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SCREEN DAILY

The Lebanese Rocket Society

11 December, 2012 | By Mark Adams, chief film critic



Dirs/sr: Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige. Lebanon-France-Qatar. 2012. 95mins

This stranger-than-fiction documentary tells the fascinating story of the space programme run by Lebanon in the 1960s, where a rocket – named 'Cedar' - was being developed by students until the government-backed programme was scrapped due to Western pressure.

In the sure hands of directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige it is a breezy and accessible look into a scheme driven by good intentions and bold ideas rather than any sense of military superiority.

When civil war struck the country in the 1970s the scientists and researchers scattered around the world, but this fascinating documentary pieces together archival footage of manufacturing testing the device (which was never made into a weapon or sold on to other countries) along with recollections, amounting to an intriguing footnote in rocket development.

The film – which has screened at Toronto, CPH:DOX and Doha Tribeca Film Festivals – offers a fascinating delve into

history, and in the sure hands of directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige it is a breezy and accessible look into a scheme driven by good intentions and bold ideas rather than any sense of military superiority.

Led by Manoug Manougian – who now teaches at the University of South Florida, but who in the 1960s was a scientist teaching at the Armenian University in Beirut – the programme started with very little, with students developing their own formula for rocket fuel and experimenting with toy-size rockets. The army eventually built larger versions for the students, which meant that by the time the 1967 Israeli-Arab war was underway there were suspicions about the programme and its military potential.

The Lebanese government quietly drew a veil over the rocket project to the extent that it is barely remembered (despite launches in 1962-63 being commemorated on a special postage stamp) with this engaging documentary – narrated by the co-directors – engagingly bringing the past to life.

Production companies: About Productions, Mille et une Productions, Doha Film Institute

International sales: Urban Distribution, www.urbandistrib.com

Producers: Georges Schoucair, Edouard Mauriat

Cinematography: Heanne Lapoirie, Rachel Aoun

Editor: Tina Baz

Music: Dadim Mishlawi, Scrambled Eggs, Discipline

J'aime

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