



Production Notes

CARAMEL

Discover the sweetness of life

Directed by Nadine Labaki

**Cannes 2007 - Directors Fortnight
Toronto 2007 – Official Selection**

**Starring
Nadine Labaki
Yasmine Al Masri
Joanna Moukarzel
Gisele Aouad
Siham Haddad**

Release date: September 18, 2008
Running time: 95 minutes
Rated: M (Themes)

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A woman is seen from behind, standing in front of a window. She is wearing a sleeveless, knee-length dress with a bold tropical print featuring large green leaves and pink flowers. Her hair is pulled back into a low ponytail. She is looking out the window, which is covered with light-colored, sheer curtains that have a subtle floral pattern. The light from the window creates a warm, golden glow throughout the scene. The word "Caramel" is written in a large, elegant, white cursive font across the lower half of the image.

Caramel



Synopsis

In Beirut, five women meet regularly in a beauty salon, a colourful and sensual microcosm of the city where several generations come into contact, talk and confide in each other.

Layale loves Rabih, but Rabih is married.

Nisrine is Muslim and her forthcoming marriage poses a problem: she is no longer a virgin.

Rima is tormented by her attraction to women and especially to this lovely client with long hair.

Jamale is refusing to grow old.

Rose has sacrificed her life to take care of her elderly sister.

In the salon, their intimate and liberated conversations revolve around men, sex and motherhood, between haircuts and sugar waxing with caramel.

Interview with Nadine Labaki

How would you sum up your film?

Briefly, I could say, "It's the story of five Lebanese women, five friends of different ages who work or meet in a beauty salon in Beirut." If I were to develop on that a little, I could add, "In this typically feminine world, these women - who suffer from the hypocrisy of a rational oriental system in the face of western modernism - help each other with the problems that they encounter in relation to men, love, marriage and sex..." Today, in that part of the world, Lebanon appears as an example of an open, free and emancipated society. But that isn't always true. Behind the façade, we are still subjected to many constraints, the permanent fear of other people's looks and their judgement of us. In this context, Lebanese women are eaten up by remorse and guilt. In the hair and beauty salon, my heroines feel safe. It's a place where, even if they are looked at from

a very intimate angle, they are never judged. The woman who does hair removal sees us naked, in every sense of the word, because that is a moment when we cannot cheat. Little by little, we tell her about our lives, fears, plans, love affairs, etc.

Why the title CAMEL?

It refers to the product for removing unwanted hair in the Middle East, a blend of sugar, lemon juice and water that is boiled until it turns into caramel. This mixture is spread over marble to cool a little. And it is turned into a paste used to remove unwanted hair.

But CAMEL is also the idea of sweet and salt, sugary and sour, of the delicious sugar that can burn and hurt you.

Tell us about your characters. Let's start with Layale, the role you play.

She is the owner of the salon. A young woman of 30, Christian, who still lives with her parents like virtually all young, unmarried women in Lebanon. Her jewels show her love of the Holy Virgin and her words reveal that she is attached to her religion. Layale is in love with a married man and is his mistress. That's the perfect example of the contradiction. On the one hand, there's her family that she doesn't want to disappoint, her religion, a protective cocoon and, on the other, this man on whom she is totally dependent and who represents a complete taboo, a transgression.

For a first film, it can't have been easy to direct and act at the same time?

I admit that I hesitated for a long time. I was tempted by the idea of acting but I was afraid it would hurt the film. Luckily, I took that risk because it allowed me to direct the scenes from the inside. Since the actresses were non-professionals, I could drive the film along by being as close to them as possible. Especially as, since I wanted each one to keep her own way of speaking, I didn't give them any dialogue to learn.

Was the use of non-professional actress a deliberate choice or a simple coincidence?

I wanted women who, in real life, are like their characters. I had a very precise idea of their physique, their personality, the words that they would use and I didn't want character parts. I had to look for them in the streets and shops, in friends' homes... That took some time but they are all very close to the reality of their parts.





And Rima?

She is a young girl of 24, a bit of a tomboy, who does the shampoos in the salon. Silent and introverted, she isn't voluptuous and coquettish like the others. Rima is looking for herself. Little by little, we discover that she has a penchant for women. But is she really aware of it? Joanna Moukarzel is a business manager with a large electrical appliances company. I was quickly won over and charmed by her spontaneous, vibrant side.

