

CAPERNAUM

A FILM BY NADINE LABAKI

Monday, April 15, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A.O. Scott / New York Times *Rated R* *121 Mins.*

“Capernaum,” Nadine Labaki’s hectic and heartbreaking new film, borrows its name from an ancient city condemned to hell, according to the Book of Matthew, by Jesus himself. The word has since become a synonym for chaos, and modern Beirut as captured by Ms. Labaki’s camera is a teeming vision of the inferno, a place without peace, mercy or order.

Its crowded streets and makeshift dwellings hold endless desperation, but the movie is too busy, too angry and too absorbing — too exciting, you might say — to succumb to despair. The sources of its remarkable energy are Ms. Labaki’s curiosity and the charisma of her young star, Zain al Rafeea, who plays a boy named Zain.

Zain is around 12, though his precise age is unknown to him, his parents or the Lebanese authorities. In some ways, he looks much younger, a skinny urchin with big eyes and an air of worried determination. But he also seems older than his years — hard-working and resilient, with an impressive command of profanity and a steely defiance that can back down grown men.

When we first meet Zain, he is in jail and then in court. He has brought suit against his mother (Kawthar al Haddad) and father (Fadi Kamel Youssef) for bringing him into the world and failing to care for him or their other children. The courtroom scenes that frame the tale of Zain’s ordeal at home and his adventures once he runs away serve a few distinct purposes. They offer a measure of comfort — a guarantee that whatever horrors he endures, our hero will at least survive — and also a dose of semi-satirical social critique.

The kindly, avuncular judge (played by an actual retired Lebanese jurist named Elias Khoury) and the officious lawyers representing Zain and his parents speak a language of reasoned inquiry and civic enlightenment. Their rhetorical pomp is meant to show the benevolent, problem-solving authority of the state, which has the power to discipline and protect its citizens. Everything that happens outside the court makes a mockery of this assertion.

At first, Zain finds relief from his disorderly home in the routines of work and the company of his siblings, especially his sister Sahar. He is in constant motion, running errands for shopkeepers in his neighborhood and helping his parents with their almost-legal and brazenly criminal enterprises. When he fails to prevent them from marrying off Sahar, who is 11, to their landlord’s son, Zain flees. He seeks refuge in a shabby amusement park, and finds it with Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw), an African refugee who lives in a nearby shantytown with her toddler son, Jonas (Boluwatife Treasure Bankole).

Zain looks after Jonas while Rahil, who is working illegally with a forged permit, scrubs floors and hauls garbage. The precariousness of their household is agonizing, even as the

tenderness that holds it together is touching and understated. There is also an element of comedy in the spectacle of Zain and Jonas as they make their way through the chaos, the younger child nestled into a cooking pot mounted on a skateboard that his caretaker pulls along through the streets.

You might see a trace of Huck Finn in Zain — a wily, footloose boy whose wanderings illuminate the absurdities and horrors of the larger world. He’s also, in circumstance if not in attitude, like a Dickens hero navigating a metropolis where poverty and cruelty threaten to overwhelm kindness and fellow feeling.

That they don’t quite succeed is testament to the strength of Labaki’s humanist convictions and also to her instincts as a storyteller. Her two previous features, “Caramel” and “Where Do We Go Now,” examine aspects of Lebanese life that are somewhat less harsh than the ones depicted in “Capernaum” with a similarly acute sense of the injustices and contradictions that plague the country. They are also full of warmth and humor, which this film insists are never absent, even in dire circumstances.

Which is not to say that anything here is sugar-coated. The buying and selling of children is contemplated with chilling matter-of-factness, and the world Zain inhabits is one where human bonds have become brutally transactional. Forced to become a shrewd materialist — in his interactions with adults he is almost always trying to make a deal or work an angle — he somehow clings to a sense of honor and a capacity for empathy.

Does Zain’s goodness arise from childish innocence or a magically saintly disposition? In al Rafeea, a Syrian refugee with no training as an actor, Labaki has found a performer who renders such questions moot. This is a matter less of authenticity than of charisma. His charm and magnetism amount to a kind of moral authority. You don’t just root for Zain or believe in him: You trust him.

Rahil sees that. Jonas does too. And “Capernaum,” a sprawling tale wrenched from real life, goes beyond the conventions of documentary or realism into a mode of representation that doesn’t quite have a name. It’s a fairy tale and an opera, a potboiler and a news bulletin, a howl of protest and an anthem of resistance.

