



West Beyrouth

West Beirut

Ziad Doueiri

LEBANON/FRANCE, 1998

105 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
Production Company: **La Sept Arte/**
3 B Productions

Producer: **Rachid Bouchareb, Jean**
Bréhat

Screenplay: **Ziad Doueiri**

Cinematographer: **Ricardo Jacques Gale**

Editor: **Dominique Marcombe**

Production Designer: **Hamzé Nasrallah**

Sound: **Nicolas Cantin, Thierry Sabatier**

Music: **Stewart Copeland**

Principal Cast: **Rami Doueiri,**
Mohammad Chamas, Rola Al Amin,
Carmen Lebbos

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"The war granted me unbridled freedom. There were no more imposed laws... At a very early age, I understood the rules of the game and the advantages of the situation. I was able to explore everything that life could bring me: the discovery of my sex drive, love, friendship – and later the concepts of fear, hatred and injustice."

– Ziad Doueiri

While the opening years of Lebanon's ghastly civil war may seem an odd setting for a coming-of-age tale, Ziad Doueiri has created a romantic, funny and utterly charming autobiographical first feature in the shadow of this horrifying time of ethnic and religious strife.

Tarek and Omar – young teenagers, secular Muslims and best friends – are the troublemakers in a Catholic school in East Beirut. Ordered out of the classroom, Tarek witnesses the first official act of the war: the slaughter of 30 Palestinian bus passengers by masked gunmen. While this causes him some anguish, he quickly reverts to his playful sex-crazed adolescent self. The next day his school is closed and no one can cross from West to East Beirut. The situation suits Tarek just fine, even if his parents are consumed with worry.

So the two boys and their new-found friend – a beautiful Christian girl named May – bicycle around the disrupted city. Moments of (mostly) high-spirited joy mix with (occasional) sheer terror. Yet complications

ensue: local militias threaten Tarek's friend, the local baker, and Omar's father becomes increasingly orthodox, banning Paul Anka from his son's music collection. While goofing around in a street demonstration, the boys are separated and Tarek finds himself hiding out in the most notorious brothel in Beirut – the only place near the Green Line where both Muslim and Christian are equally welcome.

The kids are great, especially the director's little brother, Rami Doueiri, as Tarek; and the film is an aesthetically pleasing mix of hand-held and Steadicam shots. Not unrelated to John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* – it too saw war as a mostly entertaining time for young people – *West Beirut* has no ultimate ethnic heroism to fall back on. It simply commands us to enjoy life to the fullest, no matter what the circumstances.

■ **Noah Cowan**

Ziad Doueiri was born in Lebanon in 1963. He studied cinema at the University of San Diego in California, took courses at UCLA and made several short Super 8 and 16mm films. He was assistant cameraman for Quentin Tarantino's films to date. *West Beirut* (98) is his first feature.

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