

A.O. SCOTT | FILM REVIEW

The Dispute Is Personal. And Political.

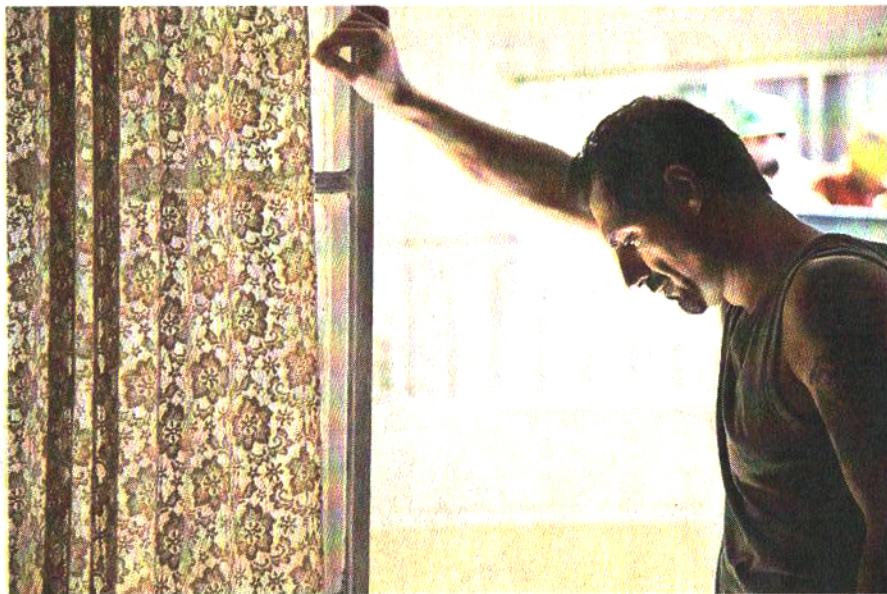
Lebanon's Oscar entry is the story of a quarrel that escalates into a greater conflict.

"THE INSULT," Lebanon's official Oscar candidate, is about how a trivial, personal conflict explodes into something much larger, a drama that consumes a city and a nation. You could also put it the other way around. The film, directed by Ziad Doueiri ("West Beirut," "The Attack"), reveals how large-scale social divisions infect even the most banal daily interactions.

Two guys have an argument about a pipe that drips water from an apartment terrace onto the street below. Harsh words are exchanged. An apology is demanded. A punch is thrown. And then, as the matter winds its way through two different courts, memories of past atrocities are dredged up, and Lebanon's civil war, which officially ended in 1990, seems on the verge of erupting all over again.

For a viewer with only cursory knowledge of that conflict, which began in the mid-70s and transformed Beirut from a symbol of Mediterranean elegance into a synonym for Middle Eastern chaos, "The Insult" is a fascinating history lesson. It is also a reminder that resentment and hatred don't necessarily recede when the fighting stops. People have long memories, and so do groups whose identities rest in part on seeing one another as enemies.

In that sense, Tony Hanna (Adel Karam), a garage owner, and Yasser Salameh (Kamel El Basha), the foreman of a construction crew, hate each other before they ever meet. Tony is a follower of Lebanon's Christian party, which is less a matter of religious devotion than of ideological zeal. He



COHEN MEDIA GROUP

faithfully attends political rallies and watches videos of speeches by Bachir Gemayel, the Christian militia leader who was briefly the president-elect before being assassinated in 1982.

Yasser, who is about 15 years older than Tony, is Palestinian. Though he has lived in Beirut for decades, his legal status is ambiguous, and the neighborhood where he lives with his Lebanese wife, Manal (Christine Choueiri), is classified as a refugee camp. In spite of their mutual hostility, he and Tony have a lot in common. They are both hard workers and good husbands, and each is a victim of his own stubbornness as well as of the other's provocations. Tony is more of a hothead, while Yasser is more likely to

seethe in silence, but they share an inclination to value dignity more than common sense and to see humiliation as a kind of existential death.

Manal tries to reason with her husband, as does Tony's wife, Shirine (Rita Hayek), who is pregnant with their first child. Neither man really intends for things to escalate the way they do, nor can either figure out how to back down without a loss of face that would also feel like a betrayal. And so the movie's focus shifts from the private world of work and family into the court system and the news media. Tony hires a prominent Christian lawyer (the wonderfully histrionic Camille Salameh), while Yasser is represented by a woman (Diamand Bou

Abboud) who turns out to be — spoiler alert! Metaphor alert! — the opposing counsel's daughter.

As that plot twist suggests, "The Insult," is not always subtle. As the trial progresses, it becomes more programmatic, confronting the viewer and the characters with reminders of past atrocities that sometimes feel heavy-handed. But the film derives some of its vital energy from the way that it often seems to argue with itself. The grace and precision of the performances — not only Mr. Karam's and Mr. El Basha's, but also those of the actors playing the colleagues, advocates, surprise witnesses and bureaucrats who populate an increasingly crowded story — push against the director's fondness for grand statements and obvious ironies.

This internal tension brings home the complicated point Mr. Doueiri is determined to make, which is that personal matters are neither separate from political concerns nor identical with them. At several moments, you expect a sentimental, uplifting solution, the hug or handshake that assures everyone that bygones will be bygones, that deep down we're all the same. But that would be a lie. The more complicated truth is that everyone who holds a grudge does so for a reason, and fears that letting go of it would mean the loss of something precious.

That may not seem like a very hopeful or happy idea. A hopeful, happy movie about the Middle East may be too much to ask for right now. But "The Insult" is too energetic to be depressing. Sometimes it's just too energetic, period. But there is something undeniably exhilarating about the film's honest assessment of the never-ending conflict between decency and cruelty that rages in every nation, neighborhood and heart.

Adel Karam is cast as a garage owner in "The Insult," which is set in a region of seemingly never-ending unrest.

The Insult

Rated R. Strong Language. In Arabic, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 52 minutes.