Who is Nisrine?

A Muslim woman of 28, Layale's friend, who works in the hair salon. She is about to get married to a Muslim boy who doesn't know that she is no longer a virgin. This is a big problem for her. Should she tell him? Or get herself stitched up like many other Lebanese girls in this situation do? Yasmine Al Masri who plays the part isn't an actress. She was born in Lebanon from an Egyptian mother and a Palestinian father. She is a good friend that I met in Paris where she studies Fine Art and oriental dance. All her work, her struggle even, revolves around the woman's body. Nisrine couldn't be anyone but her.



And Jamale, the client?

Jamale is friends with all the girls in the salon. We don't really know how old she is or her religion. She is so afraid of growing old that she struggles to hide the fact that she is going through her menopause. Life is nothing but show to her. Many women in my country are in this situation because a Lebanese woman's powers of seduction play an important role in her life. Jamale wants to become an actress because, after having devoted her life to her children, she wants to shine and exist, especially as we discover that her husband has dumped her for a younger woman. In real life, Gisèle Aouad is a personal assistant. She has a generous, extrovert personality that is ideally suited to the part.



And Rose, the seamstress?

Rose is a Christian aged 65 who lives next door to the salon and who knows all the girls well. She has never married because she has sacrificed herself for her slightly crazy sister. When she meets a man, Charles, she lets love pass by, out of a sense of sacrifice no doubt, but also by censoring herself. In Lebanon, when you're a widow, divorced or a "spinster", you're no longer allowed to be in love after a certain age. Otherwise, you become a laughing stock, you're made to look ridiculous and you're an embarrassment to the people around you. In this closed society, guilt arises from bonds with the family and religion whichever one it may be. Sihame Haddad, who plays Rose, is a housewife. I was immediately attracted by her personality, which is touching in spite of her restraint.



And then there's the beautiful and mysterious woman who calls in from time to time and whom we don't know anything about.

Not even her name! She is the perfect example of the perfect woman. Hair, silhouette, clothes... She is everything that a man could desire. As in an American commercial from the 1960s, this housewife and mother embodies the stereotype of the ideal woman. But we soon realize that she is incredibly frustrated, like many Lebanese women who abandon their true personalities to conform to an image that is expected of them. There is a genuine attraction between this woman and Rima. At the end of the film, after a personal journey, she makes a gesture that may seem perfectly banal: she cuts her long black hair. As if to free herself of a burden. Siham Fatmeh Safa is a Shia Muslim who was married for 13 years and who now lives alone. She gives off the air of mystery that I needed for the character.

And Lili, who plays Rose's older sister?

Lili is a godsend! In creating this character, I took my inspiration from a woman whose story I heard. When she was a young girl, she fell in love with a French officer who, when he left Lebanon, wrote to her every day, but his letters were intercepted by her family. When she found out, it was too late. Since then, she has been looking for those letters everything were... Lili is a slightly crazy spinster who picks up everything that bears a resemblance to paper. Lili must be about 85. I had almost given up all hope of finding her when I spotted her on the street one Good Friday. Right away, I knew she was the Lili I had been dreaming of. She is a Christian who only speaks Arabic and, in real life, she is both very calm and very funny...



Are these characters representative of Lebanese women today?

More or less, yes. But I didn't want to present a sociological work and I certainly haven't summed up the whole of Lebanese society in the film. I made this film because I ask myself a lot of questions about Lebanese women. Obsessed with their appearance, they are seeking their identity between the image of western women and that of oriental women... The Lebanese woman always feels as if she is stealing her moments of happiness. She has to use all kinds of ploys all the time to live the way she wants. And when she manages it, she feels guilty. We'd be wrong to think that they are free. Even though I am fairly emancipated and do the job that I want to do the way I want, I feel conditioned deep down inside by traditions, education and religion. Little girls in Lebanon grow up with the Arabic word "aayib" which, accompanied by a threatening gesture of the finger, means, "That's shameful." Anything can be shameful. We are continually afraid of doing something that we shouldn't do. With the idea of sacrificing ourselves to please our parents, children, husband and

family. At every stage in our lives, we are given an example to follow that, of course, doesn't correspond to what we want to be. The Lebanese woman, be she Muslim or Christian, lives a contradiction between what she is, what she wants to be and what she is allowed to be.

