

Interview: Director Nadine Labaki Wonders ‘Where Do We Go Now?’

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CHICAGO – The morality of conflict is brought to form in the new film, “Where Do We Go Now?,” written and directed by Nadine Labaki. This is a speculative fable about a small town in Lebanon that lives in harmony, as long as they stay away from religious battles that plague the rest of the country. The town loves their peace, and the women there want to keep it that way.

Nadine Labaki is a native of Lebanon, and grew with the continuous warfare associated with the country. Her escape was the television screen, where she both observed the outside world and absorbed all the films she could rent. This led to a lifelong interest in making movies, and she received her degree in film studies at Beirut’s Saint-Joseph University. Her final year project, “11 Rue Pasteur,” won the 1998 best short film at the Biennale of Arabic Cinema in Paris. The Cannes Film Festival in-residence program is where she finished writing her first feature film, “Caramel” (2007), which was a hit in France and played the art houses in America. She also acts in her films, with major roles in both “Caramel” and “Where Do We Go Now?”



Director and Actor: Nadine Labaki (Amale) and Julien Farhat (Rabih) in ‘Where Do We Go Now?’
Photo credit: Rudy Bou Chebel for Sony Pictures Classics

Nadine Labaki was in Chicago last month, and talked to HollywoodChicago.com about the filmmaking experience that reflects her own life.

HollywoodChicago.com: I couldn’t help but think of the Aristophanes play Lysistrata – in which women withhold sex to stop war – when I saw your film. Were you inspired by that play and what statements were you making about the power of women in ‘Where Do We Go Now?’

Nadine Labaki: I know about that play, but I wasn’t inspired by it. This is a personal story, because in Lebanon we’ve been through continuous war for a long time. And two years ago, after living in peace for nearly two decades, people took up arms again, this time between two opposing political parties. It was a street fighting war that lasted a couple weeks. When you see this, you see the absurdity of our situation. How can neighbors, who may even send their kids to the same school, become enemies over political differences? For me, this was completely ridiculous, and around the same time I learned that I was pregnant. That changed my perspective, because I thought of my child at 18 or 19 years old, in a situation where he was tempted to take up arms and go into the streets, what would I do as a mother to stop him? That’s how the story was inspired and developed.

I am aware of my responsibility as a woman and a mother. If I live in a society that takes up weapons for any stupid reason, I have a responsibility towards that. I am part of this society, what would I do to stop it? How far would I go to stop it? What is my impact? That's why I talked through women in the film, I wanted to make them aware of their responsibility, and how we can stop it. If we don't interfere, it's going to keep happening.

HollywoodChicago.com: Much of the conflict in the film revolves around the mythos of religion, but the religious leaders are also the peacemakers in a sense. With most religions simply offering peace for the soul, why do you think followers separate that peace in defending their religious brand?

Labaki: There are misinterpretations in what religion is teaching us. It all comes down to 'be good, and don't be evil.' No matter which religion we come from, the problem is in interpretation. It's not only about religion, it is about the differences between people and being able to tolerate these differences.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is an exploration of different powers in your film – religion, patriarch, matriarch, sensuality, empathy – which of those powers throw our current societies most out of balance and how can we as individuals use our own powers to balance our destiny?

Labaki: I'm aware that I can make a change. Most of the time we're fatalistic, and question whether we can make a change in the larger world. The fact that we believe we can't make change is the reason no change occurs. If everyone of us can believe they can make a change in themselves, maybe the world would be a better place. We need to believe in that power. I am naive and a little innocent about that, but I want to stay that way. If being naive and innocent allows me to make a film like this, then I want to be that way.

In Lebanon, the film is opening up debate, and I'm giving a lot of talks at universities where we discuss the issues. The debate is going beyond the film, and whether we like it or not, it is...maybe...making a small change.



The Women of 'Where Do We Go Now?'
Photo credit: Rudy Bou Chebel for Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: The musical elements in the film add to the morality fable within it. How does breaking into song lighten the mood of the story, and when did you know the right time to make it happen within the flow of the narrative?

Labaki: The music was important because I was making more of a fable. This was not about Christians and Muslims living in Lebanon, it was about war in general. I needed a more universal aspect in the film, and the music helps the fable because it makes the conflict not completely realistic, and it seems like it can happen anywhere.

HollywoodChicago.com: You stated in the press notes that television was an escape for you as a youngster growing up in Lebanon. You include an homage to the TV in your film, showing both its power to entertain and inflame. With the wide proliferation of even more screens in modern life, do you admire that expansion or are you feel more cautionary regarding it?

Labaki: It has good sides and bad sides. It has an influence on rumors, the new media conveys more rumors. That impacts our life. For example, a Christian may have a good relationship with a Muslim neighbor for years, but just because they hear a rumor in the media, they could easily change. In that sense, it isn't that good. If we were able to absorb information wisely about the world around us, it would be fine, but the misinterpretation of that information is what's causing the problems.

HollywoodChicago.com: The men in the story are depicted somewhat as wild beasts that need to be fooled into being caged, and are depicted

being placated by drugs and eroticism. What, in your opinion and observations, is the main advantages of being male and the main disadvantages?

Labaki: It is the different point-of-view that males have that makes me think that men and women are two different species, but it's also healthy that we have distinctive behavior. There is a possibility from the film that you would think that men are stupid, and women are clever, but it's not that. The fact is is that the men want to prove a point, and it has been shown throughout history that it is the men that take up the weapons to do so, and it's always the women that are left behind with the consequences.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did acting in your first film, ‘Caramel,’ make you a better director of actors in ‘Where Do We Go Now?’



Nadine Labaki in Chicago, April 30th, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Labaki: Because I work with non-professional actors, it does make it a lot easier because I am in it with them. I am inside the scene, close to them, and it does create a bond that is very strong. It becomes organic – I am there, I am close, I am in touch with them – it's better than the relationship of a director behind a camera. I am one of them. And if something isn't going right, I will improvise, because I am always looking for that unexpected moment of truth where a magical reality happens. I don't like the term acting, I am searching for a type of ‘real reality,’ so when the audience gathers in a dark room, they can watch that reality unfold. It's a fiction, but it's a fiction with real people and real stories. It becomes bigger than just a film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who were your directing influences as you learned your craft, and do you pay any honor to them in your own films through scenes or camera technique?

Labaki: I'm fascinated now with the way Iranian directors work. Iranian cinema is very interesting, it does work with reality and does reflect a certain real aspect of society, it feels like the real thing. I admire that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you think you are offering answers to the question of your film? Isn't plain empathy and common fellowship the way to a different path for the world?

Labaki: If I had the answer I wouldn't be asking the question, ‘where do we go now?’

“Where Do We Go Now?” continues its limited release in Chicago on May 18th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Nadine Labaki, Claude Baz Moussawbaa, Julien Farhat, Yvonne Maalouf and Antoinette Noufally. Written and directed by Nadine Labaki. Rated “PG-13”



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