

"The New York Times" Saturday, March 27, 1999

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FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

How a War Pulls Apart Every Life

By JANET MASLIN

With an eye for affectingly quotidian detail, Ziad Doueiri makes "West Beirut" a largely autobiographical account of war brewing in his native Lebanon, circa 1975. "During the first years of the civil war, despite the anxiety that I could sense in my parents, I was incapable of feeling it myself," he has said about the events described here. "I wasn't born with fear; I acquired it." His film described how that happened, step by step.

Making his debut feature in a film that will be shown tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 3 P.M. at the New Directors/New Films series, Mr. Doueiri (who has worked as a cameraman on films by Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, and has the visual ingenuity those credits suggest) casts his younger brother in its central role. Rami Doueiri plays the teen-age Tarek, the only son of parents who dote on him. In this household, where the parents are worldly and opinionated, Tarek's complaints about attending a French school are a main source of strife until larger crises abruptly leave their mark.

With the April 1975 massacre of a busload of civilians, Beirut is suddenly on its way to becoming a war zone. It becomes a divided city, with military checkpoints even for a Muslim native like Tarek's father (Joseph Bou Nassar) and danger zones where not even the most intrepid schoolboy ought to go.

But neither Tarek nor his friends are inclined to play it safe or take no for an answer. So they roam through the city guided by the factors that most matter to them, like finding a place that will develop Super 8 movies they furtively took of an older man's sexy new girlfriend. At first they travel blithely, but the film shows how the war affects even happily indifferent teen-agers. It's no longer easy for a Muslim like Tarek to be smitten with May (Rola al-Amin), who wears a crucifix around her neck. And Tarek's friend Omar (Mohammed Chamas), who instigated taking the naughty pictures and has an "Airport 1975" poster in his



Cowboy Booking International

Mohammed Chamas and Rola al-Amin in "West Beirut."

WEST BEIRUT

Directed by Ziad Doueiri; written (in Arabic and French, with English subtitles) by Mr. Doueiri; director of photography, Ricardo Jacques Gale; edited by Dominique Marcoumbe; music by Stewart Copeland; production designer, Hamze Nasrallah; produced by Rachid Boucharah and Jean Brehat. Today at 6 P.M. and tomorrow at 3 P.M. at the Roy and Nita Titus Theater, Museum of Modern Art, as part of the 28th New Directors/New Films series of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and Department of Film of The Museum of Modern Art. Running time: 105 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Rami Doueiri (Tarek), Mohammed Chamas (Omar), Rola al-Amin (May), Carmen Lebbae (Hala), Joseph Bou Nassar (Riad) and Lilliane Nemry (Neighbor).

room, is suddenly being told by his newly fundamentalist father that he must fast for Ramadan and give up theater, cinema and rock-and-roll.

With a feisty, believable performance from his brother Rami, Mr. Doueiri gradually shows its hero coming of age while war destroys all the ordinariness in this teen-ager's life. It watches as the rubble piles up, the streets grow more dangerous and the kindly local grocer has to cope with a desperate bread line. "West Beirut" registers these changes in sometimes predictable, dutiful fashion but there's no mistaking the grief at the heart of its story.

The film's English subtitles sometimes inject levity where it's least expected, as with "Holy-moly macaroni!" or "You're shish-kebabbing me!" or "You drive like Steve McQueen!" The boys' piquant exclamation at the sight of a beautiful woman is "What a piece of lamb!"