In the film, Jamale is obsessed with plastic surgery. Does that reflect a state of mind in the country?

As everywhere else, I think. But since we are a very extrovert nation, there has been a genuine explosion in Beirut. Women start at a very early age. Nose, mouth, liposuction, eyebrows, facelifts, breasts... everything is done. I'm not against it as long as it does good. I have turned against it however because the Lebanese woman has created her own style of beauty that is like no other anywhere in the world: very high eyebrows, a tiny nose, plump lips, high cheekbones, etc. We want to look like Western women but with our own criteria that are not exactly discreet.

Is having your hymen stitched back up before marriage a common practice?

For Muslims, as for Christians, virginity has great value. That too is extremely representative of Lebanese society. Appearances are continually stressed because of our fear of not conforming to a model. It's done in secret but in well-established clinics. Men never talk clearly about the subject. As a result, we never really know what they think. Even if they claim to be broad-minded, how will they react when faced with the reality? Between modernity and tradition, the men are often as confused as the women are. But, there too, one should avoid general remarks.

Is homosexuality still taboo today?

Yes, definitely. In the film, Rima doesn't live out her homosexuality. It is limited to what she feels when she shampoos the beautiful stranger. Moreover, her friends notice but never mention it.

When Layale is looking for a hotel to spend some time with her lover, she has to prove that she is married. Is that a reality too?

Not in tourist hotels. But in the others, yes. Or you're looked at with suspicion. Legally, you don't have the right to go to a hotel if you're not married; Lebanese society is still very puritanical.

And men are all machos?



Not at all. In the film, they are all friendly, the cop, the fiancé, the old gentleman... The only bastard is the lover whose face we never see. That is a deliberate choice because the model of a husband with a mistress exists in every country in the world. The other men are, in fact, the way I would like them to be. The romantic policeman is surprising because of his sensitivity. Charles, the elderly man who falls in love with Rose, is elegant, touching and the way that he looks at Rose is full of tenderness. In fact, Lebanese men are going through an identity crisis too.

There is a great deal of humour in the film. Is that a Lebanese quality or one of your own qualities?

Self-derision is something one finds often in Lebanese people. It's a way of dealing with everything that we have been through. Lebanese women are survivors. Like all Arab women, they are passionate and gifted with a strong temperament. But they refuse to dramatize things and to let sorrow overwhelm them. Their way of defending themselves is to make a mockery of everything. After you have known war, as we have, you're able to put things in perspective.

In 1990, when the war ended, you were 17. CARMEL is the first Lebanese film that doesn't mention it. Why?

When I made this film, I wanted to write about the future and not look back. I belong to a generation that wants to talk about something different, love stories for instance, something that is closer to the feelings



that we know and the experiences that we have than to war. The events of the past have been viewed, analysed, reviewed and broken down to such an extent that I felt the need not to mention them. Unfortunately, one week after the end of shooting, we were made to live through dramatic events again.

After last summer's war, could you write the same story now?

When that war broke out, I had just started cutting the film. I had a very strong feeling of guilt: "What is the sense of this colourful film about women, love and friendship?" For me, the cinema should have a mission and help to change things. But what was my film going to bring or change? I was even tempted to give it all up. But, in the end, I told myself that CARMEL is yet another way of surviving the war, of getting over it, of winning it and of getting revenge. It marks my revolt and my commitment. So, yes, if I were to write it now, it would be the same story.

Do you think the relations between the different communities could improve



thanks to women?

I think so, yes. Women have a lot more in common than men do: children, the preservation of life, complicity, love affairs... Muslims or Christians, no one can take that from us, even beneath the bombs. I believe in the universal nature of these feelings.

Why did you shoot in Lebanese?

It's the language of my country! I cannot imagine a Lebanese film, about Lebanon, performed by Lebanese actors, in any other language but my own!

Was it a coincidence or a deliberate choice to write this screenplay with two men?

It was vital. Since I didn't want to make a purely feminist film, I really needed the opinion of men.

What kind of light did you ask the director of photography to provide?

Yves Sehnaoui is a very talented young Lebanese DOP. I asked him for a very sensual, warm, colourful, soft and gentle light on the skin and the colour... caramel.

