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Posted: Wed, Jan 19, 2011, 9:29pm PT

Palm Springs

# 12 Angry Lebanese: The Documentary

(Documentary -- Lebanon)

By DENNIS HARVEY

A Catharsis Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy production. (International sales: Catharsis-LCDT, Beirut.) Produced, directed by Zeina Daccache.

With: Zeina Daccache, Youssef Mazloum, Atef Josef, Ghassan, Hussein, Nidal, Rateb.

"12 Angry Lebanese" charts director Zeina Daccache's launch of Lebanon's first prison theater project. A lone woman among drug dealers, rapists and murderers, she formidably applies a sharp tongue lash whenever her charges' focus wanders, but primary interest is in the prisoners themselves, who are duly transformed by their experience. Docu should continue its fest travel while picking up select broadcast sales.

Forty-five convicts are selected from hundreds of applicants at notorious, crowded Roumieh Prison, which was built for far fewer prisoners than the 5,500 it holds. We don't see much of those who work on autobiographical monologues, dance sequences, music or other sidebars to the eventual evening's entertainment, as the pic concentrates on its centerpiece: an Arabic translation of "12 Angry Men," whose jury-room debates over innocence, social justice and the law strike a personal chord for all. This yearlong project culminates in a premiere that's a major media and state event. But most affecting are the interview segments in which the men recall and repent of past misdeeds, poignantly hoping not to fall back into incarceration's "oblivion world" once this inspiring creative collaboration ends. Assembly is aptly unlick.

Camera (color, mini-DV-to-DigiBeta), Jocelyne Abi Gebrayel, editor, Michele Tyan, music, Inmates of Roumieh Prison. Reviewed at Palm Springs Film Festival (True Stories), Jan. 14, 2011. (Also in Dubai, Vancouver film festivals.) Running time: 78 MIN.

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