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'The Insult': Ziad Doueiri on Hum Story's Politics

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The latest film from DP-turned-director Ziad Doueiri is already several countries.

Ziad Doueiri's *The Insult* begins with heated words exchanged over the issue of an illegal drain words eventually grow more heated, turning into actions that lead the two men involved, a mec

foreman, into court and on the national political stage. In addition to examining the struggles between Kamel El Basha and Yasser (Kamel El Basha), *The Insult* reopens the unhealed wounds of prejudices lingering from the war, forcing us to reckon with unclear circumstances shaded in human experience and political

Stirring controversy and critical acclaim, *The Insult* competed at the 2017 Venice Film Festival with the Golden Lion prize for El Basha (while its director was being detained on arrival in Beirut). It now represents Lebanon at the Best Foreign Language Film at the upcoming Academy Awards.

No Film School spoke with Doueiri, a former cinematographer for Quentin Tarantino and assistant director on *Tales from the Crypt* episodes in the early 90s, about balancing the dramatic with the political, tackling a politically-charged movie in the Middle East, and advice for filmmakers dealing with sensitive subjects.

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No Film School: How did your original concept for the film evolve?

Ziad Doueiri: The whole idea started out with a real incident that happened to me in Beirut a few years ago. I was watering plants. The water fell on one of the construction workers, and so we had a small argument. He insulted me and I insulted him. Then I told him a bigger insult. We were just two people and then that was it. That was the end of the story. Two days later, I started thinking, “what if the story was something like this?” And instead of getting resolved, it actually gets more complicated and more emotional. The idea started coming in a natural flow. It just happened. The idea came like this, but certainly there’s a lot of history between me and Joelle, my co-screenwriter, a whole background of what we’ve seen growing up in the country.

NFS: In a recent interview, you said, “What if I take a simple incident and it spirals out of control in Lebanon and I’ve always lived in that fear.”

Doueiri: Words become very emotional and can degrade very fast, becoming worse and worse than the original. It’s not something unheard of. It’s something that happens because certain subjects—certain words

loaded that it can spiral out of control. You insult someone's religion, and as a result, a mini civil

"I grew up in a left-leaning family and my co-writer grew up in a right-leaning family. We were considered enemies."

NFS: What was the writing process like? I read that you and your writing partner Joelle Tou

Doueiri: Regarding the divorce... At that time, three years ago, Joelle and I came to the conclusion that the marriage had taken its course and it was a mutual decision. We filed for divorce while we were writing. I mentioned it in an

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interview and it became a central topic people wanted to know. It was a relatively simple divorce. We were very compatible in many ways. We worked on three projects together, we have a daughter together, and we are

very compatible in many ways. We worked on three projects together, we have a daughter together, and we are very compatible in terms of experience. When I came up with the idea for the film, I sat down with her, she immediately understood the psychology of the story. She understood the drama because she also grew up in the period that I grew up in. The difference is that I grew up in a left-leaning family and she grew up in a right-leaning family. And during the war from 1979 to 1990, a civil war was going on in my camp that was at war with my camp. She was considered my enemy and I was considered hers. And then time passes and you connect with the so-called enemy and evolve. We still have that

When we sat down to lay out the scenes, I had a lot of scenes that I had written chaotically. I wrote a lot of scenes and then I sat down with her. We built the structure of some of the written scenes and she helped me with what I wrote. It was a very organic process. She would say, "Let me write scene 3, 6, and 8." I would say, "Let me write scene 16, 24, and 28," for example. And we find out that she was curious, that she wanted to write a lawyer defending the Palestinians, even though she was brought up waging war against the Palestinians. I wrote scenes of the lawyer defending the Christian right-wing guy Toni, even though I grew up in a family that was



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Adel Karam in 'The Insult.' Courtesy of Cohen Media Group.

No Film School: In another interview, you mentioned that you gained empathy through writing.