And for the sets?

Cynthia Zahar and I took our inspiration from a very beautiful salon in Beirut. But, in addition I wanted us to sense that the place had been through a lot. For Rose's home and workshop I also wanted to give this impression of different periods that had passed by. And, with talent, Cynthia was able to conjure up this impression of passing time.

And the costumes?

My sister, Caroline, designed them. She has created a very special world for the film thanks to her blend of styles and periods and to her keen sense of observation. Her precision in the choice of fabrics and colours has managed to convince us of the realistic nature of the characters.

Music plays an important part in the film. How did you go about that?

Khaled Mouzanar, the composer, knows me well... He is my future husband! A writer and composer, he is about to release his first album of French songs on the Naïve label. His music has always conjured up images for me. He has a very special world but he knows how to apply it to a screenplay and a story. He experienced the whole adventure of this film with me and I didn't need to talk to him for him to understand what I wanted.

I played for him some songs that make me drift off and dream and he managed to create a successful but far from obvious blend between Oriental and Western music that works brilliantly in CAMEL. Thanks to him, the music becomes a genuine character.

Last of all, is CAMEL a political film?

That wasn't my intention when I wrote it. But now, because of the events, I would say yes. In Lebanon, everything has become a political act, politics slip into the most intimate areas of our lives! I thought I could get away from it but the reality of the war caught up with me. Today, with the tensions that reign in Lebanon, CAMEL contains a message nonetheless: in spite of the opposition between the different religions, reactivated by the war, cohabitation and coexistence are natural. At least, that's how we should live.





Biography of Nadine Labaki :

Born in Lebanon in 1974, she passed her Baccalauréat in 1993. She then studied media at Saint-Joseph University in Beirut and graduated in 1997. 11 RUE PASTEUR, her school film project was awarded first prize for short films at IMA's Biennale du Cinéma arabe in Paris in 1998. She went on to directing commercials and many musical clips for well known Middle-Eastern entertainers and was awarded several prizes in 2002 and 2003.

In 2004, she attended the Résidence du Festival de Cannes to write CAMEL, her first feature length film.



The production

“ In October 2003, I went to present Emanuele Crialesé's *Respiro*, that I had co-produced, at the Beirut Festival. After the screening, I was introduced to Nadine Labaki, well known in Lebanon for her commercials and music video for Arab singers. We talked for barely ten minutes but, in that very short time, Nadine was able to express with disconcerting sincerity just how important the cinema was to her. I suggested that we stay in touch and, if she wished, to act as a coach for her. One month later, when I wrote to her to ask her what she was up to, she replied that she was working on an idea. A few days later, the first pages of *CARAMEL* arrived... I then advised Nadine to apply to Cannes Festival Résidence, a place that allows young directors to write their screenplays in Paris in the best conditions possible. Nadine was picked from more than one hundred candidates!

In October 2004, she enrolled at the Résidence and gave me her screenplay six months later. Touched by the grace of this story, I felt that my decision to produce the film had been confirmed.

In order to find Lebanese partners, I left in August for Beirut where, after

the spring of 2005 and the departure of the Syrians, unexpected artistic effervescence and a wind of change reigned.

I didn't find a co-producer but I found an enthusiastic distributor, Sadek Sabbah, and promises of local financing. I quickly decided to found my own production company, Les films de Beyrouth, and from that point on I travelled to Lebanon every month. With a first assistant and a production manager both from France, we set up the production structure for the film. It was important that the whole artistic side (photography, sets, costumes, music) should be Lebanese.

As soon as we had the shooting's budget, I felt that we needed to get to work without waiting. It began on May 20th, 2006 and ended on July 2nd. We celebrated the end of shooting with an unforgettable party, rich in laughter and friends, on the night of the World Cup match between France and Brazil. One week later, Beirut was under the bombs!

Since post-production was set to take place in Paris, we had to bring Nadine and the rushes back in this time of conflict, a far from easy matter.

The film has now been selected for the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Festival where it will be screened on May 20, one year to the day after the first day of shooting! The first screening in Beirut will take place in front of the whole cast and crew. For all of us, *CARAMEL* has been an incredible adventure from start to finish. The bond that it has forged between us goes way beyond that of a traditional film, since History has mingled with our personal stories and the story of the film. Personally, I am particularly proud of *CARAMEL*. Proud of having contributed to linking the name of Beirut to images full of life and light.”