In Arabic and Amharic, with English subtitles.

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Monday, May 13, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Chris Jones / Chicago Tribune Rated PG-13 87 Mins.

Cans of 7-Up formed chorus lines. Crusts of bread crooned. Dishwashers and disposals danced of desperation. Insurance men sung of how they could "serve all coverage needs." And buckets of paint and clusters of ball-bearings and turkey processing equipment and air conditioners and combine harvesters and spark plugs and the detritus of the industrial Midwest were all, for one shining moment, as heroically at home in the American musical theater as Alexander Hamilton.

Such promotional poetry was the province of "industrials" — live production shows staged in service of, and at the expense of, a deep-pocketed corporate entity like Chevrolet or Hardee's or Gulf Oil and, in most cases, designed to buoy and educate the troops at an annual sales convention. And in Dava Whisenant's funny and moving documentary "Bathtubs Over Broadway," this forgotten genre of live entertainment, at its peak from the mid-1950s to the mid-'70s, gets its loving moment in the legit spotlight — as do the now-veteran performers and songwriters who created these campy custom productions.

Campy did not mean cheap. When "My Fair Lady" opened on Broadway in 1956, car companies were simultaneously producing shows with six times its budget — thus it hardly was surprising that major stars like Chita Rivera and Tony Randall were willing to stay in a luxury hotel and "put the dazzle in diesel." So to speak.



Our guide here is Steve Young, a genial, nerdy comedy writer for "Late Show with David Letterman" is tasked with finding weird discs for the long-running segment, Dave's Record Collection. Soon Young becomes obsessed with collecting rare "souvenir" recordings of corporate gigs that few put on their resume. In essence, the simply shot, modestly budgeted film follows Young's journey deeper and deeper into this sub-genre — always hidden from the public and mostly embarrassing to performers. No reason for that, Young and the film assert. And indeed, "Bathtubs Over

Broadway" offers plenty of evidence that these shows contained material from songwriting greats — composed by the likes of Sheldon Harnick ("Fiddler on the Roof"), no less — that might well have become standards of the American songbook had the lyrics not referenced, say, liquid manure.

For fans of musicals — who absolutely should not miss this film — the documentary is another reminder that top-drawer musical-theater talent has long been more abundant in America than prestigious paying gigs, and that great actors can make you cry when they're singing about car-key blanks (yes, there really was such a show). Watching the footage, though, is also a reminder of how much corporate America has changed. These shows thrived in a world of postwar optimism, when lifer employees were proud of their companies and their employers rewarded that loyalty with generous retirement plans and Hawaiian sales meetings and shows that made ordinary salesmen (and they were almost all men) feel like heroes. When corporate America abandoned that loyalty, and the perks and pensions, the industrials began to disappear.



The film doesn't address the sexism of most of the shows — which is a significant omission. And musical theater experts will wish there had been a deeper dive into how to rescue or repurpose the songs that still sound better than half the new stuff on Broadway. But then Young — a self-described "comedy writer with comedy damage" — does not claim to be a specialist. Merely curious. Until he falls in love with a community of show-biz vets.

For Chicagoans, the film has particular pleasures, including the voice of the late Dennis Kennedy, an actor who appeared in more than his share of these shows, along with his partner Ami Silvestre. Indeed, one of the giants of the field, Sid Siegel, is finally tracked down by Young in Buffalo Grove of all places. New York might have had Broadway, but plenty of industrials were created in the Midwest, closer to the tractors.

All theater is ephemeral by nature, of course, but industrials have always been especially that way, given that no one benefited from publicity, so there was none. They were for insiders and, for the most part, created by a distinct community of brilliantly talented insiders who, as the years flew by, eventually found that this had been their life's work.

Young, whom we see losing his own job as Letterman ends his show, has tears in eyes as he talks of these artists for hire. He clearly comes to see that they were not unlike himself — or indeed this critic. There's no shame in creating to order for an honest living.

Please join us for our thought provoking post screening discussions!

TRANSIT

Monday, May 20, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Brian Tallerico / RogerEbert.com Not Rated 101 Mins.