Doueiri: Yes, it's very important to empathize with all of your characters. My background was with the Christian right wing. My distance is with Toni. I grew up in Yasser's world. With time continuing to pass, I now belong more to the Muslim world. How we evolve in life. I grew up always thinking that the Christian right wing had no narrative, they were just the enemy. Period. With time, you get to sit with them and negotiate with your neighbor and you realize they're not the enemy. "I'm second." We accuse those people of all sorts of things, but in reality, they aren't this-and-that. They are not collaborators. They are actually the opposite. They are the people who really fought, they were in the defense of a certain ideal that I like.

She felt very comfortable writing certain scenes and so I let her do it and she let me do my scenes.

and discuss it like I'm discussing it with you. A very organic process. It takes time when you write reflection. It takes a lot of reexamination. There was no writer's block.

NFS: That's rather incredible considering how well the film manages to capture the nuance situation as well as playing to great dramatic effect.

Doueiri: We spent a lot of time understanding those two characters. You've got Yasser and you from that start that it wasn't good vs. bad or bad vs. good. It's good vs. good. We knew that.

How do you breathe the conflict between them? What's his problem and what's the other man's story's about. [Toni] is a thug, tattooed and muscled. [Yasser] is much calmer and [Toni] is much more at the end is Toni's story. If I was going to start with him as very noble, what would that leave me

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Start as somebody less, a bit of a thug, and then at the end, we discover the humanism. That's how

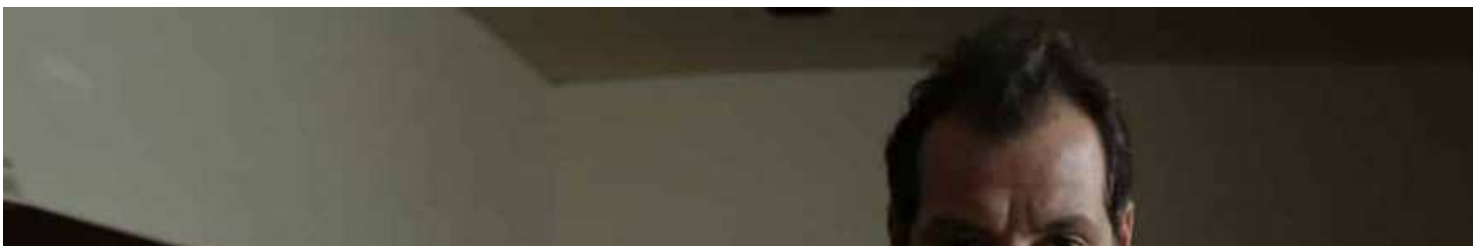
Basically, we did all of that thinking of it as a character's piece, and this might be of interest to you

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"I think courtroom drama is something American cinema has perfected"

NFS: Why that choice?

Doueiri: Because I write in English better. It is the language of the job that I did for 18 years in America. I learned the filmmaking craft in America, so it was much easier for me to do it. Plus, I think courtroom American cinema has perfected so well.





Adel Karam taking the stand in 'The Insult.' Courtesy of Cohen Media Group.

NFS: Were there any films you were thinking of while writing and making this one?

Doueiri: I had seen so many movies during the writing period. In the evening, I would chill out and watched *The Verdict* like ten times. *Judgement at Nuremberg* is a great movie. It's one of the best. It is so powerful. I was so touched by this one. It is about the human condition. I kept on seeing *Philadelphia*, and then I saw *12 Angry Men* and *Inherit the Wind*. I've seen them all. I've seen Clint Eastwood, Al Pacino, and Jack Nicholson. I just gathered so many movies to see how they dealt with courtroom drama.

Why do Americans succeed at making courtroom drama? It's part of the American cinema culture. It examines your legal system, your psychological system, everything. I studied in America, I worked for years of my life totally immersed in American cinema. Not because other ones are not good, but

school that I knew. I wrote [The Insult] in English, and Joelle wrote her scenes in French. The ov American. It's the language that I think really fits for trial movies.

