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The Lebanese Rocket Society: Toronto Review

4:23 PM PDT 9/30/2012 by Deborah Young

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The Bottom Line

Lebanon's forgotten space program relives in a funky doc with ironic socio-historical-political commentary.

Venue

Toronto Film Festival

Writer-directors

Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige

Filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's docu centers on Lebanon's forgotten space program and the professor in Beirut who developed rockets with his students.

Who knew Lebanon had a space program years before Israel? *The Lebanese Rocket Society* tells it like it was, and it's a blast for the viewer with an interest in strange historical facts about the Middle East. A funky, easy-access doc with socio-political-asides, it comes from noted artist-filmmakers **Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige** (*I Want to See*), who seem to really enjoy investigating and divulging this piece of forgotten history about their country. It's amusing enough to jet into film clubs after its Toronto launch, though too much a speciality item to shoot for wide commercial release.

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Subtitled *The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Race*, this “tribute to dreamers” is a true story all for more amazing for being unearthed accidentally. School kids in Lebanon have no inkling that, in the 1960s, a scientist teaching at the Armenian University in Beirut developed rockets with his students. The young **Manoug Manougian**, who now teaches at the University of South Florida, started from the ground up.

Neither the Americans nor the Soviets were about to give away the formula for rocket fuel, so he and his students prepared hit-or-miss chemical brews that had some disastrous results. Their successful launch of toy-size missiles interested the Army, which manufactured their bigger rockets. On a ridiculously small budget, they had two important launches in 1962-63 that were “the pride of the nation” and even commemorated on postage stamps. But by the time of the Israeli-Arab war in 1967, the Army’s involvement raised the suspicion that a weapons program was underway. Bowing to pressure from its alarmed neighbors, the Lebanese government quietly put a lid on everything. The extraordinary thing is that 50 years after the first launch, almost no one remembers that Lebanon ever had a space program.

The final scenes describe the directors’ decision to build a monument in the form of a rocket to place in the courtyard of the Armenian university. While this coda lacks the compelling feeling of what has gone before and feels a bit tacked on, it emphasizes their unique interventionist approach and their desire to be among the researchers, utopians and dreamers they cite.

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As in their other documentaries, Hadjithomas and Joreige narrate the film in their own words, adding a personal touch that helps put things in context, though it can feel a little too distanced and intellectual. The Beirut-based filmmakers were born in 1969 after man walked on the moon, and they draw freely on film archives and newsreels to set the well-told tale somewhere between **Jules Verne** and **Georges Melies**.

Venue: Toronto Film Festival

Production companies: About Productions, Mille et une Productions in association with the Doha Film Institute

Directors: Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige

Screenwriters: Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige

Producers: Georges Schoucair, Edouard Mauriat

Directors of photography: Jeanne Lapoirie, Rachel Aoun

Editor: Tina Baz

Music: Nadim Mishlawi, Scrambled Eggs, Discipline

Animation: Ghassan Halwani

Sales Agent: Urban Distribution Int.

No rating, 95 minutes

Links:

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cooper-370639

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