



IN HER OWN VOICE

Nadine Labaki is a pioneer in the world of Arab cinema as she explores human behaviour and how society works

When Nadine Labaki, the darling of Lebanese cinema, walked on stage to collect this year's Jury Prize at the 71st annual Cannes Film Festival, it was not only recognition of a decade-long career, but an acknowledgement of the deep social issues that have been central to all of her work.

With her on stage at the Palais des Festivals was Zain Al Rafeea, the star of *Capernaum*, which tells the story of a 12-year-old boy who rebels against the life of destitution and poverty imposed upon him in Beirut's slums. The film received a 15-minute standing ovation following its world premiere at Cannes in May.

Labaki, who began her career directing TV commercials and music videos, is a pioneer in the world of modern Arab cinema. She is also a standard bearer for the Lebanese film industry, which has suffered from widespread apathy and a chronic lack of funding for years. She was also one of only three female filmmakers in a competition of 21 films at this year's Cannes. The only other Lebanese woman to previously compete for the Palme d'Or had been Heiny Srour in 1974.

Social issues have always been at the heart of Labaki's films. Her 2007 debut, *Caramel*, which she directed, starred in and co-wrote,

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Above: Nadine Labaki with her husband producer Khaled Mouzanar and Syrian actor Zain al-Rafeea during the 71st annual Cannes Film Festival in France recently

dealt with adultery and perceptions of beauty. It was a colourful, sensual, almost life-affirming comic drama centred on the lives and loves of five women working in a Beirut beauty salon.

Her second feature, *Where Do We Go Now?*, was a commentary of Lebanese sectarianism. In the opening sequence a huddle of multi-denominational female mourners walked and swayed in gracefully choreographed harmony towards their village's communal graveyard. The women rhythmically beat themselves, tilted their heads to the side, and almost danced before parting and heading to separate Christian and Muslim cemeteries.

Where Do We Go Now? propelled Labaki onto the world stage, perhaps more so than *Caramel*, winning the People's Choice award at the Toronto International Film Festival and breaking box office records in Lebanon.

"It's not the fact of telling a story that interests me," she said. "It's the fact that I need to understand through my work a lot of things about society and how it works. About human behaviour and human feelings and why we behave the way we do. Human nature is something that fascinates me."

The road to *Caramel* had begun with a chance meeting with the French film producer Anne-Dominique Toussaint at the Beirut Film Festival in 2003. They kept in touch and Labaki sent Toussaint the first few pages of the film shortly after their initial meeting. Toussaint then suggested she apply to the Residence du Festival de

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Cannes, a forum that allows young writers and directors to work on their scripts in a creative environment.

It was there in 2004 that Labaki wrote the film after being picked from more than 100 candidates. Toussaint co-produced the film with a budget of \$1.6 million and filming took place from May to July 2006.

"It's a challenge for me to make films – Lebanese films in the Lebanese language – and to travel with it abroad," she said. "But I want to continue this challenge. It would feel like a betrayal of my language, of Lebanon, and of the Lebanese people if I went and made an English language film. A lot of people send me scripts to make films abroad but I've never felt a need to do it. I want to make films in my language, about my culture and in my own voice."

Labaki has kept true to her word. All of her films have been set in Lebanon, feature predominantly non-professional actors, and are in Arabic. As a result she is regarded as one of Lebanon's most famous daughters, with a career that has been marked by determination and hard work.

Born in the small village of Baabdet, she studied media at Saint-Joseph University in Beirut before



Above right:
A scene from
Nadine Labaki's
second film *Where
Do We Go Now?*

Above left: The
actress is a
pioneer for
Arab cinema

Right: Labaki
received a double
gold award in
recognition of
sales in Lebanon
and the Gulf
states for the
original soundtrack
of *Where Do We
Go Now?*



becoming a successful director of TV commercials and music videos, making more than 70 ads and more than 25 pop videos for the likes of Nancy Ajram and Carole Samaha. She was even an aspirational role model for Johnnie Walker in 2012 and a brand ambassador for Olay earlier in her career.

"Each person has a different path and I've followed mine," said Labaki, whose sister Caroline is also a director and whose husband, Khaled Mouzanar, composes and produces her soundtracks. It is his *Danse Funèbre* that the black-clad female mourners dance to in *Where Do We Go Now?*

"But I also consider myself to be very lucky because it's not only about a lot of hard work, it's also about knowing how to grasp the right opportunities and not being scared to dream big. Not being scared of pursuing exactly what you have planned for. I chose this path because for me it seemed like the most natural."

Her acting career has also steadily grown since her feature length debut in *Bosta* in 2005. She had leading roles in her first two films and in 2010's *Stray Bullet*, but took on a supporting role in *Capernaum*.

"There's a lot to say in this region," she said. "There are so many people who have so many things to say. People who are suffering. And suffering creates a need to express yourself, to say things. We need to start encouraging them. We're on the right track but there's a vicious circle – in Lebanon at least. There are

no examples, or very few examples, of films that make it outside the Lebanese territory.

"Lebanon is not enough. You can't make money and get your investment back if you only count on the Lebanese market. So we need more and more examples of films that make it abroad – that are financially successful – in order to make people believe that Lebanese films can make money. This is how we are going to start having an industry and make more people interested in financing films."

Alongside Ziad Doueiri's *The Insult*, which was nominated for a best foreign language Oscar earlier this year, *Capernaum* is a fulfilment of this commitment to the Lebanese film industry. ♪