"My mom is a lawyer and she was the legal consultant on

I even wanted to shape the Lebanese courthouse like American courthouse drama. In Lebanon system and I wanted to have a jury system. My mom is a lawyer and she was the legal consultant her how about we use a jury system, and she would say that the jury system is not believable in 48 believe you in America, but they will not believe you in Lebanon," she'd tell me. I said that I didn Shares come from one person only; I wanted a majority rule. She said, "Well, actually, in Lebanon, you c 46 the case is very sensitive and in the court of appeal. In the final court, the supreme court, you c aid, "Great!" It isn't done often, but it's totally legitimate, and so we had three judges. We just p that the verdict would be two voices-versus-one. I did not want a unanimous statement.





Adel Karam in 'The Insult.' Courtesy of Cohen Media Group.

NFS: On The Insult, you worked again with The Attack cinematographer Tommaso Fiorilli. What was the motion. Could you speak a bit on that style and how your team captured that?

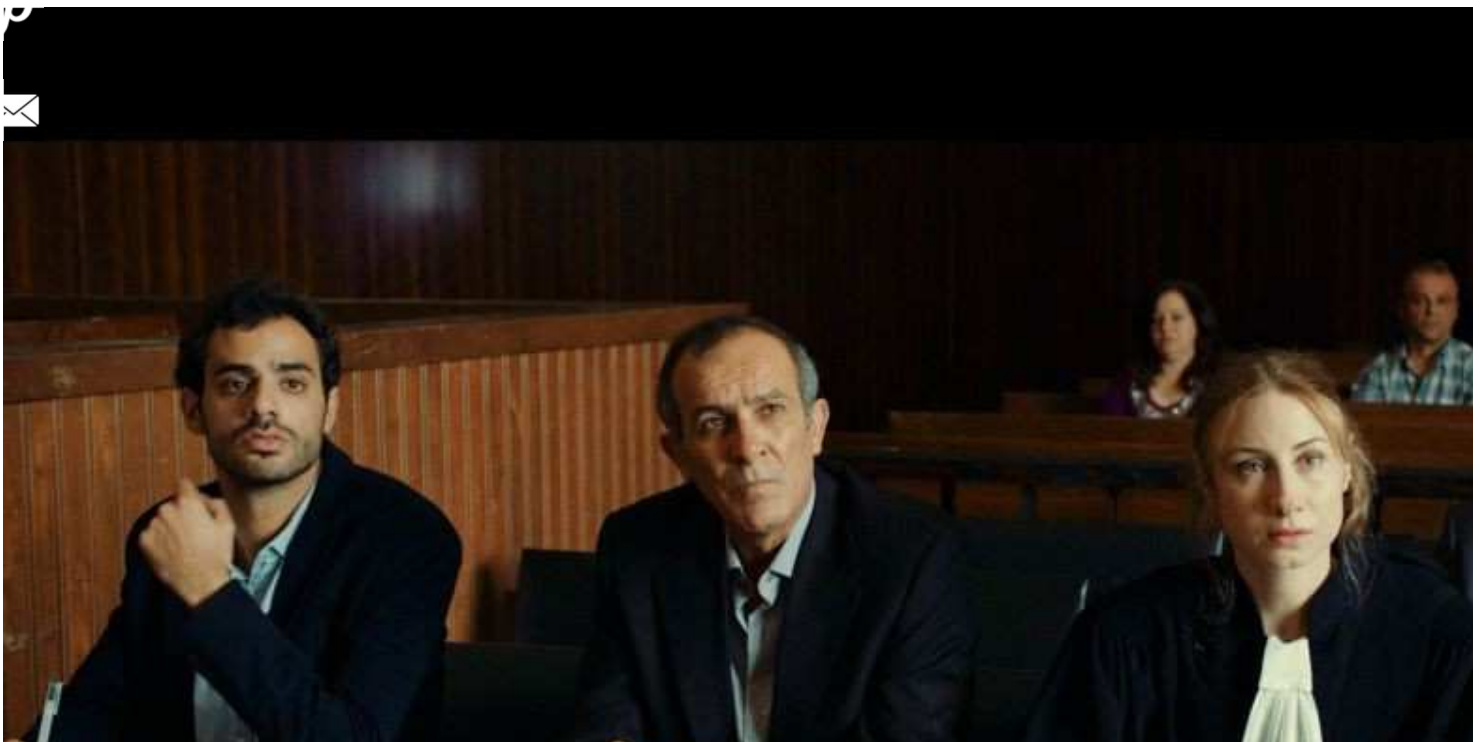
Doueiri: When we did The Attack five years ago, I used Steadicam extensively. I felt that Steadicam movement without restricting the actors from Point A to Point B. I adapted the style. You walk around and did a series in France called Baron Noir in 2016, which was very successful. I expanded on this master, meaning the actors move and the camera follows as much as possible with very little cut. In The Insult, I brought the same team and wanted to use that fluidity as much as possible. Because we have a lot of courtroom scenes, I did not want to just do close-up and reverse close-up. I wanted to have the camera lighten up the dialogue a little bit.

