

T H E INSULT



Directed by Ziad Doueiri

2017 Official Oscar® Entry – Lebanon
Best Foreign Language Film
Official Selection Venice International Film Festival 2017:
Winner, Best Actor (Kamel El Basha)
Official Selection Telluride Film Festival 2017
Official Selection Toronto International Film Festival 2017

Synopsis:

In today's Beirut, a civilian dispute blown out of proportion finds Tony (Adel Karam), a Lebanese Christian, and Yasser (Kamel El Basha), a Palestinian refugee, facing off in court. As the media circus surrounding the case threatens a social explosion in divided Lebanon, Tony and Yasser reconsider their values and beliefs as revelations of trauma complicate their understanding of one another.

Runtime: 1hr 52minutes

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Long Synopsis

In today's Beirut, Palestinian refugee Yasser (Kamel El Basha) has been assigned to fix building code violations in an insular Lebanese community. When Yasser attempts to fix a drainpipe protruding from the home of Tony (Adel Karam), a Lebanese Christian, Tony tries to ignore the request. Yasser begins the repair anyway and Tony lashes out, destroying the handyman's work, prompting Yasser to shoot back with a vulgarity. Tony goes to Yasser's boss and demands an apology, which Yasser finds hard to do.

When an attempt at reconciliation between the two men is organized, the increasingly angry Tony lets loose with a racially charged insult striking at the core of Yasser's Palestinian heritage. An angry Yasser then punches Tony in the stomach, breaking a couple of his ribs in the process.

The men subsequently face off in court, with Tony demanding an apology for the assault and Yasser standing his ground. With neither man retaining a lawyer and insubstantial evidence on both sides, the judge throws the case out, only to have it advance to a higher court.

Tony engages the Christian establishment's most prominent prosecutor Wajdi Wehbe (Camille Salamé) for the case, while the young lawyer Nadine (Diamond Abou Abboud), who sympathizes with the plight of the nation's refugees, takes on Yasser's defense.

A media circus quickly begins to grow around the high-profile case, which exacerbates the already-high tensions between the Muslim and Christian groups in Lebanon's Arab community. Inside the courtroom, the trial begins to move past the specifics of the case as the lawyers begin investigating the opponents' private lives and backgrounds. Meanwhile, outside the courtroom, Tony and Yasser struggle with their personal lives and obligations—Tony with his wife Shirine (Rita Hayek) and Yasser with his own, Manal (Christine Choueiri)—as they begin to realize that their skirmish has grown far beyond a matter of pride.



Interview with Ziad Doueiri

-Are we to assume the premise for *The Insult* springs from an observation about Lebanese society?

No, more prosaically, the premise for the movie was something that actually happened to me several years ago in Beirut. I had had an argument with a plumber, something very banal, but tempers quickly flared, and I said practically the same words as those in the film. Joëlle Touma, my co-writer on this film, was present that day. She persuaded me to go apologize to him. But the plumber refused to accept my apology. I wound up going to his boss to present my apology. When his boss used

this along with other reasons to fire the man, I instantly took the man's defense. I then realized that this was good material for a script. I had immediately found all the dynamics for crafting a story built on an event that spirals out of control.

In this case, it's thrilling, because with this conflict as a springboard, I had not one but two main characters: Tony and Yasser. Both have their faults, both characters present very strong development potential. Their respective pasts are colored by a series of internal obstacles. Plus, they are in a highly charged, electric external environment.

-How did you develop it into a courtroom drama?

It's a genre that I have always loved and that has had an impact on my work. Americans have always used court trials to put historical and societal issues on the table. These films are milestones for me. Courtroom dramas afford scriptwriters a single place in which to pit two antagonists against each other. It's a sort of modern take on the western, but played in a closed setting. Dramatically, a trial can be very rich when brought to the screen. This is what I tried to achieve given that this movie describes a sort of duel between Tony and Yasser.

