



Left: Khalil Joreige, actor Ziad Saad and Joana Hadjithomas on the set of "A Perfect Day" with the newspapers that provide a key plot twist. Right: Joreige and Hadjithomas in Paris

Photo by Jessica Forde

INTERVIEW

Film-goers, choose your own meanings

Makers of 'A Perfect Day' want viewers to make up their minds for themselves

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BEIRUT: "Why does Zeina leave Malek?" Joana Hadjithomas asks with a smile and a sidelong glance.

"Why all the cigarettes? Why the gun?" Khalil Joreige asks with something closer to a grimace.

Hadjithomas and Joreige are recounting the most common questions they've been asked during a year-long, worldwide tour with "A Perfect Day," their second feature film, which finally opened locally on Thursday.

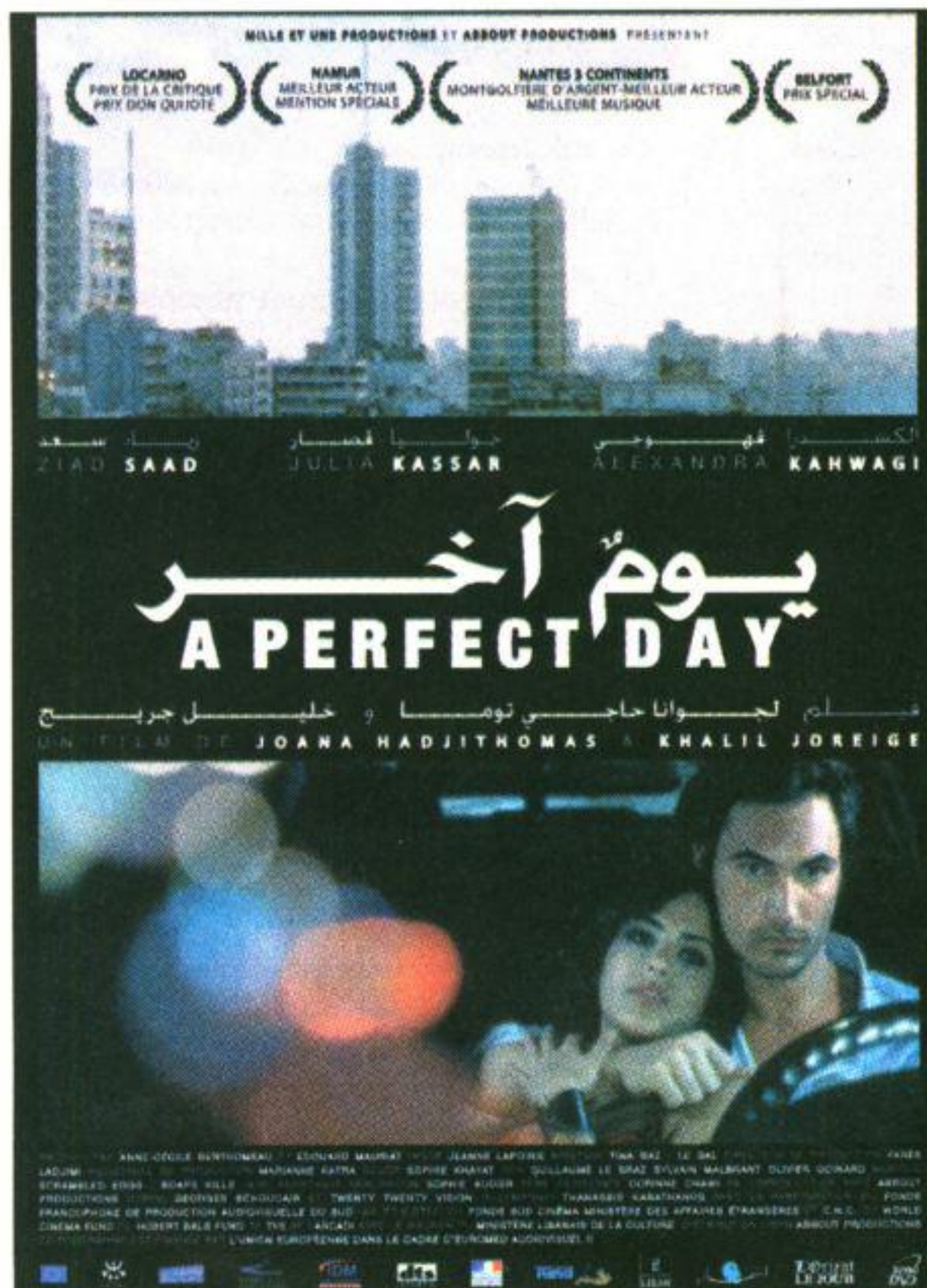
Sitting in an old-school coffee house in Beirut, Hadjithomas and Joreige are back in town for advance screenings of the film. The surrounding noise is a few notches too high. Next to a half-drained glass of *jellab*, there are at least twice as many mobile phones on the table as would be expected between two people.

As is probably always the case with film premieres, there are problems, ranging from minor and logistical to major and distressing. Hadjithomas and Joreige periodically clutch ringing phones, utter a few terse words and then palm the phones off to one another.

