

Waking sleep

'A Perfect Day' is one of the most original films to come out of Lebanon in the last five years. **Ramsay Short** talks states of rhythm, latency and Beirut life with directors Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas

Impressionistic and nuanced, 'A Perfect Day' is the tale of a young man and his mother living the cyclical Lebanese experience over 24-hours in Beirut as they prepare to finally declare their long lost father dead. It is not an obvious movie to take European film festivals by storm.

But that is exactly what it did winning the FIPRESCI critics prize at the Locarno International Film Festival, the Silver Montgolfiere for best film at the Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes and best actor prize for its lead Ziad Saad at the Namur International Film Festival.

The husband and wife filmmaking duo of Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas are bursting to get this out when we meet at the old villa that is their home and office in Achrafieh. They are about to set off for the Tribeca Film Festival in New York where 'A Perfect Day' is screening in competition.

'You know it even played for a month in a theatre in the Champs Elysee in Paris', says Joreige excitedly, quite an achievement for a small, non-commercial film. They are right to be pleased. 'A Perfect Day' is the pair's second feature after 1999's relatively low key 'Around The Pink House' and it documents Joreige and Hadjithomas's continuing obsession with pace, rhythm and mood. 'It is a film about sensations, atmosphere, mind frames, wrong tracks, strong situations', Hadjithomas says. 'It is not a film about the war but about the present. We wanted to represent a situation in Beirut today and capture it in one day through characters in the city – especially the rhythm of an individual in a society where everything must move very fast'.

The film encapsulates this warped rhythm in clever ways. Malek (Ziad) suffers from nar-

colepsy (he falls asleep whenever he stops moving) and so is always tired and slow battling against the speed of modern living. It is an inspired parallel to capture the tiredness that effects the state of the nation and the inability to make real change. Meanwhile his mother Claudia (Julia Kassar) doesn't know if she's coming or going, haunted by fear of the past and an inability to accept the loss of her husband who was kidnapped 15 years earlier.

'We come from an artistic background. Representing the rhythm in these ways, through the set up and the way we are going to put these elements together, this is what interests us', says Hadjithomas.

And so everyone in the film feels off-tempo, unable to live at their own rhythm in a paradoxical city, and that allows the directors to inject some wonderfully lyrical scenes that resemble artistic installations – Malek puts his estranged girlfriend Zeina's contact lenses in his eyes while driving (to stay awake?) with the result that the lights of the city fade in and out in a skewed rainbow of colour.

'These different rhythms, and the state of latency of this city, where things are there but remain unclear,' says Joreige, 'are a major part of what we are trying to depict. But it is a composition that the audience will take for themselves.'

'Perhaps at the end of the film Malek wakes up, finds his ambition. Perhaps he is just scraping through. Perhaps it is just another

day', adds Hadjithomas.

Joreige and Hadjithomas skillfully denote the authenticity of people and life in the city using elements of documentary film making instead of recreating scenes (using an everyday traffic jam to film in, for example).

'We work in the cut. Reality is not reconstituted', they explain 'On the contrary, we decided to insert ourselves into reality, filming in public spaces in a documentary-like manner'.

And importantly the pair deal with that most important question in Lebanon – the conditioning of people since childhood of belonging to a certain community and the way that influences other people's perception of them – the question of what it means to be an individual.

'Our films try to show this reality and attempt to reflect on how to free ourselves from the weight of this community feeling without breaking up with our families and our society', says Joreige.

'A Perfect Day' is the story of a generation, ours, to which Malek belongs. Young people seeking intensity in life but who let themselves be carried along by daily life. Trapped between the guilt of a past that is difficult to assume and the anguish of an uncertain future in a politically unstable region, how can one live the present life, love, construct or find their places in society?'
How can they indeed.

'A Perfect Day' opens in Circuit Empire theatres on May 11.



Joreige and Hadjithomas on a perfect day