If I had to sum up this film, it would be the quest for dignity. Both main protagonists have suffered blows to their honor and to their dignity. Both blame the other and make him responsible for his problems. Both want the justice system to restore their honor. This is why I don't see *The Insult* as a tragedy. It is absolutely optimistic and humanistic. It shows the paths that can be taken to achieve peace.

-Can we also see this as an assessment of Lebanon today, thirty years after the end of the civil war?

The war in Lebanon ended in 1990 with neither winners nor losers. Everyone was acquitted. General amnesty turned into general amnesia. Discussion is needed, not to reopen old wounds from this conflict, rather to close them definitively. It is our duty toward future generations.

-To what degree does a courtroom drama about Lebanon also become a personal film for you?

Our past subconsciously helps us craft a story, there's no escaping that. Justice has always been very important for me. I come from a family of lawyers and judges. Joëlle and I are both well-versed in the history of Lebanon's civil war, the price paid by each of the parties. As a matter of fact, she and I both come from families with deep political convictions, and with different religious affiliations. Joëlle is from a Christian phalange family, while I'm from a Sunni family that defended the Palestinian cause. Then, as young adults, we both tried throughout the years to understand the other's point of view. We must constantly question things that our families or our camp taught us back then, lead our own investigation in order to see things more clearly.

-Do you think this film is comprehensible for non-Lebanese audiences?

This film has a universal dimension. Yasser and Tony could be any other nationality, from any other nation that had been through a war. Once again, this film is absolutely optimistic and humanistic. It shows an alternative to conflicts by taking the path that recognizes suffering, the path to justice and to pardon.

-Was this your first shoot in Lebanon since 1998 when you shot *West Beirut*, your first feature-length movie?

Yes, it was. When I returned to shoot in Lebanon, I didn't know the actors. It was our first time working together. The casting call was huge, we had over 450 actors audition in four months. The ones that I selected, I got to know. They did amazing work. I can say that in the twenty-year interval since shooting *West Beirut*, things have changed significantly. Crews back then hadn't done a movie since the war ended. But today, the know-how and skills are there. For me, returning to shoot in Lebanon was returning to the land where my heart is. Consequently, I invested myself in every little detail. I negotiated practically each hurdle. It was an extraordinary experience that greatly stirred my emotions and feelings.

-After you travelled to Beirut for the opening of *The Insult* in Lebanon, where you were detained at the airport and later appeared before a military court amidst accusations of treason. What was that all about?

The BDS Movement (The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, a Palestinian-led campaign against Israel) was behind what happened. They're the ones that stopped the release of my film *The Attack* in the Arab world back in 2012, including Lebanon. This was because part of *The Attack* was shot in Israel, which many Lebanese people consider to be an enemy of the state.

Why do you think this happened now?

They couldn't legally stop *The Insult* from being released, so they went back and re-lit an old fire from *The Attack*. But at the end of the day, it was not the government that was after me – it was a group that had its own political reasons. The government followed the standard procedure of an investigation and it was all handled very professionally. I was treated with respect.

I'm reminded of the controversy with Asghar Farhadi and his film *The Salesman* following the newly elected President Trump's executive order barring Iranians from entering the U.S.

It's the same thing that is happening with us. I didn't start anything, I didn't want to start anything. I wish we could turn back time so we could get rid of this dark cloud. In the Arab world, if you accuse someone of Zionism, you're putting a label on them. It's very difficult to change public opinion once that accusation has been put upon you.

As a leading international filmmaker, how do you see political conflicts of this nature playing out?

My reaction to these kinds of things is very simple—it's not analytical, it's not philosophical. At the beginning, you say to yourself, "I'm not coming back here to make more films." This is always the first reaction. Then some time goes by and you look at your life and say, "But I have so many stories to tell—I am from here, the country is in shambles and I feel useful telling my stories." In Beirut, despite the attacks against me, I feel that I can do something. And that brings me back to the basics of being a filmmaker—a filmmaker is here to tell a story. I don't believe that my job is to change society and control the lives of any individuals. My main quest is tell a story with lively characters, a strong plot and good psychology.

