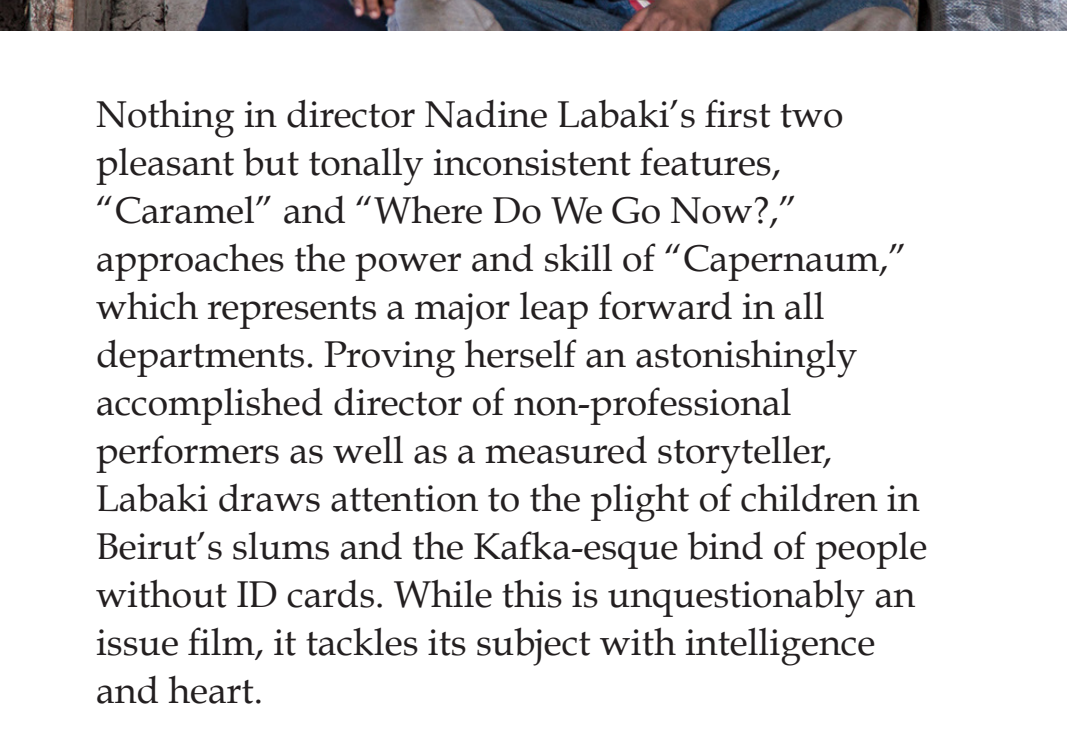


REVIEW VARIETY:

Cannes Film Review: ‘Capernaum’ Tackling its issues with heart and intelligence, Labaki’s child-endangerment tale is a splendid addition to the ranks of great guttersnipe dramas.

By Jay Weissberg - May 17, 2018



Nothing in director Nadine Labaki’s first two pleasant but tonally inconsistent features, “Caramel” and “Where Do We Go Now?,” approaches the power and skill of “Capernaum,” which represents a major leap forward in all departments. Proving herself an astonishingly accomplished director of non-professional performers as well as a measured storyteller, Labaki draws attention to the plight of children in Beirut’s slums and the Kafka-esque bind of people without ID cards. While this is unquestionably an issue film, it tackles its subject with intelligence and heart.

Prizes are almost a certainty, and not just because juries might be more prone to awarding women directors in this particular moment in history — no wonder Sony Pictures Classics snapped it up in the Cannes market for Stateside distribution, since this is one Lebanese film sure to do significant business at art-house cinemas nationwide ...