But then again, I had nine court scenes and I chose not to film every single scene like the previous ones. The very first courtroom scene was all static because they're triangular (the judge, the plaintiff and the defendant) and didn't have any movement in it. I shot it on purpose like this. And then in the second scene, I started to have movement. And then in the third scene, I shot it from Toni's perspective, and then from the judge's perspective, from the lawyers' perspective. I kept changing my angles to create something new every time. I wanted to capture the revelations. All this work... to tell you the truth, it just came out. I did not pre-plan my shots. I just trusted the instinct. I never prepared. I went to set completely unprepared. I was prepared to know what the story was about, I knew my characters, but I didn't say, "Now we move the camera here and there." I swear to you, I would come to set not knowing how to film the scene.

**"At one point, you start trusting your device, saying maybe I don't
prepared."**

NFS: That sounds very daunting.

Doueiri: I knew the subject so well that I told myself to trust my instinct and figure it out as I went. We start rehearsing. I'd say "interesting, let's do that," and then, I feel like I need that shot. I want to stand by, and shoot that shot. I did not plan in advance. At one point, you start trusting your device
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Share needed to be so prepared. Maybe I won't be able to do that in the next film, but I wanted to be as
not improvised because I don't improvise anything [in terms of script], but I let the moment decide
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would be. It created some conflict for the crew because I would cut it in my head as I'm filming.
one way and then I'd revert back to another way and the DP would have to realign again (the plot
to follow as it comes along. I'm so happy with it. I wanted to trust my instinct totally.





The ensemble cast of 'The Insult.' Courtesy of Cohen Media Group.

NFS: What advice do you have for filmmakers wanting to tackle difficult subjects, particularly wounds that haven't yet healed culturally and/or politically?

Doueiri: The only advice I give filmmakers or screenwriters is to think of your story, not of the subject about. Think of how to build your story, how to build your characters. Don't start thinking about who's going to react, who's going to react, is it controversial or not controversial? If you start thinking in terms of controversial enough, you're fucking yourself up because people are not going to see controversy going to see a cause. A spectator is not going to see a revolution. They are going to see a story. If you want to go and think about all of the rest, you can make a film that is artificial, contrived, and without a very beautiful cause and if you don't do it well, if you don't write it well, you're not going to tell. You should only concentrate on storytelling. That's it.

When Joelle and I sat down to write *The Insult*, we did not think about all of the ramifications,. We did not say "for this particular scene, we want to send this message to the audience and in the change society. The film is about reconciliation. The film is about hating." No, you don't think that.

Screenwriters and filmmakers should think in terms of storyline, not in social messages or political after. Let the spectator extract that. If you have something to tell, that's great, but you've got to tell. That's it. I'm 100% sure this is how somebody should go about it.

The Insult is currently playing in theaters nationwide.

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