By and large, The Insult is not about the politics of the region, but rather the effects the politics have.

They are interpreted as overly political by certain parties in the Middle East. I don't look at life that way – I believe there is a narrative on each side. I understand that the world is very polarized, but I try to make my way up the middle, to tell a story with much more nuance.

Biographies

ZIAD DOUEIRI – Director/Co-screenwriter

Born in Beirut in 1963, Ziad Doueiri left Lebanon at the age of 20 during the Lebanese Civil War to study in the U.S., later graduating from San Diego State University with a film degree. Working in Los Angeles, he cut his teeth as a filmmaker working with Quentin Tarantino as a camera assistant on the films *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *Jackie Brown* (1997). In 1998, Doueiri wrote and directed his first feature film in his native Lebanon, the romantic comedy-drama *West Beirut*, which earned the François Chalais Award at the Cannes Directors' Fortnight, the International Critic's Award at the Toronto Film Festival, the Grand Jury Award at the Taipei Film Festival and the Audience Award in Brussels, among other honors. He followed that up with the coming-of-age drama-romance *Lila Says* (2004), which won Best Screenplay, Best Actor and Best Film at the Gijon Film Festival in Spain, as well as the Grand Jury Award at Italy's Verona Film Festival. Doueiri's next feature was the internationally acclaimed drama *The Attack* (2012), which won a Special Mention at the San Sebastian International Film Festival prior to being acquired by Cohen Media for distribution in the U.S. His television includes directing *Sleeper Cell* for the Showtime Network in 2006 and eight episodes of the French TV crime series *Baron Noir* (2016) for Canal+. Doueiri's latest film, *The Insult*, enjoyed its world premiere in Official Competition at the 2017 Venice International Film Festival.

JOËLLE TOUMA – Co-screenwriter

Screenwriter and script doctor Joëlle Touma began penning screenplays, in 1998, while also working as a TV host, a television and theatre actress, and as the Beirut correspondent for the French daily *Libération* and the Belgian daily *Le Soir*. Later dedicating herself primarily to her screenplay work, she co-wrote the films *Lila Says* (2004), *The Attack* (2012) and *The Insult*, which were each co-written and directed by Ziad Doueiri. Joëlle also co-wrote the 2012 drama *Just Like a Woman*, starring Sienna Miller and Golshifteh Farahani.

ADEL KARAM – “Toni”

Lebanese actor and comedian Adel Karam, a Beirut native, has appeared in a number of feature films and television productions over the past decade, including the romantic comedy *Caramel* (2007), the comedy-dramas *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011) and *One Day I'll Leave* (2015), and the drama *Rue Huvelin* (2011). He is currently the host of the popular comedy/variety show *Hayda Haki*, which is broadcast on MTV Lebanon.

KAMEL EL BASHA – “Yasser”

Kamel El Basha won the Best Award award for *The Insult* at the 74th Venice Film Festival, where the film premiered in August, 2017. Prior to that, actor/director/playwright Kamel served as the artistic director of the Palestinian National Theater in East Jerusalem from 2007 to 2011. He has since appeared in the short films *Lesh Sabreen?* (2009) and *Solomon's Stone* (2015), as well as the 2015 feature *Love, Theft and Other Entanglements*. In 2016, he executive produced the short Palestinian documentary *Defying My Disability*, which follows the lives of young Palestinians as they cope with their personal handicaps.

RITA HAYEK – “Shirine”

Born and raised in Beirut, Rita Hayek first garnered attention as one of the stars of the 2005 Lebanese television drama *A March Dream*, followed by the TV shows *Say God-willing* (2008), *Secret Stitch-Up* (2009), *For Her Eyes* (2010) and *That's What Zahia Said* (2011). She studied acting at the National Institute of Fine Arts at Beirut Lebanese University and, in 2011, took acting courses at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in Los Angeles. Rita has also been a prominent brand ambassador for Nivea cosmetics in the Middle East.