Anne-Dominique Toussaint



Cast

Layale Nadine Labaki
Nisrine Yasmine Al Masri
Rima Joanna Moukarzel
Jamale Gisèle Aouad
Youssef Adel Karam
Rose Siham Haddad
Lili Aziza Semaan
Siham Fatme Safa
Charles Dimitri Stancovski
Christine Fadia Stella
Bassam Ismail Antar

Crew

Director Nadine Labaki
Producer Anne-Dominique Toussaint
Screenplay Nadine Labaki, Jihad Hojeily, Rodney Al Haddad
Music Khaled Mouzanar
Photography Yves Sehnaoui
Editing Laure Gardette
Set design Cynthia Zahar
Costumes Caroline Labaki
Sound Pierre-Yves Lavoué
Sound editor Hervé Guyader
Mix Emmanuel Croset
1st assistant director Elizabeth Marre
Production manager Stéphane Riga
Associated producer Raphaël Berdugo
Co-production Films Les Films des Tournelles - Les Films de Beyrouth
Roissy Films - Sunnyland - Arte France Cinéma
Fonds Sud Cinéma
Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication
Centre National de la Cinématographie
Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (France)
Agence de la Francophonie
Ministère de la Culture du Liban
La Cinéfondation
International sales Roissy Films
Middle East sales Sabbah Media Corporation



The Sunday Times

May 11, 2008

What if you have your own job, wear jeans and show your bra straps – but still have to be a virgin to marry? Nadine Labaki's film about East-West society is set to be a smash

Gemma Soames

I always want to go to the screening of my film wherever we are, because I like to see where reactions occur," says Nadine Labaki of her movie, *Caramel*. "It is amazing how it is always the same reaction. They laugh at the same places and are emotional at the same places – with the same intensity. We have secret codes that are beyond language and culture." Those codes are resonating across the globe right now, taking Labaki's first feature film to more than 60 countries, via a standing ovation at Cannes, several awards at international film festivals and a string of spellbound audiences.

Caramel is a highly personal film and an even more personal project – Labaki, now 34, wrote, directed and starred in the movie, working with her sister on the costumes and her fiancé (they are now married) on the music. Focusing on the lives of a group of female friends in a beauty salon, it is a film about her life, her country and what it feels like to be a woman in Beirut.

It is deeply, deeply powerful.

"This idea was something that I'd felt for a while," Labaki says. "I've always felt this contradiction between east and west, between modernity and tradition. I've always thought, 'Who am I exactly? Am I a modern woman, or am I this more traditional woman?' I want to do all these things in my life, but I don't allow myself to do them because I'm scared of how people will view me. And I looked around me and I saw that there were many women who felt the same way, so I decided to write this film about women who were going through similar things, who steal their moments of happiness because they don't allow themselves to live how they want to live."

All this makes for a story that is laugh-out-loud funny and tear-jerkingly tragic at the same time. Layale, Labaki's character, is a 30-year-old woman who runs her own business (the salon), but still lives at home, sharing a room with her baby brother. A devout Christian, she is in love with a married man. Nisrine, a Muslim, is engaged to a man who has no idea she isn't a virgin – should she get "stitched up", like many Lebanese girls in her situation? Jamal is an older woman, trapped on her own after her husband ran off with a younger model, with only her ageing looks and a fast-approaching menopause as currency. And Rima, the youngster with feelings for other women, is the tomboy destined for unhappiness in a society that is entirely unaccepting of homosexuality.

In the confines of Layale's salon, a space safe from the judgmental world

outside (a place inspired by Labaki's mother's kitchen), their various secrets are outed as their clandestine parallel lives unravel around them. "When we were growing up, my sister and I used to watch our mother and her friends in the kitchen doing this Caramel ritual [making a leg wax out of sugar and lemon juice], and I remember seeing the bonding of these women. It became an excuse for them to get together to tell their secrets and say what was on their minds and in their hearts. It is a refuge, their hiding place, like when you're a kid and you go under the bed, where it's safe."

