

Jan Chats with Filmmaker Nadine Labaki

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Where Do We Go Now?

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Nadine Labaki's breakout film Caramel was firmly set in contemporary Beirut, but her new film Where Do We Go Now? is Magical Realism. A mythical Lebanese village, surrounded by landmines, is dominated by a one church & one mosque. Exhausted by intramural feuding & senseless death, the women of the village seek ways to distract their men long enough to hide all the guns. Brilliant dramedy: Romance! Laughter! Tears!

Jan: You are so beautiful, Nadine! Did you start your career as an actress and make a transition from acting to directing?

Nadine: No. I was always a filmmaker, and then I started acting, so it was the opposite. At first I was shy and I was afraid to experiment with my other natures through acting. And then I started discovering it when I began working with actors.

This relationship between the actor and the director started giving me more confidence in the fact that I can be these characters I am drawn to. I know them so well that I could be them. And so it started gradually; that's how it happened.

Jan: So you studied filmmaking first?

Nadine: Yes, I'm going to go back to when I was a child. Because of the war—because of the fact that most of our childhood, unfortunately, was spent at home and we couldn't go out or even shelters—TV became a very important part of my life. TV made me escape my reality and the boredom of my everyday life.

And so very soon I understood that in order to be able to create these worlds that have nothing to do with my world, these stories that have nothing to do with my story, the way was to become a filmmaker. I decided to become a filmmaker very early, when I was a kid. I decided very early that one day I would make films and I would tell stories.

Jan: So you're the Frida Kahlo of Lebanon! You were stuck indoors and your imagination took flight!

Nadine: Yes, because you have to. We used to spend a lot of our time at home—no school, nothing. We couldn't even play outside.

Jan: Were you in Beirut or were you outside Beirut in a village?

Nadine: I was in a village, the village of Baabdat where I was born. Do you know the Matn? It was there.

[Editor's Note: The Matn District, in the mountains outside Beirut, is a very popular resort area for people who want to leave the hot coastal cities during the summer.]

So I had this dream, but didn't know where to begin because there's no film industry in Lebanon. So I did university, an audio-visual university that taught us how to make films, and then I started making films.

In the beginning, I was more into nice pictures—more into what it looked like than what it was saying. But when I started gradually to understand the power of film, I started to feel the impact I was having on people through what I was doing.

I started doing music videos and advertising, and I was gradually becoming famous. I started working on the image of the Arabic woman. I started creating images that were very strong.

Jan: Not just the girlfriend and the wife and the mother, but the woman herself, right?

Nadine: The woman herself.

I started understanding that my voice should have a meaning. I started feeling how big an impact it can have on people. It's not only a voice because it's being heard and it's being heard by a lot of people. I started developing this awareness, and then when this awareness came, I decided I want to make something out of it. Because if we artists can influence how other people think—if we can be more and more aware of that—we can make a very big change in this world.

Jan: It's what I've been fighting for ten years now with WITASWAN (“Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now”).

Nadine: Yes, I think we can. And so I decided that I want to make this voice meaningful and have an impact on people. I truly believe that cinema is one of the most powerful non-violent weapons for change. I truly believe it because you are able to entertain people but at the same time tell them stories about the world: Give your vision; give an opinion; give a statement; change something; make people aware of who they are as human beings.

Jan: You certainly did that very artfully in *Caramel*. The main thread was a relatively conventional love story that was very accessible, so people could get into it very easily. But then around the edges, you planted more subversive elements. So tell me how you blended those components? What were you thinking?

Nadine: It's this anger that's inside you that makes you want to talk about things that are frustrating to you or that seem unjust. I have a problem with injustice. I have a problem with seeing the wrong things around me and just not saying anything about them. I am not able to do this.

So for me, cinema became my way to express myself and to take this anger out in a soft way, because it also has become part of my nature. I'm not a provocative person in the sense that I am not looking for confrontation. I'm just trying to say: “What if we could

explore a different way of thinking? What would happen? What if we can see things in a different perspective?" It's an invitation from me to see things in a different way.

And so when I talked about women in this first film [*Caramel*], it was because as a woman, I was feeling all these frustrations. I was feeling this contradiction between what I want to be in life and who I want to be in life and who I really am because I'm scared of how people judge me. I'm scared of the weight of how people look at you.

In the Middle East, you don't live on your own, you live in a community. Whether it's your family or the society you live in, you are always with people. So it doesn't give you the freedom you want to experiment. So you're always afraid because you don't want to deceive them. They love you; these people love you and they expect so much from you that sometimes you do make concessions on who you want to be because you're scared to deceive them.

So it started from here and I decided that I want to explore:

Why we are like this?

Why are we so afraid?

Why are we not at ease with our bodies?

Why do we steal our moments of happiness?

Why do we hide our feelings?

Why, why, why?