TOMMASO FIORILLI – Director of Photography

With *The Insult*, cinematographer Tommaso Fiorilli continues his ongoing collaboration with filmmaker Ziad Doueiri, following their work together on *The Attack* (2012) and the French TV series *Baron Noir* (2016). He has also shot a number of other French television shows, including *Paris*

(2015), *Jo* (2013), *Les beaux mecs* (2011), *Reporters* (2009) and *Spiral* (2007). Fiorilli's first feature film was the 2006 drama-romance *Cages* and, prior to that, he worked on a handful of short films, including *Chambre froide* (2000), *La petite fille* (2003) and *Le grand bassin* (2006).

DOMINIQUE MARCOMBE – Editor

For her first feature debut, Dominique Marcombe edited Ziad Doueiri's first feature effort, 1998's *West Beirut*, and she has since collaborated with Doueiri on *The Attack* (2012) and the French TV series *Baron Noir* (2016). A leading television editor in her native France, Dominique's other credits include *Research Unit* (2010), *Night Squad* (2009), *Brigade Navarro* (2009), *Ladies of the Law* (2008), *Lost Signs* (2007) and *The Red Summer* (2002).

ÉRIC NEVEUX - Composer

The Insult marks Éric Neveux's second collaboration with Ziad Doueiri following 2012's *The Attack*. Neveux launched his career as one of France's most prolific film composers scoring Francois Ozon's 1997 short film *See the Sea*, followed by Ozon's first feature, *Sitcom* (1998). Among Neveux's films are Sophie Marceau's *Parlez-moi d'amour* (2002) and a number of movies by Patrice Chéreau, including *Those Who Love Me Can Take The Train* (1998), *Intimacy* (2001) and *Persécution* (2009). In the early 2000s, alongside his film work, Neveux released two albums of electronic music under the name Mr Neveux.

CAST

TONI HANNA
YASSER SALAMEH
WAJDI WEHBE
NADINE WEHBE
SHIRINE HANNA
THE GENERAL MANAGER
MANAL SALAMEH
JUDGE COLETTE MANSOUR
SAMIR GEAGA
JUDGE CHAHINE

ADEL KARAM
KAMEL EL BASHA
CAMILLE SALAMEH
DIAMAND ABOU ABOUD
RITA HAYEK
TALAL EL JURDI
CHRISTINE CHOUEIRI
JULIA KASSAR
RIFAAT TORBEY
CARLOS CHAHINE

PRODUCTION

PRODUCERS

EZEKIEL FILMS / **ANTOUN SEHNAOUI**, TESSALIT PRODUCTIONS / **JEAN BRÉHAT**, **RACHID BOUCHAREB**, ROUGE INTERNATIONAL / **JULIE GAYET**, **NADIA TURINCEV**

