



Living it up – the young cast of *Caramel* at play

Caramel – A Lebanon you don't see in the news

“As a film producer, I love going off the beaten track. It’s a breath of fresh air each time,” says *Caramel*'s French producer, Anne Marie Toussaint.

By now, Anne Marie has had quite a track record in off-the-beaten-track ventures into films that bring original voices from outside the mainstream to a wide audience. In 2002, she produced the comedy drama *Respiro*. Made on a shoestring with a cast of unknown actors and a second time director, the film went on to win major awards, including the Grand Prize of the Critics' Week at the Cannes Film Festival.

The making of *Caramel*, an ensemble comedy drama about a group of young female friends in contemporary Beirut, was in a different order of risk. “I took the decision to start shooting the film in Lebanon without any guarantee we would be able to finish it; we were still missing a third of the budget.” As it turns out, the gamble paid off. On viewing the stunning rushes, French broadcasters and sales agent jumped in at the end of the shoot, allowing Anne Marie and her first time director Nadine Labaki, to complete post-production in Paris.



Director and star Nadine Labaki (left)

Lebanese-born Nadine had never directed a feature before, let alone scripted one. “I was over in Beirut in 2003 and was struck by the quality of her work as a music video director. It was vibrant, visually sharp and she seemed to have a particular eye for getting the best performances out of women,” says Anne Marie. “She felt hidebound in Lebanon and wanted to expand her talent so I encouraged her to write a screenplay.” Under Anne Marie’s coaching, Nadine applied to the Résidence du Festival de Cannes. The Résidence is an actual place – a villa in the centre of Paris - as well as an immersive six months’ experience for fledgling script writers and *cinéastes* needing time off from real life to write. Nadine was selected amongst hundreds of applicants from throughout the world to be one of the Résidence’s six room mates.

In March 2005, Nadine dropped off the completed first draft of *Caramel* at Anne Marie’s Les Films des Tournelles in central Paris. “I liked it immediately. It was vivid, funny poignant and it was about people you hardly ever see on our screens, young Arab women struggling to make sense of opportunities and conflicts in a culture in transition.”

From that point on, the two women went through what Anne Marie describes evocatively as a gruelling “assault course” to get the film financed. This was a low-budget film by European standards but a tall order for the Lebanese, whose film industry is still at a formative stage. Yet remarkably, the film was able to start production largely thanks to early financial commitments by Arab film financiers.

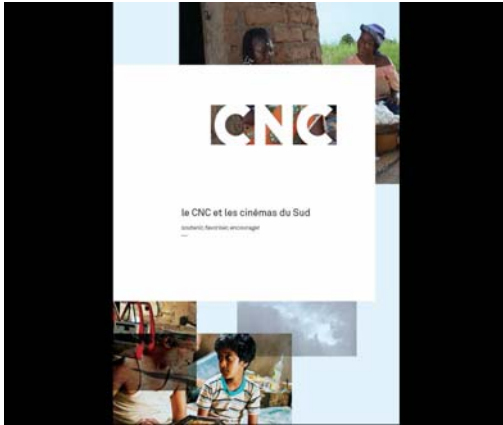
In Beirut, film distributor Sabban Media put up a small advance against cinema and video rights across the Arab world. ART, a market leader amongst the Arab world’s numerous pay television platforms, bought broadcast rights for its pan-Arab footprint.

Also supporting the project were two public funds based in France and dedicated to films from the developing world, the Fond Sud and the Agence de la Francophonie. Fond Sud, co-managed by the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC) and the French Foreign Ministry, has been operating since 1984. It puts small amounts into films but with the majority of the projects coming in under €1.5 million, the money goes a long way. “Between Fond Sud and the Francophonie agency, we were pledged over 10% of our budget at an early stage, which was very helpful in getting us going.” When Anne Marie and Nadine returned to Paris from Beirut after finishing production, senior international sales company Roissy Films helped reduce the budget gap by agreeing to handle world sales against an advance. Bac Films, an experienced distributor added an advance on cinema and DVD in France. The budget was fully covered after the Franco-German public broadcaster, a channel dedicated chiefly to arts and culture, put completion money against the right to broadcast the film on their service.

“Production is never where the real challenge lies,” Anne Marie reflects. “The real test is in distribution and access to the market. A film like *Caramel* needs a leg up, something that will help it stand out in the crowd.” In that respect, the film got exactly what it deserved: selected for the Cannes Film Festival’s prestigious Quinzaine des Réalisateurs, it was received to critical acclaim in Cannes and a tsunami of press attention. Politics were a factor too; *Caramel* finished shooting in Beirut on 3 July 2006. On 12 July, the Israeli army launched its bombing campaign and Lebanon crashed back into the grimly repetitive nightmare of war.

“*Caramel* did well in Lebanon,” says Anne Marie. “The impact was much greater than the 130,000 admissions, itself a very good result for a country with so few cinemas. It was

about affirming who they were to the rest of the world; complex, multi-dimensional human beings, not hapless victims or cartoon comic villains. Cinema can do this sometimes. It can open us up to others by looking for what we all have in common. These are the films I want to make.”



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