

Venice Film Review : 'The Insult'

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A not-so-simple insult has significant ramifications in this well-made but obvious dissection of Lebanese political and religious divides culminating in a standard courtroom drama.

The tinderbox of Lebanese politics and identity sparks into a controlled conflagration in Ziad Doueiri's calculatedly explosive drama "The Insult ." Conceived as a classic story of how a not-so-simple insult can escalate into a nationwide crisis, the film pits a belligerent Lebanese Christian mechanic with a traumatic past against an older Palestinian Muslim still unable to quietly suffer the ever-present verbal and institutional barbs against his dignity.

This time debuting in competition at the Venice film festival before heading to Telluride and Toronto , where his terrorism-themed "The Attack" premiered five years earlier, Doueiri sets out the issues in an easily understood, rather too obvious manner, shifting into the courtroom where the proceedings resemble

one of those “ Law & Order” episodes that deal with a “ sensitive ” topic such as abortion. Both sides get an impassioned defense , and yet, like Lebanon as a whole, there 's a whole lot of talk and zero accountability.

The jury is out whether the writers deliberately wanted to drive this point home , or if, like most level-headed people , they're simply afraid to set a match to the kindling. They certainly do their best to stir things up, pitching emotions at an overly dramatic level only to offer concessions at the end that feel far too pre-packaged for movie consumption. Clearly there's some concern, which is why a disclaimer at the start warns that the film doesn't necessarily reflect the views and policy of the Lebanese government. At home, “The Insult” will become a major talking point, and festivals will give it high exposure since it's easily digested and tries to be strenuously even-handed. A small Stateside release is possible , especially given that courtroom dramas are a relatively easy sell.

Some understanding of Lebanese politics is crucial, as well as the knowledge that Palestinians make up more than 10% of the country 's inhabitants. The tensions from hosting so many refugees have long been exploited by various political parties , Christian and Muslim, left and right, creating further divisions in a nation that's never healed from its bloody civil war . Knowing this, and being aware that assassinated right-wing Christian leader Bachir Gemayel's anti-Palestinian hate speech, heard several times in old footage from political rallies, remains accepted rhetoric, explains why feelings in the film run so high.

Well, maybe it only partially explains it: The character of Tony Hanna (Adel Karam) exudes such an intense level of anger that there's barely any nuance at all. First seen gloating at a political rally of the Christian right, Tony owns a car repair garage , and he and his wife Shirine (Rita Hayek , warm and nurturing) are expecting a baby girl . Like most of Beirut , his street is undergoing construction and repairs, but when Palestinian foreman Yasser (Kamel El Basha) asks Tony to let him correct the illegal drain pipe on his terrace, he gets the door slammed in his face . Yasser does it anyway from the outside, so Tony smashes the new pipe.

To ease the tension and get the work finished, Yasser's boss insists he apologize, but when he arrives at the garage, Tony is blasting Bachir Gemayel's nasty anti-Palestinian talk. Unable to speak , the foreman fails to apologize, upon which Tony yells, “I wish Ariel Sharon wiped you all out.” Yasser punches Tony hard, breaking a couple of ribs, and the wheels are set in motion for a legal showdown.

At first, neither man bothers to get a lawyer , but when the judge throws the case out, things reach another level. Tony engages prominent prosecutor Wajdi Wehbe (Camille Salamé), mouthpiece for the Christian establishment, while greenhorn counsellor Nadine (Diamand Bou Abboud) offers her services to Yasser. Wajdi is the ruthless lawyer ready to exploit tensions, Nadine is the righteous attorney with a novice's lack of confidence , and oh yes, they're father and daughter — not the most original twist in the playbook.

What follows is standard- issue courtroom stuff , with each side scoring points while revealing that everyone in this conflict has legitimate grievances that go far beyond this particular insult. The media get involved , stoking the inflammatory divisions, and the case becomes a cause celebre, with expected outbursts from spectators and threats against both Tony and Yasser. All the men are stubborn and hot-headed, all the women are kind and nurturing. If you're looking for subtlety, this isn't the movie.

Toward the end, Doueiri attempts to give his two leads a little more nuance, but Tony's overwhelming anger steamrolls over occasional conciliatory behavior , which winds up feeling just manipulative. Yasser ultimately is the more complex character, but maybe it's just because he's seen to hold it in more. It's a shame Éric Neveux 's score didn't hold it in more as well; unlike in "The Attack," his orchestrations are omnipresent and intrusive, but Tommaso Fiorilli's camerawork is attractive, and Beirut's gritty side is placed in the foreground.

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Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing), Aug. 31, 2017. (Also in Telluride, Toronto film festivals.) Running time: **113 MIN** . (Original title: "L'insulte")

Production

(France-Lebanon- Belgium -USA) A Diaphana release (in France) of an Ezekiel Films presentation of a Tessalit Productions , Rouge International , Cohen Media Group , Scope Pictures, Douri Films production, with the participation of Canal plus , Ciné plus.

(International sales: Indie Sales, Paris.) Produced by Antoun Sehnaoui, Jean Bréhat, Rachid Bouchareb, Julie Gayet , Nadia Turincev. Coproducers, Charles S. Cohen, Geneviève Lemal.

Crew

Director : Ziad Doueiri. Screenplay: Doueiri, Joëlle Touma. Camera (color, widescreen): Tommaso Fiorilli. Editor: Dominique Marcombe. Music: Éric Neveux.

With

Adel Karam, Rita Hayek, Kamel El Basha, Christine Choueiri, Camille Salamé, Diamand Bou Abboud, Georges Daou. (Arabic dialogue)

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