

كفرناحوم

C A P H A R N A Ü M



OFFICIAL SELECTION
COMPETITION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

A FILM BY NADINE LABAKI

Mooz Films presents

كَفَرْنَا حَوْم

C A P H A R N A Ü M

Directed by
NADINE LABAKI

Produced by **KHALED MOUZANAR**

123 min

Lebanon – 2018 – 2.66 – 5.1

Photos and press kit can be downloaded from
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Synopsis

نموذج ملخص

INT. COURTROOM

ZAIN, a 12-year-old boy, faces THE JUDGE.

THE JUDGE: Why are you suing your own parents?

ZAIN: For giving me life.

Interview with Nadine Labaki

لقاء مع المخرجة نادين لبكي

Why did you choose to call your film *Capharnaüm*?

The title imposed itself without my really being aware of it. When I started thinking about this film, my husband Khaled suggested that I write all the themes I wanted to talk about, all my obsessions at that time, on a whiteboard in the middle of our sitting room. It's how I usually proceed with the ideas I want to develop. Looking back at the board some time later, I told Khaled: In fact, all these topics make a real "capharnaüm". That's what this film will be: (a) capharnaüm.



And what were the first themes you wrote on that board?

I always feel the need to question the pre-established system and its contradictions through my films, even to imagine alternative systems.

At the start of *Capharnaüm*, the themes were: illegal immigrants, mistreated children, immigrant workers, the notion of borders and their absurdity, the fact that we need a piece of paper to prove our existence, which could be invalid if necessary, racism, fear of the other, indifference to the Convention of Children's Rights...

You chose however to centre the film on the theme of childhood...

The idea of building the film around the question of mistreated childhood was born in parallel to this brainstorming. It followed a heartrending moment that happened right around the time I was working on these ideas. Coming home from a party at around 1 a.m., I stopped at a traffic light and saw, just below my window, a child half-asleep in the arms of his mother, who was sitting on the tarmac, begging. What hit me hardest was the fact that this two-year-old wasn't crying; he seemed to want nothing more than to sleep. The image of his eyes closing wouldn't leave me; when I got home I had to do something with it. I drew a child's face yelling into adult faces as if blaming them for bringing him into a world that deprived him of all

his rights. From there, the idea for *Capharnaüm* started to grow, taking childhood as its starting point because, obviously, this is the phase that shapes the rest of our lives.

So what is the subject of your film?

Capharnaüm recounts the journey of 12-year-old Zain, who decides to sue his parents for having brought him into this world when they can't raise him properly, even if only to give him love. The fight of this mistreated boy, whose parents have not lived up to their task, resonates like the scream of all those who are neglected by our system. A universal accusation seen through candid eyes...

What "lever for action" does *Capharnaüm*, and your cinema overall, represent?

I see cinema first as a means to question – and to question myself about – the current system, by presenting my point of view of the world in which I'm evolving. Even if through my films, *Capharnaüm* in particular, I portray a disturbing and raw reality, I am profoundly idealistic in as much as I believe in the power of cinema. I'm convinced that films can, if not change things, at least help to open up a debate, or make people think. In *Capharnaüm*, instead of lamenting the fate of this child I saw on the street and feeling even more powerless than I am already, I chose to use my profession as a weapon, hoping to succeed in having an impact on the child's

life, if only by helping people to become aware of the situation. The trigger was my need to shine a raw spotlight on the hidden face of Beirut (and most large cities), to infiltrate the everyday lives of those for whom destitution is like a fate they can't escape.

All the actors are people whose lives are very similar to those of the characters of the film. Why did you make this choice?

Yes, Zain's real life is similar (in several respects) to that of his character. The same goes for Rahil, a person without papers. For the character of Zain's mother, I was inspired by a woman I met who had had 16 children, living in the same conditions as in the film. Six of her children had died; others were in orphanages because she couldn't care of them.