"Ports are places where stories are told," a character says in Christian Petzold's masterful "Transit," a film that closes out what the director has called his "Love in the Time of Oppressive Systems Trilogy" with "Barbara" and "Phoenix." At first, the parallels between "Transit" and "Phoenix" are striking. Both films are about identity and betrayal, and this film is based on a novel by Anna Seghers from the era in which "Phoenix" takes place: World War II Europe. As it unfolds and expands, "Transit" starts to echo several other clear inspirations from "Casablanca" to Kafka to even some more modern filmmakers like the Dardenes and Aki Kaurismaki, and yet this is very much a Christian Petzold film, first and foremost. It explores the themes that clearly fascinate him with his confidence of visual language and gift with performers. It is daring, riveting, and the first great movie of 2019.

Franz Rogowski stars as Georg, a German in Paris during an increasingly tense and violent occupation. Seghers' book was released in 1944 and set in 1942, so the story at that time was about the Nazis, but Petzold boldly chooses to update the story to modern times without really clarifying the threat. We just know that people are being rounded up and the country is increasingly unsafe. Before we've even seen the title card, police sirens have been heard three times. There's a sense of dread and urgency that's amplified by leaving the threat as undefined as active police cars in the street and enhanced discussion of things like travel papers. Especially with our current state of the world and its threats of violence amidst increased polarization, the themes of "Transit" added resonance by making this a '10s story instead of a '40s one.

In Paris, Georg is asked to take two pieces of correspondence to a writer named Weidel. When Georg gets to the hotel, he finds a bathroom covered in the blood of the man he was supposed to meet, who has committed suicide. He takes the writer's belongings and jumps a train with a man named Heinz who has been injured. The two are headed to Marseilles to hop a boat to Mexico, where they might be safe, but Heinz dies on the journey. Two dead men will shape Georg's future, guiding him into the lives they left behind.

Throughout "Transit," Georg plays different roles. He's a father to a boy named Driss; he's a friend to a doctor named Richard; he eventually meets Marie Weidel and becomes a version of the person who left her behind; and he's even the film's (not necessarily reliable) storyteller, as the movie is narrated by a bartender who heard this tale from his best customer. "Transit" is essentially about a man caught in purgatory considering the lives he could have had as a writer, doctor, father, lover before he's

allowed to move on to the next phase. He even reads one of the writer's stories about a man waiting to get into Hell only to be told that he's already there.

However, Petzold is too much of a romantic to allow Marseilles to become Hell. The already-great film reaches another level when Georg and Marie finally meet up. As she wonders why her husband never responded to the letter that she sent him, Georg becomes fascinated with her beauty, almost convinced he can save her. But if he leaves with her, he leaves behind the boy to whom he's become a father figure. So much of "Transit" is about people connecting and disconnecting. It is about the impact of fracture on both sides as one person asks who forgets first, "He who is left or she who is left behind?" And the impact of broken relationships is amplified by a sense that the world around these people is about to collapse. Who do you hold onto when the walls are coming down? Who do you choose to be when crisis knocks on the door?

Petzold's "Phoenix" was steeped in noir visual language, and this story could have been told in the same smoky, neon-lit style, but he conveys a lot of "Transit" in the bright light of Southern France, adding to the sense of confusion and disconnect that defines the film. Georg sometimes looks like a time traveler, and one could be forgiven for thinking this is a story of a Jew fleeing the Third Reich until Petzold drops in a shot from a surveillance camera or of a modern automobile. It adds both to the sense of purgatory—the idea that this is a man who doesn't belong and isn't sure where he's going—and the feeling that Georg is lost, not just in place but time. When he connects with Marie, it almost feels like he's connecting for the first time in his life, and yet this connection is based at least partially on a lie. Even in his truest moments, he is not exactly himself. He is a fill-in for a missing father or a missing husband.

Rogowski elevates the film by nailing a very difficult part—it's purposeful that Georg is in every scene in that it adds to the overall sense of confusion to limit our perspective to only his. Instead of presenting Georg as the cipher he could have easily become, Rogowski makes fully three-dimensional a protagonist who feels both classical in his Kafkaesque dilemma and yet also relatable in his emotions and actions. It's a great performance.

As he did with "Phoenix," Petzold completely sticks the landing, concluding with an almost mirror image of his last film's perfect closing shot. It's an ending that is both hopeful and uncertain. In other words, it captures the tone of a film about a man stuck between Heaven and Hell, and the stories he becomes a part of while he's there.

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"A kind of filmmaking miracle that boggles the mind."

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Monday, April 15 at 7:30 pm

"Lovely, hilarious, poignant...About art and why we make it."

Craig Thomas, Los Angeles Times

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TRANSIT

"Spectacular...Past and present feel like they exist simultaneously."

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