These last-minute details are only compounding the fact that the filmmakers are exhausted, having taken the film to more than 30 festivals in more than 20 cities so far, and having done countless interviews about the story, which stems from the sensitivity of personal experience (Joreige's uncle was one of the 17,000 people who disappeared during Lebanon's most recent Civil War, an absence that occupies the core of the film).

"They're not really questions," says Joreige, returning to the list of regular inquiries.

"It's more that people would like to have the keys to open up different dimensions of the film," he explains.



Although at this point it is probably annoying to the directors, "A Perfect Day" is particularly well suited to such requests. The film is intensely atmospheric, deliberately slow-paced and leaves numerous gaps in the narrative for viewers to fill in for themselves. "You have to choose the meanings," says Joreige. "They are floating."

"A Perfect Day" tells the spare story of a day in the lives of Claudia, a woman who is wrestling with the decision to have her husband declared legally dead (some 15 years after his disappearance), and Malek, her listless and lackadaisical son who is suffering from a sleep disorder and struggling to get back together with his ex-girlfriend, Zeina.

As much a portrait of a place and time (and an attempt to capture its lurching pace) as it is a story about an ensemble of characters, the film is spiked throughout with symbolic details, formal innovations and intentional red herrings.

It is in no way arbitrary, for example, that Malek works as a contractor who spends his days visiting various construction projects throughout Beirut (at one point a body is discovered on a work site in Chiyya, which rankles Malek's nerves until he learns that the corpse dates back to before the Civil War).

"He's not an architect," Joreige says of Malek. "He's not even an engineer."

"This was important to put in," adds Hadjithomas. "There is so much construction in Beirut, yet the evidence doesn't come up, even though 17,000 people have disappeared."

Because Hadjithomas and Joreige work together as artists and filmmakers, "A Perfect Day" also smudges the fine line between the two disciplines. A number of scenes are purely vi-

sual – birds above the Corniche at dawn, the lights of Beirut abstracted as Malek tries to literally see through Zeina's eyes by wearing her contact lenses while driving, a move that makes it seem as if the film itself were tearing up, just as it injects terror into the plot, as Malek, bleary-eyed, nearly wrecks his car.

And then there are the false turns. After Malek takes Claudia to see a lawyer to process his father's papers, he goes to his old office to find evidence of the disappearance among a pile of old newspaper clippings and discovers, among his father's effects, a revolver.

From that point on, the film is heavy with premonitions of danger. What will Malek do with the gun? What will his mother do if she finds it in a not-so-great hiding place in his bedroom? What will happen if Zeina keeps rejecting him and he ends up a sulky, depressed young man – with a frustrating job and an overbearing mom in a hysterical city – who just happens to have a gun in his hands? The whole thing is a well-executed diversion on the part of the filmmakers, leading the plot one way as the film's more aesthetic and philosophical concerns lead another.

Making "A Perfect Day" was a long process, says Hadjithomas, even though the filming took place in Beirut over the course of just 30 days.

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"There were lots of scripts," she recalls. "We were searching for something closer to atmosphere. We wanted to film bodies. Cinema is about images and sound. It's not just about the story or about people talking. It was important for us to film a wall, the skin of someone."

"And latency is very important in the film," she adds, reviving a theme that runs throughout many of the installations and video works the pair have produced. "In the form of the film, the structure, the surface of the picture, even the way the actors are playing, there is always something missing."

"This is the most interesting part for us," Joreige interjects, "to find a way to dialogue between our artwork and our cinematic work."

"I'm not just a person who is digging into ideas and concepts that hurt and that must come out," explains Hadjithomas. "This is a very personal film that deals with our personal story. It's not only [about the pressures of being] the son, it's about [the pressures of being] the child. How can you get out of your family life and be an adult and make your own choices when you're always a disappointment? In a way it's a very traditional evolution but it is also always very cruel."

"This heaviness is not only on Malek," says Joreige. "It's also on Claudia. She's always trying to please her son, even when he's sleeping."

Which leads to Malek's narcolepsy. "We liked [this disorder] because it's not psychological at all. It's very common. And it's really linked to the problem of rhythm, agitation," says Joreige.

"We wanted to do something on sleeping, because this country is sleeping. When will it wake up?" asks Hadjithomas. "And we liked the idea of someone sleeping where he's not supposed to, on the Corniche, in B018, in his car. It's a cinematic question, too. Today films have to be fast."

"A Perfect Day," by contrast, moves slowly. It lingers on moments and details, sometimes to the point of utter exasperation.

"A lot of films are made so you don't feel time," Joreige says. "We wanted to figure out how to make films so you don't lose time but so you feel it and are disturbed by it. In the narration, you don't know what will happen. There is this tension. You are surprised. We take our time."

So what will they do now that the film has opened in Beirut? Hadjithomas and Joreige begin shooting their third feature in June. But until then, says Hadjithomas, plucking a phone off the table and dropping it into her bag, "We are going to finish this and rest."

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's "A Perfect Day" is playing in theaters throughout greater Beirut.