The woman who played Kawthar did in reality feed her children sugar and ice cubes. In this casting where even the judge is a judge in real life, I was the only "wrong note". That's why I wanted my part to be minimal.

The word "play" used for acting has always been a problem for me, and especially so in the case of *Capharnaïm*, where absolute sincerity was key. I owed this to all those for whom the film serves as a banner for their cause. It was crucial that the actors knew the conditions we were showing, to give them a legitimacy when speaking of their cause. Anyway, I think it would have been impossible for actors to portray people with such heavy baggage, who are living in a hell. In fact I wanted my film

to get under the skin of my characters rather than the other way around. Street casting was an obvious choice, and as if by magic, because I am convinced that some force protected our film, it all fell into place. As I wrote my characters, they emerged on the street and the casting director found them. I just had to ask them to be themselves because their own truth was sufficient, and I was fascinated, almost in love with who they are, the way they talk, react and move. I am happy because it was also and above all a way to offer them the film as a place to express themselves, a space in which they were able to expose their suffering.

Beyond Zain's accusation, the motor of the story recounts the initiatory journey of a boy without papers...

Zain has no documents and so, in the legal sense, he doesn't exist. His case is symptomatic of a problem raised throughout the film – the legitimacy of a human being. Throughout my research I encountered so many similar cases of children born undocumented because their parents couldn't afford to register their births, who ended up invisible to the eyes of the law and society. Since they are undocumented, many end up dead, often from neglect, malnourishment or simply because they have no access to hospital treatment. They die without anyone noticing, since they don't exist. They all say – and my research is there to prove it – that they are not happy to have been born.

Filming began soon after you had given birth to your second daughter...

My daughter Mayroon is very close in age to Yonas; my milk came in at the same time as Rahil's in the movie. This double experience, lived through on set and in my private life, when I had to juggle between the two, has certainly heightened my relationship with the film and with this overwhelming adventure. Even if I had to go home to breastfeed in between shots, even if I hardly slept, an inexplicable force inhabited me throughout the shoot... It was incredible.

Rahil is Ethiopian – was this a deliberate choice?

Unconsciously, I wanted the heroine of this film to be a woman of colour. In Lebanon, so many girls like Rahil leave their families, their own children, to work for other families where they become invisible women, forced to cut themselves off from any emotion, from the right to love. They're often the victims of racism or ill-treatment by employers who don't view them as they do their other employees, for the simple reason that they are women of colour. They are not allowed to love or have children... Here again, the scene at the lawyer's (where Harout has to pretend to separate from Rahil in favour of a Filipino employee who will bring more 'prestige' to the family) embodies the incongruity of a system that not only considers these women as property but also categorizes them. My desire was therefore to celebrate these women as they deserve to be celebrated.

What were the similarities between the film and what took place in real life?

There were numerous resonances, which made this adventure quite magical. First of all, the day after we shot the scene where Rahil is arrested in the cybercafé, she was arrested for real, for not having any papers. It was hard to believe. When she starts crying as she is being thrown into prison in the film, her tears are real, as she had lived through that very experience. And it was the same thing for Yonas, whose real parents were arrested during the shoot. The young girl who plays him (her name is Treasure) had to live with the casting director for three weeks. All these moments, where fiction and reality conjoined, without doubt contributed to the film's truth.

The film also addresses the question of migrants. Was this important?

In the film, the topic is broached through the character of Maysoun. It was important to me to talk about this through the children who fantasize about these voyages about which they know nothing – these children who are thrown into adulthood, into hard and brutal lives, against their will.

Do you consider this film as a documentary?