Labaki uses a trial to structure the film, though this isn’t a courtroom drama and those scenes are wisely kept to a minimum. Admittedly the case could probably only exist in cinema: Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), already serving a five-year sentence for stabbing someone, is suing his parents ... for giving him life. Approximately 12 years old (even his parents don’t know his exact age, and they never got a birth certificate), this pint-sized James Dean is a sensitive toughie simmering with righteous resentment. One glimpse at his troubled home life and it’s easy to understand why.

Zain lives with parents Souad (Kawthar Al Haddad) and Selim (Fadi Kamel Youssef) and an unspecified number of siblings in an apartment characterized by chaotic squalor, first seen when family members grind prescription opioids into water and wash clothes in the solution in order to pass them off to Zain’s jailbird older brother, who’ll make good money inside selling off the reconstituted drugs. All the kids are put to work hawking stuff on the street or, in Zain’s case, at the convenience store owned by their shady landlord Assad (Nour el Hussein), who’s got his eye on 11-year-old Sahar (Cedra Izam).

Labaki does a superb job capturing the cacophony of the streets through a mixture of nervous camera movements, shrewd editing, and a multitude of sounds, generally keeping the camera just below or just above the boy’s head. Unable to save Sahar from being sold by their parents to Assad, Zain runs away, winding up at an amusement park where he’s befriended by Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw), an Ethiopian cleaning woman illegally in Lebanon without papers. Hiding her adorable toddler Yonas (Boluwatife Treasure Bankole) at work is problematic, so Zain’s willingness to act as babysitter is serendipitous. Yet when Rahil disappears, Zain has to fend for himself and the child.

While the idea of a kid taking his parents to court for bringing him into such a horrid world sounds like a gimmick, “Capernaum” quickly shifts into unadorned realism, and even in the brief trial scenes Labaki generally avoids the usual grandstanding (the director, first known as an actress, appears briefly as Zain’s attorney). Firmly in the tradition of great guttersnipe dramas, the film pays a considerable amount of attention to milieu, foregrounding the solidarity of children (Zain’s relationship with Sahar is especially well done) as they struggle to survive in an adult-made hell. Lest there be any foolish suggestion that the script doesn’t pass judgment, the parents are unquestionably at fault, and their protestations that they don’t know better because they were raised the same way ring false.

... the overall rhythm supports the emotional build-up, and moments of humor, such as a terrific scene when Rahil is assisted at a notary by two older eccentrics, offer just the right balance with the overall unforced pathos. Five people are credited as working on the script, yet there’s no loss of cohesion, and certain pieces of dialogue, such as at the very end, deliver a genuine punch made more potent by Labaki’s avoidance of falsely dramatic flourishes.

Most of the performers enact roles not so far removed from their own lives — casting director Jennifer Haddad deserves special kudos for bringing together such an exceptional group whose potent personalities and ease before the camera unfailingly hold the screen. Young Al Rafeea is a revelation as the swaggering, foul-mouthed Zain, combining the requisite traits of wounded sensitivity with seasoned resilience that somehow never feels clichéd. His seemingly effortless ability to carry the majority of the film doesn’t diminish the sterling work by the rest of the cast, especially Shiferaw, who is remarkably natural in a difficult role.

Visually, “Capernaum” is notably more sophisticated than Labaki’s previous work, and certainly more gritty. Sequences where the camera hovers around Zain’s height allows for a sense of subjectivity without an easy reliance of p.o.v. shots, and rising cinematographer Christopher Aoun proves his mettle with a number of potent scenes, such as the moment when Zain tries to protect his parents from selling Sahar for a few chickens. Editing is also skilled, and Khaled Mouzanar’s low key music is in perfect harmony with the film’s emotional tenor, accompanying the action without manipulation for most of the way.

REVIEW: CANNES 2018:

Capharnaüm, The First Of Many And More

by Chaz Ebert - May 19, 2018

Nadine Labaki shot over 500 Hours of footage over 6 months to craft this tale, and the result is astounding.

