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Lebanon comes alive in “The Insult”

By **Mick LaSalle** Updated 7:41 pm, Wednesday, January 24, 2018



Adel Karam is Tony, a Lebanese Christian who gets into a dispute with a Palestinian workman.



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“The Insult” takes a small incident and uses it to throw audiences right into the experience of contemporary Lebanon. As if in passing, it gives us an education into a country’s history, its fault lines and its people.

It’s a strange thing. If you were to take a poll and ask most American moviegoers if they wanted to see a movie all about modern Lebanon, a small minority would say yes. But if

you forced those same people to sit through a screening of “The Insult,” the vast majority would thank you. My point: Chances are you would like to see this movie,

even if you don't yet know it.

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The story spirals out from a couple of minor encounters. There's a construction crew going around doing repairs and making small improvements. The crew manager, Yasser (Kamel El Basha), knocks on the door of one of the residents, asking if he could repair a drainage pipe. That resident, a man named Tony (Adel Karam), becomes nasty and abusive. The insult, of the title, comes when Yasser uses foul language in response.

Now it's likely that, for a Lebanese audience, the source of the tension between the two men would be obvious. Tony is a Lebanese Christian, and he recognizes that Yasser is Palestinian just on the basis of his accent. But the movie works just as well for this to linger for a few minutes as a mystery. An effort to bring about a rapprochement between the two men fails, when Tony tells Yasser that he wishes that Israeli General **Ariel Sharon** would have killed all the Palestinians. So Yasser punches him.

With this, the stage is set for a courtroom drama, in which each man is suing the other. The offenses, on both sides, are relatively small; but the lawyers get involved, and each side sees the case as a way of giving voice to larger grievances. From here, the stakes escalate.

"The Insult," nominated this week for an Oscar as best foreign film, was directed and co-written by **Ziad Doueiri**, who is a Lebanese Muslim, in partnership with co-writer Joelle Touma, a Lebanese Christian, who is also Doueiri's ex-wife. The film takes the form of a courtroom drama to explore the grievances on all sides of modern Lebanese life. The mission isn't to choose who is right and who is wrong, but rather to emphasize that everyone has scars and genuine reasons to be enraged. The movie also suggests that Lebanon might have benefited from something like the Truth and Reconciliation process that was instituted in South Africa after the end of apartheid.

The writing is subtle and refreshingly without sentimentality — sentimentality being a common flaw in Middle Eastern cinema. In a film in which characters must, in a sense, stand for entire peoples, the danger is that the characters will lack individuality, that they'll become archetypes or, worse, clichés.

That's doesn't happen here. The performance of Adel Karam is especially striking, playing Tony as a powerful man who goes through life enraged. Karam never tries to soften that, but he illuminates it.

It's a fascinating job of acting, in that Karam seems to be opening up his soul even as he's not giving an inch.

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The Insult



Drama. Starring Adel Karam and Kamel El Basha. Directed by Ziad Doueiri. In Arabic with English subtitles. (R. 112 minutes.)

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