

Style

Oscar-nominated 'The Insult' reopens old wounds — but to heal them

By **Michael O'Sullivan** February 2

Ziad Doueiri knows how to get a rise out of people.

Case in point: According to the Lebanese-born, Paris-based filmmaker, his new film, "The Insult" — a politically charged courtroom drama set in Beirut about a verbal altercation that spins wildly out of control — was inspired by his own, deeply noxious words. To wit: "I wish Ariel Sharon had wiped you all out."

That's what the character Tony (Adel Karam), a Lebanese Christian auto mechanic, says to a Palestinian Muslim named Yasser (Kamel El Basha) after an inane dispute over a rain gutter leads to a vulgar epithet, and then to even more inflammatory language and violence. And it's exactly what Doueiri says he once shouted, in Beirut five years ago, to a passerby who swore at him — in a Palestinian accent — after Doueiri accidentally got water on him while tending to his balcony cactus.

"I know how to hurt people the most," says Doueiri, who was in Washington recently to promote "The Insult," which has been nominated for a foreign-film Oscar. "I know how to hurt a Muslim, I know how to hurt a Christian. I just have to spend a little bit of time with each of them, and I will put my finger on it. My dad used to say to me, 'Ziad, you're going to get yourself into trouble, but it's in your nature to provoke.'"

The 54-year-old director isn't bragging, just being bluntly honest about his proclivity, and skill, in going for the jugular. Doueiri's 2012 film, "The Attack" — about an Israeli Palestinian surgeon whose wife becomes a suicide bomber — was banned in the Arab world because parts of it were filmed in Tel Aviv. The pro-Palestinian B.D.S. movement, which advocates for boycotts, divestiture and sanctions against Israel for its treatment of Palestinians, still hasn't forgiven Doueiri for what they call an offense. Recently, the group renewed its attacks on Doueiri, whose latest film suggests that the Palestine Liberation Organization — and not just Israel — has been guilty of atrocities.

According to Doueiri, the B.D.S. movement has leveled death threats against him on social media, and the filmmaker was detained last year in Lebanon in what he calls an attempt to suppress his new film. So it's no surprise that Doueiri sounds a tad paranoid these days. Before this interview even began, he questioned why a writer from another publication might have canceled an interview at the last minute, wondering aloud whether the "B.D.S. people" had been bad-mouthing him.

In the case of Doueiri's encounter with the Palestinian pedestrian in Beirut, the filmmaker says he immediately came down from his apartment and told the man he was sorry before things got really ugly. Apology accepted, problem solved. Honesty is a touchstone for the director, who says that all he has ever tried to do in his work is to tell the truth. "I've got a lot of truth to tell," he says.

But, as one character in the film says, "Which truth?"

That potentially volatile confrontation in Beirut got Doueiri thinking: "I said to myself, 'What if I have a film that starts with a very silly incident — something so insignificant — and then, instead of getting solved like it did in reality, it gets complicated? What if it goes from an apology to the refusal of an apology, to the cops, to the local courts, to the supreme court and then to the state? Is this even plausible in Lebanon?'"

There's a joke in the screenplay that suggests that Doueiri already knew the answer to that rhetorical question: "We live in the Middle East," one character says. "The word 'offense' was born here."

The words that inspired "The Insult" are more than a little ironic, considering Doueiri's background as the child of what he calls liberal, left-leaning, secular Muslims. "I grew up suckling the Palestinian cause at my mother's breast," he says. "I lost three cousins who were killed, fighting with the P.L.O. in the [Lebanese] Civil War. The Christians, for us, were the enemy, not the Palestinians."

It was a 15-year sojourn in Hollywood — to which Doueiri decamped in 1983 to escape the sectarian violence in his homeland, and where he learned his craft as a cameraman for Quentin Tarantino — that led him to question his prejudices against Christians. In the pan-ethnic, religiously diverse cosmopolis of Hollywood, he met all kinds. And that diversity, he says, opened his eyes — and eventually his heart.

After returning to Lebanon to make his first film, 1998's "West Beirut," Doueiri met, and married, Joelle Touma, a Lebanese Christian from a staunchly anti-Palestinian family who would become his regular writing partner. The couple has since divorced amicably — ironically while working together on "The Insult." Even more ironically, Doueiri wrote all of the scenes between Tony, the Christian, and his lawyer. Touma wrote the dialogue featuring the Palestinian Yasser and his legal team.

"It's called empathy," Doueiri says of his and Touma's enforced cinematic muscle-stretching, adding that the ability to understand another person's point of view holds the answer to violence, not just in the Middle East but wherever there is conflict. For Doueiri, the exercise is more than theoretical.

"I believe that only when you sit down with your enemy can things begin to change," he says. "For me, this is not intellectual. I grew up in a civil war. It was not a debate. We exchanged bombs, not arguments."

For a man so willing to press his thumb on old wounds, Doueiri says he is less interested in confrontation for its own sake than in reconciliation. With his words, Doueiri says — and here he is bragging — "I can disarm a guy. I really can."

His weapon of choice — used not to create wounds, but to heal them — is the curiosity of the storyteller. "I'm not a

politician,” the filmmaker says. “I’m not a soldier, a representative of an NGO. I’m not a psychiatrist. Even as a kid, when I was hiding in a shelter as the bombs fell, and I knew they were coming from Christian East Beirut, in my thoughts at night I would sit down and say to myself, ‘I am curious about this guy that I hate.’ ”


Curiosity, he says, is the seed of genuine connection. Late in the film, as Tony and Yasser share a knowing glance across a great divide — barely a half smile crossing their stoic faces — it’s a moment that symbolizes, for Doueiri, the recognition that there is no one single truth, but many.

To get to that place, he says, these two characters have to go through more than a trial.

“They have to light the country on fire,” Doueiri says. Eventually, “they understand each other. They’re not going to hug each other. They’re not going to go to bed with each other. They’re just going to *recognize* each other. This is the end — and the beginning — of the film.”

The Insult (R, 112 minutes). At Landmark’s Bethesda Row Cinema.

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