REVIEW TELEGRAPH:

Capernaum, Cannes review: a crazily ambitious, heart-in-mouth neorealist version of Baby’s Day Out

Robbie Collin - 18 MAY 2018

Capernaum begins with what looks like the preamble to a high-profile custody battle. A haunted-looking couple arrive at court in a flurry of flash-bulbs and microphones, where they’re joined by their 12-year-old son, who skulks into the chamber with a gaggle of stewards.

But it soon becomes clear that the seating plan isn’t quite right for a divorce: in this case, the boy is the plaintiff, and the mother and father are about to be judged. To pin-drop silence, young Zain (Zain Al Rafeea) announces that he wants to sue his parents “for giving me life” – which is, without question, a weighty statement for any 12-year-old to make. But wait until you see the life they gave him.

Nadine Labaki’s sensational new film, a late-breaking frontrunner for this year’s Palme d’Or at Cannes, turns the plight of this lad growing up in the slums and streets of Beirut into a social-realist blockbuster – fired by furious compassion and teeming with sorrow, yet strewn with diamond-shards of beauty, wit and hope.

Danny Boyle’s Slumdog Millionaire is an obvious point of comparison, particularly in Labaki’s use of non-professional actors playing roles close to their own lived experience, and an attention-grabbing and arguably far-fetched framing device – in this case the court case, rather than a round of Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? – to give structure to a wide-ranging story of against-all-odds survival.

But the film is closer in texture and spirit to Fernando Meirelles’s Brazilian gangster epic City of God, and has a middle hour so crazily ambitious – imagine a neorealist version of Baby’s Day Out – I’m not entirely clear how Labaki pulled it off. Watch it win the Palme here on Saturday, and maybe the foreign language Oscar next.

The film flashes back to long before the trial, to reveal Zain’s family living in cluttered poverty (the film’s title is an archaic word for a jumble of objects). His parents, Souad (Kawthar Al Haddad) and Selim (Fadi Kamel Youssef), appear to be better at having children than looking after them: one regular family activity sees Zain and his siblings grinding Tramadol pills, dissolving the powder in water, then soaking clothes in the solution, which they then to Zain’s incarcerated older brother, so he can steep the opioids back out and sell them inside.

Meanwhile, Zain’s 11-year-old sister Sahar (Cedra Izam) has caught the eye of a sleazy local shopkeeper (Nour el Hussein): her parents, starved for cash, effectively sell her as a child bride, and Zain, outraged and disgusted, flies the coop.

He fetches up at a decrepit fairground and befriends some of the employees, including a young Ethiopian woman called Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw), who is working illegally in Lebanon – and whose likewise-undocumented toddler Yonas (played by one-year-old Boluwatife Treasure Bankole) spends most of the day stowed in a pull-along shopping trolley in the staffroom, out of sight. Rahil takes in Zain as a live-in babysitter, an arrangement which suits all three parties famously, until she goes missing and Zain has to care for Yonas by himself.

This part of Zain’s story makes up the film’s staggering, heart-in-mouth extended centrepiece, and constantly defies belief – both in terms of the outstanding, fully inhabited performances Labaki has coaxed out of her (in one case ridiculously) young actors, and the ingenuity shown by their characters as they keep persevering in the direst of circumstances.

Zain fashions a makeshift pushchair for Yonas from a skateboard and a cooking pot, and the sight of the boy pulling the toddler along on this contraption through the city’s racket and heat has a kind of emblematic power: striking, moving, and funny too, it’s one of those great images in cinema that’s arresting enough to be recognisable in silhouette.

Shot over six months on location in Beirut, Capernaum has the same powers and limitations of postwar neorealist films like De Sica’s Bicycle Thieves and Rossellini’s Germany, Year Zero. Some audience members at Cannes found its unstinting earnestness, big emotions and political charge too much: “I need proof that you’re a human being,” an adult irritably tells Zain because he lacks the necessary papers, as if the mere fact of the boy’s standing there wasn’t enough. But for me, it is the only possible approach Labaki could have taken, and the result is a film that already feels like a landmark.