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Hello. So as you know, my comfort zone isn't here. It's usually on set, behind a camera, like him, or him. But I'm very happy to be here. So yes, I was born in Beirut, Lebanon. It's what I call my home country. It's the place where my first memories are, where my parents live, where my first loves are, my first heartbreaks. I've lived in other places and I've made them home, like New York, which I've fallen in love with -- and in. But I always felt like my biggest strength came from the fact that I knew exactly where I came from. And that knowledge was very important to me because it really defines who I am as a woman.

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But growing up in Lebanon comes with a price. I think this tension and this -- what I have between my home country is something I cherish but it's also a burden, because Lebanon is a place with a very contradicting soul. It's a place filled with chaos and poetry; a place where hope and despair coexist in really strange ways. It's also a place where joy and sorrow are inseparable, like Khalil Gibran -- in one of my favorite poems by our national poet, Khalil Gibran mentions "that well from which comes our laughter is also the one that hosts our tears." And I think today, more than ever, this is true in Lebanon, because after everything that happened, it feels like a land of broken dreams, but filled with so many dreams nonetheless.

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And growing up in Lebanon, we were constantly on the verge of the worst. We felt like that silence between [one] crisis and the other was almost more agonizing than the crisis itself. And that really defined us as human beings, because we really live every day as if it were our last, and that's in the best and the worst kind of ways.

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I think this is where the screenwriter in me was born: at home in Lebanon, in the streets at home and the house I grew up in, because I became fascinated with human flaws and vulnerabilities and the truth that comes out of us in times of crisis and when we're put under pressure. And when at home, when I saw the people I loved the most, my parents, be real, I felt free somehow. It wasn't always pretty but at least it felt safe, like this is a place where we can be ourselves.

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But in 2020, when the pandemic hit the planet, we all started questioning what home meant. My parents were architects -- are architects, so they also added to what I felt home was to my definition of home. Because before following my own dreams -- being a filmmaker -- I was a

good daughter, a good girl, and I followed my father's dreams and I studied architecture and finished. And what I learned in architecture school is how much you can learn about people, about their story, about societies through the spaces that they inhabit, through every object, every frame, every wall, through the ground, through the streets. But what do you do when you feel like the ground on which you're standing might not hold? In the world of today, filled with political instability, climate disasters, where our spaces are constantly ravaged and threatened, how do you create a sense of home?

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In 2020 when the pandemic hit, we all felt -- or at least those of us lucky enough to have homes - - we all went inside, and that became our safe space. The outside world became the threat: the air, the people. This invisible monster was outside. But as long as you were tucked in your bubble, you were safe. And I'm talking about those of us who are lucky enough not to live locked with an abuser, victims of domestic abuse. So for those of us, the safe bubble was inside.

04:11

Or so we thought. On August 4, 2020 in Lebanon, our lives changed. In a split of a second, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions pulverized our port and destroyed half our city, killing many people and destroying homes and creating losses that we can't even count until today. And there still hasn't been accountability for what happened, even though it was the result of years of political mismanagement and corruption.

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I happened, on that day, to be in Beirut: in the center of Beirut, in the office, because I was in pre-production for my first feature film, "Costa Brava, Lebanon," a film we had been working on for a few years really hard, and a film that, ironically, is the story of a family that decides to leave Beirut, a place that doesn't feel safe to them anymore to create a utopic mountain home, a self-sustainable mountain home away from a city that has broken their hearts.

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This is the cast of the film. And then what happens is that their utopia is completely destroyed when the government decides to build an illegal garbage landfill right outside their home, bringing that reality to their front door -- the one they have been running away from for many years. The family finds itself again confronted to this destruction that it had been trying to avoid, facing everything it was trying to protect itself from.

