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## Twenty-four hours in the life of Beirut

### 'A Perfect Day' tells a Lebanese story in an international vernacular

By Jim Quilty

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DUBAI: A woman's hand caresses an expanse of youthful flesh, a man's torso rising and falling in sleep. It isn't really necessary, she cajoles him, to keep his appointment that day. It's a mother's touch, not a lover's, and as we discover her purpose is not in the least amorous. So begins "A Perfect Day," the latest film by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, writer-directors and Beirut's resident artists of latency. The FIPRESCI (Critics Guild) Prize-winner at the 2005 Locarno Film Festival, this laconic study of the Lebanese condition had its Gulf premier at the Dubai Film Festival Tuesday evening.

The story hinges on a son and mother. Malek (Ziad Saad) is a lower-level manager with a construction company. A lethargic 20-something, his major concern seems to be his beautiful girlfriend Zeina (Alexandra Kahwagi), who, for reasons unknown to us, has recently split with him.

Malek's mother Claudia (Julia Kassar) is coping with her own issues. Her husband disappeared without a trace 15 years earlier and she's been living in limbo ever since. She's decided, with great sadness, to begin proceedings to render him legally dead. The appointment she tries to convince the sleeping Malek to postpone is with a lawyer.

The film follows Malek and Claudia as, separately and together, they go through the motions of the next 24 hours.

Malek spends much of that day in the car. Driving to work, he gets stuck in traffic and notices Zeina's car in front of him. He calls her on his mobile but, recognizing at the number, she refuses to answer. He sends her an SMS text message informing her that he's behind her. She turns around, looks at him despairingly, then slouches back into her seat, invisible.

Claudia takes the day off work and spends much of it alone, Malek refusing to stay home with her. When they do spend some time in the same room, she tries to unpack her ambivalence about letting go of her husband, saying that even after 15 years of absence she still sees him. Malek falls asleep.

He does this a lot. Malek suffers a peculiar sleep disorder that looks at times like narcolepsy, at times something more dire. Like a sedated version of River Phoenix's character in "My Own Private Idaho," Malek falls asleep when confronted with an uncomfortable situations - Claudia's grieving, Zeina's rejection. When he is asleep, Malek's breathing becomes so shallow it looks as though it may cease altogether.

"A Perfect Day" is strongly evocative of contemporary Beirut. It's not just the time spent in (often becalmed) traffic and on mobile telephones (often ignored), nor the locations in that city's seaside Corniche and the clubbing district of Monnot Street. The film successfully evokes Beirut because it captures the stasis at the heart of the city's manic and repetitive rhythm.

There are the Marlboros. Smokes are cheap in Beirut and offhand scabbing frequent. Malek's cigarette intake is enough to make audiences light-headed and most of Beirut's male population - from the two old fellows playing tawleh outside his family flat to the lawyer they've hired to "kill" his father - are junkies to his largesse with Marlboro reds. It's an effective and only somewhat strained running gag.

It isn't the only humor in the film and, though the it's obviously not a comedy, "Perfect Day" benefits from not being unremittingly grim. One amusing set piece involves a hapless Corniche denizen (Rabih Mroue) who's bored with the ringtone of his mobile but doesn't know how to change it. Noticing that Malek has the same handset as him, he asks for help.

Malek runs through the repertoire of tunes on the handset, each title evocative of lost or unrequited love. "Can you give it a tune from [Lebanese pop star] Haifa [Wehbe]?" Corniche man asks hopefully.

"No," Malek replies.

Then his phone rings. "What's that [ringtone]?" asks Corniche man.

"Oops," Malek replies. "It's nice, 'Oops.' Give me 'Oops.'"

Though it's basically a story of Beirut's long-suffering middle class, Hadjithomas and Joreige's narrative is an inclusive one. "The missing" are 17,000 strong in that country and families of all classes and confessions have had members disappear. The listlessness of Lebanon's war children is neither classist nor sectarian.

Following an unexpected reprise of the film's opening sequence, for instance, Zeina and Malek abruptly find themselves passionately entangled at a nightclub. Unable to go to each other's houses, they decide to retreat to a friend's place. Before they can consummate their re-unification, though, Zeina turns surly and demands to be let out of the car.

"I don't want to go through this again," she says.

You may speculate from this that there's a sectarian subtext beneath their break-up or, as is equally common in Lebanon, an economic one. Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter whether you have this quiver of incidental knowledge or not. Human behavior is seldom packaged in easy explanations, in Lebanon or anywhere else.

"Perfect Day" is rich in unanswered evocations and narrative blind alleys and the plot moves at a pace that's a deliberate counterpoise to the bustle of the city.

This won't appeal to commercial film aficionados.

The film is, for all of this, mercifully spare in both plotting and acting. It doesn't labor to portray the myriad badges of self-representation that reflect the segmented reality of Lebanon's post-war society. Familiar as it'll be to Lebanese the world over, this story demands no knowledge of Lebanon's murky politics and history from its audience.

The unspoken horrors that Lebanese live beside on a day-to-day basis may be arcane.

A Beirutite may find himself living alienated within his own skin, but alienation itself is global currency.

*Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's "A Perfect Day" is tentatively scheduled for general release in April 2006.*

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