Determined to make her characters as real as possible, Labaki chose not to work with professional actors, instead finding her leads "in the streets and shops, in friends' homes". The stories they tell are just as true. "All the things we talk about in the movie really exist. In Lebanon, like in the film, a woman does not leave her parents' house unless she's married. Like Layale, I lived with my parents until I got married, even though I was doing films, travelling and doing whatever I wanted."

Labaki's isn't the only film making us look east through fresh and female eyes: *Persepolis*, the animated film based on Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel about her life going from Iran to Austria and back again, which has opened to rave reviews, also looks at the contradictions facing modern Middle Eastern women. For too long, the narrative for such stories has been slanted towards one extreme or the other, overly simplified. The truth, as shown by these two films, is much more complicated. Labaki's *Beirut* is confusing. It's a city that on the one hand is all pink bra straps, flirty jokes and leg waxes, yet on the other is a place where a woman can't book a hotel room unless she can prove she is married. It's a city where women wear miniskirts, drive and run their own businesses, but can't do anything that isn't sanctioned by the family.

"We live in a community and it's not an individualistic community," Labaki says. "You live with your family, you live with your society – you are never alone. You don't see someone having lunch or dinner alone; if you do, it means there is something wrong. So you don't have your own opinion about things. You follow the way."

Labaki is keen to point out that it isn't only women who are having a tough time making sense of it all. "I don't blame men for anything, because I think they are as lost as we are. They are also attracted to the image of the western man who is free, lets his woman do what she wants, and everything is fine. Yet, because of his education, his religion, the way he was raised, who he thinks he has to be and what he should allow his wife or his girl to be, he also is lost. He is thinking, 'Who am I exactly? I dress like a western man, I wear my jeans and I'm cool and hip and put gel on my hair, but at the same time I have to marry a virgin. So who am I?' " The answer, according to Labaki, is to try to be both – not to adopt a new culture, but to try to combine the two. She is confident that the daughters she may one day have won't be obliged to face the same problems. "We are getting there, but we still have a long way to go," she says. "Now, the problem is finding the right balance. We end up

sometimes being somewhere that has nothing to do with our own country.”

Sitting in front of me today, in a hotel in London, Labaki seems the perfect poster girl for this balance, dressed in a way that combines both cultures – all sleek, minimal tailoring, yet with heavily kohled eyes and buckets of oriental gold jewellery. “If you try to imitate the west and become western in the way you are, even denying your own language – speaking French or English instead of Arabic or Lebanese – it is isolating. At the same time, you can’t lock yourself in tradition, because then you’re not following the way the world is moving. If we just find the right balance, we can be interesting people.” Labaki is testament to that.

USA TODAY

By Claudia Puig

Caramel is a sweeter and more believable version of Steel Magnolias, Middle Eastern style.

The story revolves around five women, from their 20s to their 60s, who meet regularly in a Beirut beauty salon. A few work there, others are patrons. While they confide in one another, each has private moments only the audience is privy to. Foreign chick-flicks are rare animals, and this one works better than many of the more predictable American movies, largely because of its realistic characters and fascinating cultural backdrop. The secrets and obsessions of these women come off far more divinely than those of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood. Each of the women is in search of fulfillment, though their quests manifest themselves in a variety of ways.

Cultural rites and societal expectations clash with personal desires and a nascent sense of rebellion. But, interestingly, no mention is made of the violence that has ravaged the country. While the interconnected sagas of these Lebanese women are involving, some are more compelling than others.

Perhaps the most poignant story focuses on the last chance for love for a seamstress (Siham Haddad) caught up in daily struggles with her mother, who is suffering from dementia. And the travails of the thirtysomething character (director Nadine Labaki) and the love she finds with a shy police officer are filled with yearning.

The title refers to a hair removal process that uses sugar, which, when warmed, becomes caramel. The honeyed tones of the sugar as it's applied on the skin are an intriguing framing device.

Labaki has made a warmly appealing, bittersweet confection, and a heartfelt tribute to Beirut. Likable, funny and often poignant, Caramel is a cinematic treat.

FILM JOURNAL INTERNATIONAL

CARAMEL

Women who bemoan the loss of their voices in contemporary cinema need only to turn, ironically, to the East, especially to Iran—and now to Lebanon. Nadine Labaki's debut film, *Caramel*, about the women who congregate in a Beirut beauty salon, is not the first feminine view of Beirut or of the Lebanese, but it is the first narrative feature since Maroun Baghdadi's *Beirut O Beirut* (1975) to transform that city's image. *Caramel* never alludes to war.