Capharnaüm is a fiction, all the elements of which I have lived and witnessed while I was researching. Nothing is fantasy or imagined; on the contrary, all you

see is the result of my visits to impoverished areas, detention centres and juvenile prisons, which I visited alone, hidden behind sunglasses and a cap. This film demanded three years of research, as I needed to be able to master my subject, to see everything with a naked eye, in lieu of having lived it. I realised while doing this that I was tackling a complex and sensitive cause, one that touched me all the more since it was foreign to me. I realised that I needed to merge with the reality of these human beings, to immerse myself in their stories, their anger, their frustration, so I could best convey it through the film. I had to believe in the story before I could tell it. The shoot took place in impoverished parts of town, between walls that have witnessed identical tragedies, with a minimum of sets, and actors who were asked simply to be themselves.

Their experience was directed so it could serve the work. And this is also why the shoot lasted 6 months and we ended up with over 520 hours of rushes.

Nonetheless, the notion of a child suing his parents seems unrealistic...

The fact that Zain sues his parents represents a symbolic gesture in the name of all the children who, having not chosen to be born, should be able to demand from their parents a minimum of rights, at least the right to be loved. I wanted the trial to be credible, through the intervention of television cameras and different media who help Zain to go to court.

It's in the courtroom that all the characters of the film meet.

The idea of the court was necessary to give authenticity to the defence of a whole community of people. This hearing allows their voices – oppressed and ignored – finally to be heard. For that matter, when Zain's mother defends herself to the judge, I asked her to do what she would if she had to defend her own cause in real life to a lawyer. She expressed herself as Kawthar, allowing her to voice what has been forbidden her throughout her life. The tribunal is also there to confront us with our failure, our incapacity to act in the face of the poverty and destitution into which the world is falling.

Isn't this also a way to force us to judge?

On the contrary. The court exists to force us to see and hear different points of view, different opinions. We blame the parents, then we forgive them.

This comes from my own experience. When faced with mothers who neglected the rights of their children, I caught myself judging them. But the more I heard their stories, the hell they lived through, the clumsiness and ignorance that often led them to commit great injustices towards the flesh of their flesh, it was a slap in the face. The idea is that you say to yourself, just as I did: "How could I allow myself to hate or judge these people about whose experience, whose everyday reality, I know nothing?"

Do you consider *Capharnaüm* to be a Lebanese film?

In terms of its production and location, absolutely. The story however, is the story of all those who have no access to elementary rights, education, health, and love too. This dark world in which the characters move, is symptomatic of an era, and the fate of every big city in the world.

It seems that this film marks a shift in your career, a move away from your previous work, where a certain optimism seemed to prevail...

Zain succeeds in obtaining his documents by the end of the film, Rahil reestablishes contact with her son... For the two of them, in real life as well, we've managed to legalise their situation in Lebanon. For once, I didn't want the happy ending to be confined to the screen and I hope it will happen in real life through the debate the film can open. *Capharnaüm* has allowed the actors an outlet, a space where they are allowed to cry out their suffering and be listened to. Just that is a victory.

Ideally, what ambitions do you have for *Capharnaüm* ?

The ultimate dream would be to push those in charge to establish a bill that would set up the basis of a genuine structure to protect ill-treated and neglected children. To give back to these children, who are nothing but God's will or the fruit of a satisfied sexual urge, some kind of sanctity.

Nadine Labaki Biography

سيرة ذاتية

Filmography

(2014) *Rio, I Love You*
Segment "O Milagre"

(2011) *Et maintenant on va où ?*
(*Where Do We Go Now?*)

(2007) *Caramel*

Nadine Labaki was born in Lebanon, and grew up during the years of civil war, obtaining a degree in Audiovisual Studies in 1997 from Beirut's Saint-Joseph University. After graduation, she immediately moved into directing television commercials and music videos for popular artists in the region, garnering several awards.

In 2005, Nadine participated in the Cannes Film Festival Residence to write *Caramel*, her first feature film set in Beirut. She directed and took a lead role in the film, which premiered at Cannes' Directors' Fortnight in 2007 and won the Youth Jury Award, as well as the Audience Award at San Sebastian Film Festival. *Caramel* was released theatrically in over 60 countries. In 2008, she received the Insignia of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters from the French Ministry of Culture.

