

‘The Insult’ Review: Ziad Doueiri’s Parable Reveals a Fresh Perspective on Arab Life in the Middle East

The director of "The Attack" is back with another compelling look at tensions in Lebanese society.

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“The Insult”

It sounds like the setting of a “Curb Your Enthusiasm” episode: Two men from different cultural backgrounds exchange harsh words about an inconsequential issue that gets blown out of proportion, then deal with the fallout that just keeps coming. But Ziad Doueiri’s [“The Insult”](#) is anything but a cringe comedy. The Lebanese filmmaker’s followup to his masterful drama “The Attack” is a fascinating, parable-like exploration of the tension between two facets of Lebanon’s Arab community and the cross-cultural ramifications implied by their ridiculous feud. While it doesn’t quite justify the sprawling courtroom antics or the blunt metaphor they entail, the movie nevertheless provides a profound look at the effect of historical trauma on modern Lebanese society.

It doesn't take long for the premise to take shape. Lebanese Christian Tony (Adel Karam) lives in an insular community where Palestinian refugee Yasser (Kamel El Basha) has been assigned to fix building code violations. When Yasser attempts to fix a drainpipe protruding from Tony's building, Tony tries to ignore the request, but Yasser presses on anyway. Tony lashes out, destroying the handyman's work, and Yasser hands back a vulgarity; Tony goes to Yasser's boss, demanding an apology that Yasser won't easily give.

And it just gets worse from there. When an attempt at reconciliation between the men is organized, it leads Tony to go off the rails with a racially-charged epithet that strikes at the root of Yasser's Palestinian background. Violence ensues, charges are filed, and both men end up in court for a showdown that gradually accrues national attention. As Doueiri assembles these details, the movie keeps expanding into a remarkable window into the resentment of different Arab worlds colliding. Riots break out in the streets, pundits argue away on television, and the men land an unlikely pair of dueling lawyers. Hotshot attorney Wajdi (Camille Salameh), who once defended the leader of the country's Christian party, takes Tony's case; his daughter Nadine (Diamond About About), who sympathizes with the plight of the nation's refugees, jumps to Yasser's defense.

With this dynamic in play, Doueiri's metaphor for the country's fractured social fabric registers as a little too neat, right down to the way the courtroom divides into different sides that hoot and holler whenever the one pushes their buttons. However, the filmmaker maintains a tight grip on his performances, and they're rich with feelings that transcend the sprawling national backdrop. Outside of the courtroom, both men struggle with their personal obligations — Tony to his pregnant wife, and Yasser to maintaining his family's threadbare existence — and show increased frustrations over the possibility that they've become so far removed from the pride and testosterone that put them into this situation that they might be destroying each other more than they initially realized. It's not the biggest revelation, but it resonates nonetheless.

Working its way through courtroom arguments, the movie never transcends the main tension established early on, but Doueiri does a competent job of exploring the sources of anger on both sides without valorizing either of them. Tony may be the crueler figure, his desire to gain an apology and his racially-charged judgements driving him to extremes that set the absurd scenario in motion, but Yasser's own investment in the situation doesn't exonerate him, either.

As they exchange glances in the courtroom and eventually meet under unlikely circumstances, "The Insult" digs deep into the psyche of both men, less to suggest that they could somehow set their differences aside than to highlight the tragedy of realizing that they don't know any way to escape them. Their final, wordless exchange suggests that even if one side always has the upper hand, they're able to make some modicum of progress by simply acknowledging as much.

Grade: B-

"The Insult" premiered at the Venice International Film Festival. Cohen Media will release it in 2017.