

Our Heedless Wars

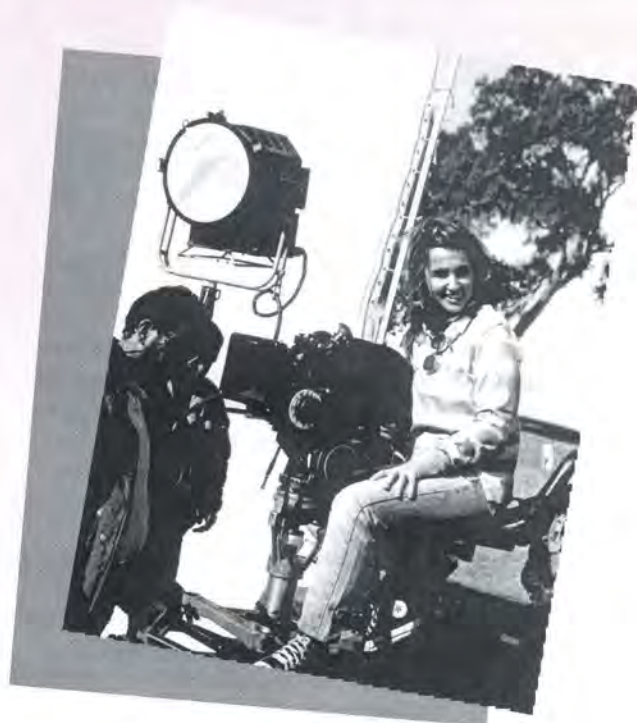
To Beirut, which I no longer love and which I never finish leaving

Directed by Randa Chahhal
Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf

A raw and painful testimony, Randa Chahhal's film is an attempt to comprehend the Lebanon war, or at least, open a debate which has resolutely been set aside and ignored. Through a family portrait, set against powerful images of war, the director offers a personal experience while simultaneously trying to revive dormant memories, a step that she considers necessary to the process of national healing.

Chahhal chooses to tackle this difficult subject by interviewing members of her family, namely her mother Victoria, her sister Nahla and her brother Tamim. Their experience reveals how the war has affected each individual - and each generation - in a different manner. None of them, however, has found a valid reason or explanation for all that has happened. Their feeling of loss and meaninglessness is felt throughout the film. Their experience has led them nowhere and has left them in a state of hopelessness and disgust. The drama aspect is subtly balanced by a lighter tone, as some of the stories that Nahla or Victoria recount are so surreal that they almost become funny.

Obviously, the family is very politically-conscious; we understand that the father, deceased at the time the film begins, was a political thinker, of a leftist ideology. The mother, Victoria, states in one of the scenes, not without certain pride, that she "was the first woman in Iraq to ever write, and the first woman imprisoned for political reasons". Her political history goes back to Iraq, Syria and then Lebanon, always in affiliation with the communist parties. Nahla was a political and military member of the Lebanese communist party. She recounts in detail her experience, people she lost during the war, and her afterthoughts of the whole period. One of the strong points of the film is when she says that "amnesia is not only hypocritical and puritan, it is also very dangerous as it can lead to another civil war, and Lebanon's history is full of these wars". Tamim, the younger brother, was a militia fighter who finds himself completely let down with no affiliation



or no one to turn to. He realizes today that the fighters were manipulated by the warlords none of whom was really committed to a cause, and finds himself at a loss and in an absurd situation.

Alternating between the different incongruities of Beirut, between its anger, laughter, sadness and hatred, between the different languages that are part of its heritage, between its complex, but rich identities, this film is a tribute to a city that does not want to be remembered but that is dangerously pervasive despite all the efforts to erase and eradicate it.

It took Chahhal around 15 years to shoot the archive images of this film. Although it was completed in 1995, it was first screened in Lebanon in July 1999, and only as a one-time feature of a film society. The film's harsh criticism, unhindered by any self-censure, of all parties involved in the war is certainly a reason for this long delay. At a different level, this also denotes the physical resistance of the Lebanese to face any remembrance of things past, of the war and its implications. No matter how strong this resistance, however, Chahhal's film is certainly a catalyst to, if not an incentive, to open the way to vital questions.