Nadine's second feature, *Where Do We Go Now?*, which she again wrote, directed and starred in, also premiered at Cannes in 2011 in the 'Un Certain Regard' category, and won a Special Mention from the Ecumenical Jury. It went on to win the Cadillac People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, and the Audience Award at San Sebastian Film Festival, before screening at Sundance in 2012. *Where Do We Go Now?* was nominated for Best Foreign Film by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards and is Lebanon's highest-grossing Arabic film to date.

In 2014 Nadine directed *Rio, I Love You*, one of the segments of the *Cities of Love* anthology film which she directed, co-wrote and starred in, opposite Harvey Keitel.

As an actor, she starred in *Mea Culpa* for French director Fred Cavayé, *La rançon de la gloire* for French director Xavier Beauvois, *Stray Bullet* for Lebanese director Georges Hachem and *Rock the Casbah* for Moroccan director Laïla Marrakchi.

Interview with Khaled Mouzanar

لقاء مع المنتج خالد مزنر

Is this the first time you have produced a feature film with Nadine?

When I began to understand which way Nadine was going with *Capharnaüm*, her obsession with truth and her desire to push realism to its limits while exploring a social and human problem, it became clear to me that a classic production wouldn't be appropriate. This is how I came to produce the film, with a view to total freedom. The idea was to create a purely Lebanese film, pretty much free of any creative or time constraints, through which Nadine could express herself as she desired, at the crossroads of documentary and fiction. *Capharnaüm* is also the proof that we make a team and can do everything together.



You've described the making of the film as a sort of "home birth". Can you talk a little about that?

Our professional and private lives overlapped completely during this whole period. *Capharnaüm* practically became a family epic, all the more so since its theme echoed the birth of our daughter shortly before we started filming. The two of us lived this film together, as you would an actual birth, with all the steps that implies: from the embryonic stage of the idea to the materialisation of images on the screen and later a kind of baby blues! We are physically connected to *Capharnaüm*, because we conceived it and made it in absolute freedom. Everything got going between our living room and my studio, before we set up an office just below our house. Even the actors, whose lives off camera resemble those of their characters in the film, became part of our day-to-day living. It's a barely-tamed film, one that emerged from our guts, and in which our DNA is deeply embedded.

The production itself was unusual.

Because of the complete freedom we allowed ourselves, *Capharnaüm* was an organisational nightmare on every level. The production breaks with all the usual rules. From the reading of the screenplay to post-production, music and mix, everything was done by us, at home. Neither was the financing put together conventionally. At the start I threw myself into this adventure with hardly any money, and apart from me, no one believed in the project. They

told me it was a crazy poker game. The risks were colossal but I believed in it profoundly. *Capharnaüm* was a truly reckless project; I reached financial lows that I forbade myself from sharing with Nadine, for fear of destabilizing her when it came to the shoot. Finally, funds were injected through an exceptional financial set-up, thanks to both the private sector and the Central Bank of Lebanon.

How did Nadine's move to a more documentary style of film affect the music you produced?

I asked myself incessantly what kind of music could correspond with all these characters' lives and all they have to say? What sound would fit the smell of drains, the poverty, the rawness of the subject? I inclined towards a less melodic score than usual. The idea was to accentuate the Mad Max side of things – almost mythological (despite all that reality) – that characterises the landscape of the film, and that I see as an allegory of the future of all large cities. This was achieved using dissonant choral melodies that seem to disappear before they can be grasped, as well as synth-based electronic sonorities. For that matter, one of the tracks, called *The Eye of God*, accompanies a shot of this city, more or less cursed, that seems doomed to this punishment: poverty without hope. What I absolutely didn't want was to underline or highlight emotions that were already sufficiently intense, but on the contrary, to strip back the scenes and establish a disturbing atmosphere for the audience, which is in some way brought face to face with its culpability for having

been here and done nothing. The aim of the film is to shake up and to move the audience.