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I was with the crew, the cast and the crew of the film in the office in Gemmayze in Beirut, when at six or seven, in the split of a second, our lives were turned upside down. We went from a creative meeting filled with passion and love and excitement to looking for each other under rubble, wondering if we had all made it alive. Luckily, we did, and we were much luckier than a lot of people in the same street. My cinematographer, Joe, almost lost his eye and everyone was injured. We got out of the street and realized that the explosion was not just next to the office, but everywhere, and that's when we understood how big it was. Walking down the street like zombies around that time, surrounded by broken, confused, stunned faces, felt like walking in the set of a movie I don't want to direct or be a part of. Everyone's homes, their private spaces, their frames, their walls, were dust on which we were walking.

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We stopped everything at that moment because we lost all of our coordinates: all of our sense of home, everything that we had worked for. So what we did is we just took a moment for two months and each of us took time to grieve, to assess the losses, whether it was the office or all of us. Anyway, how can you even think about being creative or making anything at a moment where you feel like you're living hell -- in the middle of hell? You cannot create amidst such chaos.

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At that moment, my mother -- my hero on that day because it's only thanks to her that some of us made it to a hospital, who has lived civil wars -- reminded me of a book I read in architecture school. "Invisible Cities" by Italo Calvino. I'll read to you the quote that she read to me at that time when she saw the despair me and my team were in. "The hell of the living is not something that will be. If there is one, it is what is already here, the hell we live every day, that we make by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the hell, and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, are not hell, then make them endure, give them space."

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Luckily, these people were not too far from me. There were the cast and the crew of this film, so we met all together and brainstormed. We thought, should we make this film or not? It seemed crazy to make anything around that time in Lebanon because the country was experiencing, until now, its worst economic crisis since its inception, the loss and the destruction and the PTSD we were all going through after the explosion and also the global pandemic, which was hitting the country really hard, which we had almost forgotten about because of everything else that was

happening. But at a moment where existing felt like an act of resistance, we felt like making this movie was very important, because it would mean regaining agency -- to regain agency and feel like they haven't taken everything from us. And as Maya Angelou says, there's nothing more agonizing than an untold story hanging inside of you -- not directly quoting.

09:12

And I think we really needed to regain a sense of order, find our coordinate, a sense of home. And like after World War I, a lot of European artists went back into classicism, trying to run away from this feeling of destruction that the war had brought in and stepped away from the experimentalism that came before, I think we used creativity to rebuild those pillars and that order. So it was a crazy decision, but we did it because we wanted to and because something was driving us.

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So we went and made the film against all odds. And it was hard, it was filled with obstacles, but it was beautiful, because at a moment where we had missed human connection and at a moment where our societies are becoming more fragile and loveless, we were able to recreate a moment of warmth, of love and magic, at a moment where it was hard to find any. And I think that that was very special because telling the story together gave us ... a sense of home again. It felt like the set became that safe space, that family. And it was as real and as raw as the home I was telling you about. Because we were all filled with creativity and a desire to make something, but we are also grieving and broken. So that was me again, realizing the beauty of being surrounded by people as real as me, even if it was not always pretty, but it was real. And I think that courage and -- we were always told to go to that place that is the place of great pain because it's also a place of great inspiration. I think that it's easy to hear and to say, but it's really hard to achieve. I think that courage to go there, to go where it hurts when you're so broken, came to me from those people, this cast and crew that really, really gave me the courage to want to tell the story and reminded me of the importance of it.

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And I want to mention also those two girls. I actually have twins who played the role of Rim, the protagonist of the film, and they both shared the role. And I think working with them was a great learning experience for me, because that's the beauty of being a filmmaker. You work with people from different ages and different backgrounds all the time, and working with them, for all of us on set, was a reminder of the importance of remaining hopeful and keeping the sense of wonder, especially for their generation. Because whatever world we're fighting for today, they will be able to benefit from.

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And so I know that we all deal with loss and rebuilding a home that we lost in different ways. For me, it was through human connection and understanding that it wasn't necessarily a space anymore. And I think for you it might be something else. We all channel that in different ways. But for me, that moment of joy, of sorrow, of freedom, of creativity, that moment between the action and the craft, that's what felt like home. And I'm very grateful for that.

12:21

Thank you.

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(Applause and cheers)