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The Insult, Lebanon's Oscar Candidate, Is an Evenhanded Exploration of Racial Animus

By David Edelstein



Photo: Cohen Media Group

In the Lebanese drama *The Insult* (a probable Oscar nominee), a relatively minor interaction between two men mushrooms into a national tumult in which Christians are pitted against Muslims, each side proclaiming its victimhood with increasing violence. In its sensitivity to both men's subjective experience of the incident, Ziad Doueiri's movie is everything this critic has wished aloud for: a humanist exploration of racial animus in which huge cultural and historical forces manifest themselves in the smallest of exchanges, and in which tit-for-tat blood feuds stand revealed as cries of weakness instead of shows of strength.

The movie is a little dull, though. Not dull as in a slog. *The Insult* fairly hurtles along, throwing not just Muslims against Christians, but also husbands against wives and fathers against daughters. Part of the film is a crackerjack courtroom drama. What's dull is the trajectory. *The Insult* is so schematic that it shrinks to the level of a painfully scrupulous newspaper editorial. Which is fine — for a newspaper editorial.

What's that inciting insult? It centers on a water pipe that spews onto the street off the balcony of Tony Hanna (Adel Karam), a well-off garage owner with a taste for inflammatory Christian rallies. (Tony plainly reveres the assassinated militia leader and president Bashir Gemayel.) The water splashes on Yasser Salameh (Kamel El Basha), the Palestinian Muslim foreman of a construction crew tasked with improving Tony's block of apartment buildings. A reasonable request to fix the pipe to conform with zoning laws is met by Tony with peculiar hostility, whereupon Yasser goes ahead and fixes it on his own — whereupon Tony smashes the fix. Whereupon Yasser calls him an asshole. Whereupon whereupon whereupon.

All this makes for good, tense drama, made richer by the appalled reaction of Tony's hugely pregnant wife, Shirine (Rita Hayek), understandably more farsighted when it comes to her family's welfare. But Doueiri doesn't permit Tony to be a mere racist jerk, transformed into a tribalist both by propaganda and the daily anxieties of life in a still-ravaged (physically and psychologically) Beirut. There must be hints (bad dreams, fragmented visions) of a horrific backstory in which his brutal antagonism toward Palestinians is rooted in an actual massacre, while Yasser has a past that's similarly freighted with the history of his people's injury and flight. (After more than a decade in Beirut, he still lives in a refugee area.) El Basha — his sharp, chiseled face conveying, in stillness, the immense effort of containing his rage

— is riveting. But even moments in which Tony and Yasser make small, private noises suggesting sympathy for their respective antagonist feel like gestures toward the *idea* that humans have conflicting emotions. In general, Doueiri finds no measure of irony in the media fastening on each individual as a representative of his people's struggles. The movie's only quirky notes come from Camille Salameh as Tony's driving, quick-witted attorney, an august figure frequently undone by the peppery interjections of Yasser's young, female, do-gooder lawyer (Diamand Bou Abboud), with whom he has a history. (That history is schematic, too — but fun.)

Some knowledge of Lebanon's last 40 years (which include a civil war) is helpful to understanding *The Insult's* crosscurrents, particularly when Tony complains of too-reflexive sympathy for Palestinians and “a witch hunt against Christians.” His cause is hurt, to say the least, by having told Yasser, “I wish Ariel Sharon had wiped you all out,” which allies him with hated Israeli Jews. The charge has special resonance for the director, who this year had to defend himself in a military court against the charge of treason after shooting his last film, the suicide-bomber drama *The Attack*, in Israel. A secular Lebanese Muslim, Doueiri wrote the script with his now-ex-wife, the Lebanese Christian Joelle Touma.

These days, Doueiri lives in Paris, which is safer. But at least his native country has made *The Insult* its official candidate for the Oscar, which suggests two things. The first is that the government appreciates Doueiri's attempt to portray the schisms in Lebanese society in so evenhanded a manner. The second is that it knows the Academy will, too.

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