Could we have a few words about this adventure, experienced both solo and as one half of a duo?

The adventure that is *Capharnaüm* was lived in two parts. First – solo – in my role as a composer, certainly, and above all as a producer, confronting difficulty after difficulty, pretty much all of them financial. Then, as half of a duo, there was the dream of making this film, followed by the struggle to give it life, with an insistence on reality that constrained us to shoot on digital.

This allowed us to film over 520 hours of rushes and to capture many moments of pure reality, bringing *Capharnaüm* closer to the stories it tells. Even the characters became part of our everyday life, bringing problems we had to deal with as if they were our own: helping Zain and Rahil get their documents, for example. In human terms, on top of the fabulous community that formed itself around the film, it was an adventure from which we will struggle to recover.



ZAIN AL RAFEEA

as *Zain*

زين الرفيع

He was born on October 10, 2004, in the Eastern Mliha, Daraa, Syria, the second son of Ali Al Rafeea and Nour Al Hoda Al Saleh. Zain has been deprived of his right to education since the Daraa clashes in 2012. That year, as the situation became unbearable for parents with four children (the eldest being eight at the time), the family packed up its life and headed to Lebanon.

In Beirut, Zain couldn't adapt to the educational system, but instead has received inconsistent home-tutoring. Since the age of ten, he has worked in a number of temporary jobs, such as supermarket deliveries. His real passion is raising pigeons, and his dream is to open a pigeon shop.

In 2016, he was noticed among a group of kids in his Beirut neighborhood by *Capharnaüm's* casting director, who immediately saw in him the soft-sharp character, with a mix of wit and heart-breaking charisma, the 'gem' director Nadine Labaki was looking for.

YORDANOS SHIFERAW

as *Rahil*

يوردانوس شيفراو

Yordanos Shiferaw was born in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, sometime between the late 80s and the early 90s. As a child, she spent time in a refugee camp in Debre Zeyit, Ethiopia, after her mother died on the long and arduous journey made on foot. She lived with her father briefly before he died of an old war injury.

In the years that followed, she was separated from her four sisters and found herself constantly displaced. She did not receive an education and instead, was forced very early into living an adult life, working as a street shoeshine and human parking meter when she was homeless.

Around the age of 20, she found two of her sisters working as live-in maids in Beirut. She too was employed as a maid, until she fled her employer and continued to live and work illegally in the country.

In 2016, she was approached by *Capharnaüm's* casting director, to whom she recounted her struggles, as well as her hopes of helping children with no guardians.

Like her character, Yordanos was arrested as an illegal immigrant in December 2016, during the shoot, and detained, before being released and later sponsored by Nadine Labaki.





BOLUWATIFE TREASURE BANKOLE

as Yonas

تريجر بنقوله

In 2014, in Beirut, Treasure's father, Oluyemi Damilola Bankole from Ikeji-Arakeji in Nigeria, met her mother, Rosemary Karanjo from Komarock in Kenya.

Treasure was born on November 21, 2015 at Abou Jaoude Hospital, Jall Ed Dib, Mount-Lebanon.

Both parents had arrived in Lebanon on

cleaning contracts, however her father ended up DJing on the underground African scene, while her mother stayed at home to take care of their daughter. The family moved constantly, fleeing the racism they encountered.

In 2015, they moved to Nabaa, Beirut, where Treasure was discovered by *Capharnaüm's* casting director in 2016.

In late 2016, during the shoot, Treasure's parents were arrested at the same time the character Yonas, at only 1 year of age, lost his mother in the film. The film crew stepped up, approaching General Security to bail them out and allow them time to leave the country safely.

The family was finally deported on March 6, 2018. Treasure and her mother went back to Kenya, and remain separated from her father, who returned to Nigeria. They live in hope that they will one day be reunited when circumstances allow.