And I decided to write a film about women that were going through all these things, whether it is virginity or marriage or having a forbidden relationship or being a lesbian or all these taboo subjects. And for me, it was a way to heal. It was a way to explore, and maybe to understand better. And it was a way to make other people aware—especially men—because in *Caramel* some men don't know what goes on in our heads.

Later, when I decided to make my second film [*Where Do We Go Now?*], it was a completely different issue that was boiling in me.

We've been through ongoing wars in Lebanon forever and we had succeeded in living over 20 years of peace after the Civil War. And one day, some political difference between two political parties led people—literally over hours—to take weapons, go down to the streets and start shooting at each other again. And this happened over hours.

If you look at TV, you can't believe what you are seeing. Beirut was turned into a war zone again. Roads were blocked and the airport was closed—literally over hours. And when you see such absurdity, because it was completely absurd...

Jan: So it just flashes up? The thing that fascinates me is that all the “reasonable people” somehow get sucked in too.

Nadine: That's the problem. The absurdity of the situation is that these people are able to live in peace for years together in the same neighborhood, in the same building. Their

kids go to the same school. They go to the same grocery shop. They buy the same bread. They drink the same water. They breathe the same air. They are living together normally, but then a political difference occurs and they turn into enemies again—over hours—and that's what I cannot understand.



I'm trying to understand. How do we function as human beings? What makes us forget that this was my brother a few hours ago? A few hours ago, this was my brother, and we were practically all day long in each other's houses.

When you live in a place where there has been so much blood, people are not able to forget unless there's a reconciliation process, but this process didn't happen in Lebanon. It didn't happen. Nobody said: "This is what we've done, let's forget it. Let's forgive and forget." Nobody said this, so we are living in an apparent peace, but deep down it's boiling, and the smallest excuse is a good enough excuse for us to take weapons again. And that's what I find completely absurd.

And so, at that point, I was pregnant, and I'm sure it does affect your way of seeing the world. You think: What kind of a world is this? Where I am bringing my child? What is this world that is capable of exploding over hours?

Jan: So before we run out of time, I have to ask you about the incorporation of dance in *Where Do We Go Now?* Your use of dance is so beautiful and so lyrical. The dramatic arc that you create with the use of dance—from the first scene when the characters arrive at the cemetery to the last scene when they return to the cemetery—using dance movements was such a risk!

Nadine: Why? It was a risk! I didn't know if it was going to work or not, but this was a gut feeling. I needed this image. This image came naturally to me—the image of all these women walking in black towards the cemetery. I've seen this image so many times in my head, not of the women "walking," but of the women mourning their children.



I'm sure you've seen this image so many times too. The women hit themselves. They hit their bodies. They tear their clothes apart. They tear their hair apart because the suffering is so big they cannot do anything but just hit themselves.

This image is an obsession. I look at these women in my family, and they're still wearing black until now. And I wonder: How do they do it? How do they go on? How do they keep living?

Jan: You're going to make me cry again, like I did watching that scene on screen...

Nadine: Yes, after living such absurdities! These women have found their children in the trunk of a car—decapitated—cut in pieces. And I wonder: How do they do it? How do they keep living? And this is a tribute to all these women. I've created this dance because I needed it somehow.

Jan: It took my breath away, Nadine. I'm having a crazy day. I'm running around. And then I get to the screening room, and I'm sitting there watching, and I see these women in black... and it took me awhile to understand...

Nadine: Awhile to understand what they were doing?

Jan: To understand why they were dancing like that. It was so beautiful and so moving and so unexpected. Are you a dancer?

Nadine: Yes, I am, yes. And I wanted to create sort of a tribute to all these women, so I did it through a dance.

I created very small specific movements that could be executed by these women. They're not professional actors and they're not professional dancers. I needed to create movements that they would understand, and every woman understands the weight of suffering—the weight of life. These movements, the movements like this, for me it became a ritual of the mourning, of the suffering.

You have a gut feeling that tells you, you should do it **this** way. But you don't know if it's going to work or not and you don't care because it's something that you feel deeply. And then if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. If people don't like it, that's okay.

Jan: Have you noticed any difference between the way women respond to all this and the way men respond?

Nadine: Of course. Some men feel a little bit, well, not insulted, but some men are a little bit like: "We are not all like this."

Jan: Defensive?

Nadine: Defensive, yes. Of course you're not all like this. But sometimes you need to exaggerate things to prove a point.

You shouldn't forget that this a Lebanese film coming from a woman—a mother—that has had enough and needs to say out loud: "Stop your stupid behavior because you are acting stupid. What is your cause? What is this cause? This is a Lebanese person. You're fighting another Lebanese man like you. He is Lebanese."

What I would do as a mother if my son was the one who attempted to do this—take a weapon and point it at another Lebanese? What would I do to stop it?

And that's how the idea came because they are acting stupid sometimes. They don't weigh the consequences. And we are the ones left with the consequences—as women and as mothers.



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