Podtalk: Director Nadine Labaki Creates ‘Capernaum’

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CHICAGO – One of the best films of 2018 is “Capernaum.” The title means “Chaos,” and co-writer/director Nadine Labaki certainly created a form of that action in the crazy quilt journey of the main character of Zain, an undocumented immigrant boy in Lebanon. From a story that takes us from his street survival to a court of law… suing his parents, “Capernaum” is a multi-layered masterpiece.

The film is framed by the trial. Zain, portrayed with amazing purpose by the similarly named Zain Al Rafeea, is a boy who felt that he shouldn’t have been born into his family of poor Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and sues his parents on that basis. His only respite in the family was with his beloved sister Sahar. When she was sold into marriage, Zain ran away, only to end up in the streets. An African woman with a baby took pity on him, and brought him in to care for the child while she worked. She is busted in an immigrant sting, so Zain and the baby had to make it on their own. Eventually the boy goes home, but the result of his family reunion is explosive. The film speaks of many themes and issues, but mostly is a plea for sanity in a “chaotic” childhood universe.



Director Nadine Labaki Directs Zain Al Rafeea on the Set of ‘Capernaum’
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Director Nadine Labaki is a veteran filmmaker, and spent several years to get “Capernaum” right. She grew up in Lebanon during the country’s civil war era, and began her career directing music videos. After graduating from a Beirut University, her student film “11 Rue Pasteur” won Best Short Film at the Biennale of Arab Cinema. In 2006, she directed and acted in “Caramel,” and got on Variety’s “10 Directors to Watch” list in 2007. Her next film was the poignant “Where Do We Go Now? (2011),” which won many festival awards around the world. “Capernaum” won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and received a 15 minute standing ovation after the screening there. The film is also nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globes on January 6th, and is on the short list for an Oscar nom.

In Part One of a Podtalk phone interview with Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com, director Nadine Labaki talks about Zain Al Rafeea’s performance and the themes of “Capernaum.”

In Part Two, Nadine Labaki talks about the arduous editing process for the film, and her philosophies and hopes for the world in the new year of 2019.

“Capernaum” is ranked in the 10 Best Films of 2018 by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com. Click here [24] for the complete list.

“Capernaum” opened at the Music Box Theatre – 3733 North Southport, Chicago – on January 4th. See local listings for other theaters and show times. Featuring Zain Al Rafeea, Yordanos Shiferaw, Kawthar Al Hadda, Fadi Kamel and Nour el Husseini. Screenplay by Nadine Labaki, Jihad Hojeily and Michelle Kerserwany. Directed by Nadine Labaki. Rated “R”

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