worst thing your character can go through, in *The Insult* it's when Tony hits Yasser, and the ending is obviously the end of the trial. Before writing I knew how the film would end, so it becomes organic work, you don't analyze everything, the ideas rather just flow. Joelle Touma, the co-screenwriter, and I changed some things but we knew how it would end.

JS: How do you keep the film from being didactic? Is this a preoccupation when you make films?

ZD: Sending messages is not dramatically interesting, from a filmmaking perspective it's more interesting to be nuanced. My characters have never been idealistic, I never set out to make movies to send messages, some people love making films with messages about reconciliation. The most important thing you can do in your writing is to look at your characters and see how they start and how they end. I always make bittersweet films, maybe my next film will be black and white. Seriously, I've been thinking about it, about making a film in which I show how I see myself which is more radical. I am black and white, my films are never black and white.

JS: Can you talk about how you knew you'd found the right actors to play Yasser and Toni?

ZD: I saw more than 500 people for this film, I spent a lot of time looking. In the end it's a chemistry thing, I knew most of the actors right away, the female and male lawyers were the hardest characters to cast.

JS: How did you keep up the tension between them in between scenes?

ZD: You gotta be generous as a director, spend time with your actors. The material already had a lot of tension, so I'd just remind them where we were. 90% of the work you do in casting though, once you have the actors and trust them, you don't need to tell them much. I give my actors very simple instructions, I get bored and tired of doing too much analysis. I have doubts till the end, but the more you do the more you gain experience.

JS: Are there any actors you're particularly wanting to work with?

I'd like to make a film with Steven Seagal, I think I'd make him a good actor. Seriously! I'm not kidding. I worked with him in the 80s, I did second unit in Under Siege, and I've been thinking about it since. I'd also like to work with Gene Hackman, he was my idol in the 70s and 80s.

ZD: Can you share some impressions on your film being selected by Lebanon to represent them at the Oscars?

I'm happy about it, not because of the Oscar itself but because The Attack was denied this, some people raged a battle to have that film not shown in the Arab world. I made The Insult and assumed the same people would attack me again, and it happened, but this time the government didn't give in to this. I was being accused of many things because I made a film in Israel, sometimes in the Middle East you can pay a high price for your political beliefs. Nobody believed The Insult would even be released, and yet here we are. I guess I'm happy. We'll see.

The Insult is now in select theaters across the US.