KAWTHAR AL HADDAD

as **Souad**

كوثر الحداد

Born in 1972, in Wadi Khaled, Tripoli, Lebanon, she moved with her parents and six siblings to Kuwait where her father died in 1975.

The family returned to Beirut in 1990 during the invasion of Kuwait. Kawthar holds a 2nd grade Lebanese ID and is treated as a 2nd grade citizen.

Her real passion was to study and become a doctor. Unfortunately, she dropped out of school to help her mother at home.

In 1999, she married Yasser Issa who, just like her, has not been granted full identification documents. Kawthar has since been struggling to register her two sons, Hussein and Mohamad, officially in order to secure proper access to education, healthcare, and immunization.

Kawthar has worked as a housekeeper, among other low-income jobs, in order to be able to provide for her family.

In 2016, *Capharnaüm's* casting director found her while she was taking care of her brother's orphaned children in Wata el Msaytbeh, Beirut.





FADI KAMEL YOUSSEF

as *Selim*

فادي كامل يوسف

Fadi Kamel Youssef was born on March 21, 1971 in Tareeq El Jdide, Beirut, Lebanon.

His parents' divorce left him troubled and rootless throughout his teenage years. He dropped out of Al Makassed school in the 5th grade.

In 1994, his leg was injured in a motorcycle accident and he attempted suicide after

receiving the hospital bill, which he could not cover.

Fadi has had many jobs since the age of 11, including taxi driver for 12 years and, most recently, café owner in Tareeq El Jdide, where he resides.

"I am an ambassador of the poor. I often slept on rooftops, and on the rocks in Ramlet El Bayda," he recalled during his casting interview.

During the war of 2006, Fadi married Hayat and in 2014 they had their first baby, Habiba.

In the summer of 2017, after the film shoot was completed, Fadi was inspired to change his lifestyle and attended rehab at Oum El Nour Center.

HAITA (AKA CEDRA) IZAM

as *Sahar*

سیدرا عزام

She was born around 2004, as her father recalls, in Al-Ashrafia, Aleppo, Syria.

She came to Lebanon in 2012 and settled in Ouzai Beirut with her parents and four siblings. In 2014, her older sister Sossi

drowned in the sea. In 2016, her mother gave birth to a baby girl whom the parents named Sossi.

Cedra, who used to attend school in Syria, found a different destiny in Beirut. In 2014, her father, who is in the country illegally, asked her to help provide for the family and she found herself selling chewing gum on the streets of Beirut.

In 2016, she was spotted by *Capharnaüm's* casting director.





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ALAA CHOUCHNIEH

as *Aspro*

علاء ششنية

Born on September 17, 1979, in Abu Dhabi, UAE, Alaa grew up in Yemen until he moved to Beirut during the Yemeni war of 1990. He holds dual Palestinian/Lebanese nationality.

In Lebanon, he repeated his classes at the UNRWA school until the 4th grade when

his parents removed him due to their restricted economic situation.

He was involved with a political party in which he worked in personal protection until he was sold out by its commanders, arrested and imprisoned for five years.

“I have more arrest warrants than a tree has leaves,” he told *Capharnaüm*'s casting director when they met in 2016.

In 2018, Alaa opened a food and beverage kiosk in Ard Jalloul, Beirut.

Cast

الممثلين

ZAIN AL RAFEEA

Zain

YORDANOS SHIFERAW

Rahil

BOLUWATIFE TREASURE BANKOLE

Yonas

KAWTHAR AL HADDAD

Souad

FADI KAMEL YOUSSEF

Selim

CEDRA IZAM

Sahar

ALAA CHOUCNIEH

Aspro

NADINE LABAKI

Nadine

Crew

الفريق التقني

DIRECTED BY

Nadine Labaki

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IN COLLABORATION WITH WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF

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Khaled Mouzanar

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PRODUCTION

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH

Cedrus Invest Bank SAL

WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH

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