

# CAPERNAÛM

**Lebanon (2018)** 126 minutes

**Director:** Nadine Labaki

**Cast:** Zain (Zain Al Rafeea)  
Souad (Kawsar Al Haddad)  
Selim (Fadi Yousef)  
Sahar (Cedra Izzam)  
Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw)



**Screening 19 January 2022 at Swindon Arts Centre**

## Synopsis

Zain is a 12 year old Beirut street kid who runs away from his abusive home. He is befriended by Rahil, an Ethiopian woman working as a cleaner without legal papers, and stays with her in return for minding her baby. But when she is picked up by police, he has to head off back to the streets, taking the baby with him. Zain finally ends up in jail where he decides to sue his parents for giving birth to him.

## Reviews



"I was agnostic about this movie when I first saw it, and some of those doubts are still there on a second viewing. There is a bit of button-pushing melodrama going on and the film is flawed by Labaki's opening premise, which is silly, pointless and unconvincing. From the jail where he's ended up, the kid supposedly sues his parents for giving birth to him. This has evidently been funded as a stunt by a TV current affairs show to draw attention to child poverty, but it is an outrageous stretch to believe it would be entertained for one moment by the legal system.....

"Man hands on misery to man at an astonishing rate in Nadine Labaki's righteously angry slum-survival melodrama. As the film opens, its furious streetwise hero, 12-year-old Zain, is in court, suing his neglectful parents for having given birth to him. The piercing child's-eye view of his chaotic Beirut life, to which we flash back, suggests he has a case.

But the power and emotional force of the film mean you just have to set this flaw to one side. There's no doubt about it: the extended, improvised scenes of the boy and the baby on the streets are wonderfully performed and directed. Labaki even creates some sense memories of Chaplin's *The Kid* and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*. There is passion and compassion here, and Labaki's film brings home what poverty and desperation mean, and conversely what love and humanity mean."

*Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian*

Labaki's brutally honest dive into the Dickensian conditions of Zain's childhood chooses neorealism over poverty porn, her camera roving with fly-on-the-wall tenacity through his ceaseless work round of shop deliveries and street hawking. The only activity bringing the family together is soaking clothes in tramadol-tinged water so that Zain's jailed brother can sell drug-laced shots in prison, an artisanal interlude with the tang of authenticity. *Shoplifters*, another recent tale of family criminality, looks rose-tinted by comparison."

## Film Facts

- The film received a 15-minute standing ovation following its premiere at Cannes on 17 May 2018.
- Zain Al Rafeea, who stars as Zain was at the time of filming a Syrian refugee. His family is now relocated to Norway, where Zain is learning to read and write.
- Capernaüm means "Chaos" in Arabic and also alludes to the town on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus is said to have taught in the synagogue and healed the sick.

*Kate Stables, Sight & Sound Magazine*

[swindonfilm.org.uk](http://swindonfilm.org.uk)