

Home on the Range

BY DAVID EDELSTEIN

BEIRUT: THE LAST HOME MOVIE. Directed and produced by Jennifer Fox. Written by John Mullen and Fox. A Circle Films Release. At Film Forum 1, through July 12.

COMING TO AMERICA. Directed by John Landia. Written by David Sheffield and Barry W. Blaustein. Produced by Robert Wachs and George Folsey Jr. A Paramount Picture.

DUDES. Directed by Penelope Spheeris. Written by J. Randall Johnson. Produced by Herb Jaffe and Miguel Trujada-Flores. A Vista Organization Presentation. A Cineworld Release. At the Cine 1.

The Bustros family of *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* lives in a grand palace in one of the city's most tumultuous neighborhoods—it's almost smack on the line dividing Christian and Moslem Beirut. Shells explode around the manse, plaster falls, windows shatter, people are killed, yet still the aristocrats (three sisters in their thirties, a younger brother, and their mother) remain, drinking coffee, directing the house's reconstruction, and socializing. The Bustros, who are Christian Orthodox, are not exactly indifferent to the threat; they're simply fatalistic, in the great tradition of dumb, unflappable rich people throughout the ages, who never seem to get the point until it runs them through.

At least, that's how it appears on the surface. Jennifer Fox, the director of this fractured, exhaustive family portrait, met Gaby Bustros at NYU Film School (from which the director later dropped out) and followed her home to Beirut several years ago. Gaby's mission was to convince her mother, younger brother, and two older sisters to sell the place, but Gaby was drawn once more into the family's way of life, remaining behind when the film crew packed up. *Beirut* is an attempt to suggest—obliquely—how so bonkers a decision could be logical, even estimable.

Fox has dubbed her movie "antipolitical," and noted the reactions of rage at various international festivals from those (especially Lebanese) who resent the attention she gives to this idle family with its petty psychological problems—blandly discussing their emotions (or lack thereof) as bombs fall nearby. But those bombs (some dubbed in after the fact—poetic license) and the stroboscopic fusillades are clearly used to imply the absurdity of the Bustros's self-absorption. Fox doesn't ignore the chaos; her subject is the Bustros' success in assimilating it.

Beirut: The Last Home Movie suggests

the ways in which human beings (at least wealthy ones) are capable of insulating themselves from something as momentous as a civil war—and even of deriving perverse satisfaction from the absolute beauty of destruction. The movie's problem isn't really its politics, or even its socially irresponsible paean to the lyricism of carnage. Its problem is more basic: You just don't give a damn about the people. Documentaries tend to be shaped around dynamic centers, yet the Bustros are vegetables, and it's left to Fox, her cameraman, Alex Nepomniashchy, and her editor, John Mullen, to whip up some energy in a vacuum.

The team shot more than 200 hours of footage, and *Beirut*, with its lapidary compositions and rapid cutting, has the feel of a collage that has been endlessly tinkered with. (There's never just one gorgeous shot when 10 will do.) The resulting montages can be amazingly intricate—the tinkling of glass on the chandelier after an explosion, fragments of religious paintings on the walls, flashes of artillery, somber faces. But the bravura editing and photography can be tiresome, too—they interfere with the subject almost as often as they illuminate it. *Beirut* is both digressive and high-strung; there's something neurotic about its endless circumlocutions.

Fox has a scheme, but she keeps it under wraps. In the second hour, we learn about the Bustros as children, and their relationships to a cold, often violent father, who repressed many of their natural impulses. In psychological terms, this is the answer to the mystery, the source of the sisters' attachment to their house. To varying degrees, they've proven incapable of handling intimacy; they'd just as soon curl up in their shells with a good book. Husbands, suitors, even children have come and gone; the only constant has been their magnificent palace. And now that it's vulnerable, under siege, threatened by gunfire and explosions, it has become more alluring than ever.

It was alluring to Fox, too—or so she has said in interviews—but it's not so alluring to the audience. Even addressing the camera as they might an analyst, the sisters remain distant from us, their faces hard. That hardness, of course, is the documentary's subject, its *raison d'être*, but you might not be so endlessly fascinated by it, or willing to spend so much

time with people who have nothing to say about a war that has reduced their native city to rubble. *Beirut* almost never draws you in, and Fox's tone is ambivalent, neither seduced nor repelled—only fixated. The jittery neutrality is exasperating. Fittingly, the movie ends with a sardonic celebration of shallowness, a gorgeous montage of corpses, amusement park rides, bomb blasts, and a wedding reception: *la fête continue*.

FILM

Fox has resisted pressure to cut *Beirut* from its present 120 minutes—the repetitions and digressions are part of the texture, she insists. I know what she means, but oh, how the mind wanders. Sometimes it wanders because the words are inaudible, sometimes because they're just not very interesting. Still, the film is an astounding feat. *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* won first prize for documentaries at this year's United States Film Festival in Park City, Utah, and it's easy to see why the jury went nuts. The movie is probing, obsessive, audacious. It is everything except compelling.

VOICE JULY 5, 1988