

Sweet smell of success

Words Nadine Kahil

Nadine Labaki's new film *Caramel* is her latest portrayal of the Lebanese woman

Nadine Labaki is, aside from a Pepsi light advert, best known as the music video director who has substantially changed the way younger generations consume, and also view, Arabic music today. Yet her success and impact is not limited to the music clip; the Lebanese director and actress has delved into the realm of movie making, gaining still more popularity in response to the debut of her feature film, *Caramel*, at Cannes Film Festival.

"I received a standing ovation, I never expected that," says a clearly enamoured Labaki. Nevertheless, the excitement that Labaki felt was overwhelmed by a creeping sense of guilt and pain. As she received such positive feedback for her project while signing various deals to launch *Caramel* worldwide, her country was going through yet another political turmoil.

"I felt guilty," Labaki says. "Should I really be happy receiving all this attention while my country is in pain? So many questions went through my head during this time. Eventually, however, I persuaded myself that what I was doing in Cannes was good for my country. I needed people to see Lebanon in a different way, in a less clichéd manner."

Labaki explains that when one thinks of Beirut, the normal reaction is to imagine a dark, dull and grey picture. "You imagine smoke," she says, "you see buildings >



destroyed; you see women crying and children lost." She wanted to change that. She wanted to make a film that was colourful and insightful. "I think I come from a generation that doesn't want to look back, that doesn't want to talk about war anymore and that wants the world to see Lebanon as the colourful country it is, with warm people who have normal problems like anyone else around the world."

But the challenges that Labaki encountered were difficult to overcome. "Circumstances did not help me to express the animated world I wanted to portray to audiences," she says. When she finished shooting the movie in July 2006, Israel launched its 33-day war against Lebanon.

Despite the war, the "colours" of Labaki's movie came through and the message she wanted to relay to the world was well received. The feature film concentrates on Lebanese women. Loyal, played by Nadine Labaki herself, works in a beauty salon in Beirut along with three other women. Each one has a problem: Loyal has an affair with a married man, Nisrine, a Christian is set to wed a Muslim, Rima is a lesbian, and Jamal frets about growing old.

It is a bittersweet story of five women of varying ages who meet or work in a Beirut beauty salon and help each other overcome problems of love, marriage, sex and old age. *Caramel* was a name chosen for the movie, whose translation in Arabic is *Sukar Nabat*, a blend of lemon juice, water and sugar boiled to make a caramel mixture that is cooled and used to remove unwanted hair.

The film was produced by French producer Anne-Dominique Toussaint's Les Films des Tournelles with a budget of \$1.6 million. The Arab TV network ART and Lebanese distribution company Sabbah Media were also contributors and are responsible for distributing the film across the Middle East.

Labaki hoped to portray Lebanese women as an example of liberation and independence for other nations in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Lebanese women, according to Labaki, have been portrayed wrongly for quite some time. When she started directing video clips, she wanted to portray the Lebanese woman as a strong human being, with feelings, sensuality, and character – not at all in a vulgar manner.

"Lebanese women are really doing what they want in their lives," says Labaki. "But at the same time, there is this struggle with their traditions, their families, their religions and backgrounds. We are at a transitional phase leading us to a much more relaxed way of living. I think we should take advantage of this and live it through and enjoy it, instead of abusing it the way we do with everything in excess."

For now, however, "we are stuck in between two worlds," suggests Labaki. She describes herself as someone who, because she works in the media, is free to do whatever she wants and is an example of freedom and emancipation. And yet, she is also stuck in between these two worlds.

"I always have a strong feeling of guilt. I don't want to disappoint anyone. I want to be an example of this woman that is perfect for her family, perfect for her husband, perfect for her children." It was this understanding of those two polarities inside the Lebanese women that eventually led to portraying them through this film.

In the meantime, Labaki uses the frustrations she encounters in her work. "There's always a sense of rebellion that I think is motivating you everyday. It is not bad to be in a place where you think nothing is working and you want to change the world. It makes you do things. I create a world where I want things to happen a certain way."

Commenting on her experience in the film itself, Labaki said, "acting in the film was great fun. But more importantly it helped me live the character without any worry of being judged. I was protected by the fact that I was 'acting,' so no one could say anything about me or what I am doing."

She adds that acting allows her to move out of the routine. "To experience what it's like to be another person is amazing... in fact, it helps me direct better when am on set," she says, "[but] in the meantime, I am going to take some time off acting and I'm directing to really absorb what just happened in Cannes," she adds. "But of course I have big plans for the future, new ideas and new projects, just need sometime to enjoy the success." ●