COPRODUCERS

COHEN MEDIA GROUP / **CHARLES S. COHEN**

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS

SCOPE PICTURES / **GENEVIEVE LEMAL**, DOURI FILMS

FREDERIC DOMONT, TESSALIT PRODUCTIONS / **MURIEL MERLIN**

CREW

SCRIPT

EXECUTIVE PRODUCTION LEBANON

ZIAD DOUEIRI, **JOËLLE TOUMA**

GINGER BEIRUT PRODUCTIONS- **ABLA KHOURY**, **LARA KARAM**

CHEKERDJIAN

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

TOMMASO FIORILLI

ORIGINAL MUSIC

ERIC NEVEUX

EDITOR

DOMINIQUE MARCOMBE

LEGAL CONSULTANT

WAFICA MANSOUR

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

HUSSEIN BAYDOUN

COSTUME DESIGNER

LARA MAY KHAMIS

SOUND

GUILHEM DONZEL, **OLIVIER WALCZAK**, **SEBASTIEN WERA**, **BRUNO MERCERE**

KEY MAKE UP ARTIST

STEPHANIE AZNAREZ

1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTORS

GILLES TARAZI

SCRIPT SUPERVISOR

AMELIE BERARD

LINE PRODUCER

LUCIE BOUILLERET

POST PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR

CEDRIC ETTOUATI

CASTING DIRECTOR

GINGER BEIRUT PRODUCTIONS

STILL PHOTOGRAPHER

RUDY BOU CHEBEL

PUBLICIST INTERNATIONAL

MAGALIE MONTET

PUBLICIST FRANCE

HASSAN GUERRAR

Rated R for language and some violent images

The New York Times

Expecting a Hero's Welcome, Lebanese Director Was Accused of Treason

The Saturday Profile

By BEN HUBBARD, SEPT. 22, 2017



The Lebanese filmmaker Ziad Doueiri, at the Le Gray Hotel in Beirut. He was detained on arrival at the city's airport this month and accused of treason over a movie he shot in Israel five years ago.

BEIRUT, Lebanon — It was supposed to be a glorious homecoming.

After achieving acclaim abroad for his previous films, Ziad Doueiri, a Lebanese director, thought he was returning to Beirut this month to celebrate the debut of his newest movie, "[The Insult](#)."

Instead, he was detained at the airport and summoned before a military court the next day to answer accusations of treason. His crime: He had shot his previous movie in Israel, which Lebanon considers an enemy state and bars its citizens from visiting.

Why he was stopped on this visit was anyone's guess, since he had been to Lebanon more than a dozen times in the five years since that previous film was released. The government had even chosen his new film to represent Lebanon at the Academy Awards.

He was released without charge after a few hours of questioning, but what has become known here as "the Ziad Doueiri affair" has fueled fierce debates about law, politics, artistic freedom and Lebanon's hostile relationship with its southern neighbor.

Mr. Doueiri's critics accuse him of normalizing the enemy to elevate his international profile. Mr. Doueiri says that he had to shoot in Israel to tell his film's story accurately, and that the backlash has surprised him.

"I don't mind at all being attacked ideologically or for a movie," he said in an interview after his release. "Let them criticize the movie. But to accuse someone of being a traitor — of treason — is big."

Throughout his career, Mr. Doueiri, 53, has made films about the complexities of Middle Eastern identity and about personal histories shaped by the region's conflicts.

His first film, "[West Beirut](#)," followed three adolescents — two Muslim boys and a Christian girl — at the outbreak of the [Lebanese civil war](#) in 1975. "The Insult" tracks a street conflict between a Christian and a Palestinian that escalates into a reckoning of the civil war's legacy. It is scheduled to open in the United States in January.

Mr. Doueiri, an energetic, fast-talking man with salt-and-pepper curls that tumble over his ears and eyes, said his own life had left him attuned to how people's backgrounds could shape their perception of reality. As a secular Muslim director who studied in California, married a Christian and now lives in Paris, he feels that delving into such complexities makes better characters.

"Dramatically speaking for filmmaking, it's much more interesting to be nuanced," he said. "Even Darth Vader has a good side, otherwise he wouldn't be interesting."

But he says he knew it was risky to go to Israel, which he said Lebanon considered "the ultimate Darth Vader."

Indeed, history has left many Lebanese with a deep hatred of the Jewish state.

Its creation in 1948 sent waves of Palestinian refugees across the border into refugee camps that evolved into permanent settlements. Israel also occupied southern Lebanon for nearly two decades, backed factions in Lebanon's civil war and fought a 34-day war with Hezbollah in 2006 that killed hundreds of people.

The animosity has led to laws forbidding Lebanese citizens from traveling to Israel and from associating with Israelis, although the authorities often look the other way when Lebanese with second passports make quiet visits. (Mr. Doueiri traveled to Israel on his American passport.)

The ban on engagement with Israel often creates effects in Lebanon's cultural realm.

The government has banned Israeli films, like the 2008 movie "[Waltz With Bashir](#)," an animated autobiographical drama about the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. This year, it banned "[Wonder Woman](#)" because its star, Gal Gadot, had been an Israeli soldier.

In that light, many Lebanese saw an extended trip to Israel by one of the country's most prominent filmmakers, a trip that involved paying Israeli actors and crew, as a step too far.

