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REEL WORLD



Everyday chaos

A gritty look at the lives of young refugees in Oscar-nominated film

This richly engaging Lebanese movie (nominated for Best Foreign Language Film) from writer-director Nadine Labaki (*Caramel, Where Do We Go From Here?*) is in some ways a very mixed and uneven accomplishment, but its generous assortment of rewards and pleasures make it into an especially memorable experience.

by
Juan-Carlos Selznick



Capernaum
Opens Friday, Feb. 15. Starring Zain Al Rafeea and Yordanos Shiferaw. Directed by Nadine Labaki. Pageant Theatre. Rated R.

The main setting is a poverty-stricken area of contemporary Beirut, and the chief characters are a 12-year-old named Zain (played by Syrian refugee Zain Al Rafeea), an undocumented Ethiopian and single mom named Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw), Zain's brutally conflicted parents, and several of his variously at-risk younger siblings.

The production is shaped as a latter-day version of classic neo-realism—nonprofessional actors, stories of the everyday struggles of ordinary people, passionate social protest, documentary-style filming on actual locations, etc. And in this case, the ensuing trials and tribulations touch on a volatile set of contemporary issues—grinding urban poverty, racial prejudice, child abuse, immigration, the shadow economies of sex, drugs, petty theft and child prostitution.

Ultimately, the central dramas in *Capernaum* revolve around Zain's rebellion against his parents and his subsequent involvement with Rahil, who gives him shelter in her back-alley hovel and later

puts him to work as a live-in babysitter for the infant son that she keeps hidden from her employers and the authorities. Zain is a resourceful rascal and a team player in a desperate family of petty criminals, but he is also endowed with a fierce sense of empathy. And it is the latter that emerges full-force when his parents cravenly sell his beloved sister Sahar, age 11, into a marriage with their sleazy landlord.

Most of this comes to light in intriguingly round-about fashion. At the outset, Zain is already doing a five-year prison term for stabbing someone, and when we first meet him he's back in court and filing suit against his own parents. The courtroom testimonies serve as a kind of framing device for most of the film, but it's the extended flashbacks that those courtroom moments give rise to that dominate the overall action.

The precocious charisma of young Al Rafeea in the central role is a thing of wonder all by itself. He exudes an almost casual gravitas that's well beyond his years, and that proves convincing with the character's rages as well as his boldly sympathetic actions. Shiferaw's Rahil is excellent as well, while Zain's extravagantly feckless parents (Kawsar Al Haddad and Fadi Kamel Youssef) probably need (and deserve) fuller development than Labaki is able to give them here. □



Poor



Fair



Good



Very Good



Excellent

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