Labaki, who is in her early 30s, was born one year before the advent of Lebanon's 15-year civil war, yet she seems content to put that experience behind her. In contrast, her Lebanese contemporaries remain preoccupied with the country's sanguinary history. Randa Chahl Sabag's *The Kite* (2003), for instance, tells the story of star-crossed lovers at the Lebanon/Israeli border, and Danielle Arbid's *In the Battlefields* (2004) looks back to the experiences of a girl contemplating her escape from Beirut on the verge of the Lebanon/Israeli war. *Caramel*, named for the sticky substance used to remove unwanted hair—here it would be wax—is set in a sensual, fiercely feminine space where painful transformations, promptly treated with shampoo and pedicure anodynes, are shared and embraced.

Labaki's characters span four generations of Lebanese women: There's Rima (Joanna Moukarzel), the salon's young shampoo girl, and her ideal woman, Siham (Fatme Safa); Nisrine (Yasmine Al Masri), also an employee, who is about 30 and engaged to be married; Jamale (Gisèle Aouad), a customer coping, mostly unsuccessfully, with menopause; and Rose (Siham Haddad), a sixty-something seamstress who lives with her dotty, older sister Lili (Aziza Semaan). Layla, played by Labaki, is unmarried and having an affair with a married man. None of the actors is a professional; in fact, Haddad is a housewife and Moukarzel is a manager at an electrical appliance company. They're all wonderful—perfectly cast and skillfully directed.

Framed by the women's relationships, the screenplay's drama emerges from their private terrors. Layla is ashamed of her affair, and afraid that her lover will never leave his wife. Jamale, abandoned by her husband for a younger woman, fears the loss of her looks and goes to extremes to hide the fact that she's menopausal. Nisrine isn't a virgin, and she thinks telling her Muslim fiancé might end their engagement. Rima, just discovering her attraction to women, contemplates the thrill of a first, albeit illicit, love. Rose, too, is smitten, by the overtures of a male customer, but she is conflicted: Her overriding responsibility is to her delusional sister.

Caramel is a Lebanese version of *Steel Magnolias*—a delightful valentine to women of a particular time and place. And, like Robert Harling's work, it never trivializes feminine anxieties. At first glance, *Caramel* is a chick flick, plain and simple. Labaki is gorgeous and young, and there is enough romanticism in the plot to satisfy our Cinderella side. On the other hand, Nisrine is about to

undergo an operation that will fool her fiancé into thinking he's her first lover, and Jamale, a would-be actress, keeps pigeon blood in her purse so that she can stain the clothes she wears to auditions.

Labaki's directorial style continually underplays the passion she's packed into the screenplay, so that *Caramel* never feels formulaic. For instance, when Nisrine's mother explains married life to her on the eve of her wedding, Labaki keeps the camera in medium shot. It's the choice of a filmmaker who trusts her actors, and who understands that the standard editing—cuts to close-ups of Nisrine and her mother—would distract the viewer from the scene's inherent universality. Labaki's production design emphasizes the duality of feminine spaces, of women's bedrooms and the beauty salon, which offer confinement and freedom—and the possibility of metamorphosis. When a male admirer of Layla's enters the salon, he must raise his voice to be heard. Once inside, he is welcomed as a guest: Another customer relinquishes her chair for him. In that chair, however, he is transformed by the image the women have of him.

Labaki's confidence is what makes *Caramel* such an unusual debut film. Whether she's directing a scene right out of screwball comedy—where she cuts between two telephone conversations, one real and one imagined—or a sequence that does not work as well, where Nisrine, Layla and Jamale are in a cab, Labaki allows events to unfold in what feels like real time. In the cab, the conversation is awkward and the scene is lengthy, but the writer-director plays it out nevertheless, convincing us of its authenticity. During the romantic telephone sequence, the camera spends a lot of time on Labaki's pretty face, and if at first the scene appears showy, in the end it has a striking immediacy.

Caramel is an excellent, unostentatious film, reminiscent of Martha Coolidge's *Rambling Rose*: It is a feminine embrace and a *Magnificat* to all matriarchs.

Critic: Maria Garcia