"We are in a war with Israel, and when you are in a war, you can't deal with them like a neighboring country," said Pierre Abi-Saab, deputy editor in chief of Lebanon's Al-Akhbar

newspaper, which has led the criticism of Mr. Doueiri. “So when a filmmaker goes, an intellectual, and says, ‘Brother, we are with peace’ — what peace? Whose peace?”

Mr. Doueiri made his trip to film “[The Attack](#),” which tells the story of an Arab-Israeli surgeon whose wife becomes a suicide bomber, leaving him struggling to figure out what happened.

Even though the film was shot in Israel, Lebanon’s censorship office approved it for showing in cinemas in 2012. But after lobbying by anti-Israeli activists, the Arab League asked its 22 members to boycott the film. Most did, including Lebanon.

Mr. Doueiri, too, was attacked.

“They said, ‘Ziad the Zionist. Ziad the Israeli,’ ” he said. “In Lebanon, in the Arab world, you take that label and glue it to your name and you are screwed for a long time.”

But he returned to Lebanon repeatedly and spent most of 2016 in the country to shoot “The Insult,” with help from the police, the military and the courts — all without any legal problems.

As the new film’s release approached, his foes spoke up.

Mr. Abi-Saab, the newspaper editor, [wrote an article](#) calling on Mr. Doueiri to apologize for the “moral, political and national crime” of working in Israel. If he did not, Mr. Abi-Saab wrote, the movie should be not be screened in Lebanon and Mr. Doueiri should be considered “wanted” by the authorities.

In an interview, Mr. Abi-Saab said he considered Mr. Doueiri a talented director. But he said he opposed all engagement with Israel and saw the film as part of an effort to normalize Israel and make the Lebanese people stop seeing it as an enemy.

“Unfortunately, that naïve, romantic talk about ‘the other’ and ‘I want to understand the other and make peace’ — you can’t make peace with someone who has put a knife to your neck,” he said. “It’s impossible.”

Mr. Doueiri never apologized, and the judge who had summoned him threw out the case, citing the statute of limitations and saying that the film had not defamed Lebanon or the Palestinian cause, Mr. Doueiri said.

Mr. Doueiri said he had not intended to make a pro- or anti-Israel film, but to tell a complicated human story.

He was born in Beirut to secular Muslim parents, and his adolescence was dominated by the civil war, which raged until 1990. His left-wing family supported the Palestinians, which meant that he hated the Israelis and their Lebanese Christian allies.

“To me, a good Christian was a dead Christian,” he recalled.

In 1983, he moved to the United States to go to film school at San Diego State University, where, far from Lebanon, he met Jews and Lebanese Christians it would have been hard for him to get to know at home, he said.

He also worked as a cameraman on American films, including Quentin Tarantino’s “Reservoir Dogs” and “Pulp Fiction.”

After making “West Beirut,” in 1998, Mr. Doueiri fell in love with a Lebanese Christian woman, Joelle Touma. They were from communities that had hated each other during the war, so the relationship itself was an exercise in learning to see another perspective.

“We grew up in opposite camps in the war, and each of us made his own arc to go back and look at the other point of view,” Ms. Touma said.

They began co-writing scripts, got married, had a daughter and are now divorced, although they still write together, sometimes on the same computer screen, Ms. Touma said.

Their different backgrounds informed “The Insult,” a political courtroom drama that looks at the past suffering of Palestinians and Christians in Lebanon, and the scars that remain.

They wrote it during their divorce, which probably fueled the contentious court scenes, Ms. Touma said.

Mr. Doueiri’s hope for the film, besides that it makes its money back, is that it encourages Lebanese to look back and be more open about their painful histories as a step toward reconciliation.

“It would be nice if people think a little bit about what they have wanted to say but they didn’t dare,” he said.

A version of this article appears in print on September 23, 2017, on Page A7 of the New York edition with the headline: Instead of Hero's Welcome, Treason Charges.

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