

# 'Perfect Strangers': Secrets and lies are served up for dinner



CHENNAI: One cannot refute the revolution that the advent of mobile phones sparked, but there is another side to the cellular story — it holds all of one's intimate secrets, as we see in Netflix's first Arabic original film, “As-hab wala A'az” or “Perfect Strangers.” First created in Italian in 2016 with the same title, it has been remade 18 times in different countries — such as France, Germany, Spain, Greece and South Korea — a stellar record for a seemingly simple premise. What is more, the movie grossed \$270 million worldwide. So, the Arabic edition arrived on Netflix this week with a lot of expectation.

The latest film captures the fear that the small gadget can open a Pandora's Box of intimate secrets. On the face of it, the story seems harmless enough with seven friends gathering for dinner and deciding to play a strange sort of game. But the plot

soon veers into the disturbing, with skeletons and secrets making their way out into the open, including the sorts of details one does not usually want to discuss at a dinner table.



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Hosts May (Nadine Labaki) and Walid (Georges Khabbaz) are entwined in a dry, loveless marriage. They are having a trying time with their rebellious teenage daughter. One evening, they invite friends over for a meal, and each is struggling through his or her life. Maryam and Sherif (Mona Zaki and Eyad Nassar) are having their own troubles bringing up their two children, while Ziad and Jana (Diamond Abou Abboud and Adel Karam) are newlyweds, but have a lurking fear that their passion could disappear. Meanwhile, Rabih (Faoud Yammine) shows up for the party without his girlfriend – and this is the starting point of the group’s conversations.

As May watches everybody's possessiveness about phones, she suggests they play a game in which each places his or her gadget face up on the middle of the table. And each message has to be read out to the "participants." There is a bit of unease at this, some hesitation especially from Sherif. But May convinces them that it is after all a game, a harmless one at that. What is more, it could be a lot of fun, she pushes them.



'Perfect Strangers' is captivating and emotionally a blast with the closing shot engaging us with a puzzling twist. Supplied

Fun, did you say? It turns out to be an embarrassment, sheer horror, in fact, for some. As dinner and beverages flow, tongues loosen and defenses crumble, relationships are tested and their foundations shaken. The seemingly great marriages reveal cracks, and lifelong friendships begin to break. Terrible secrets and private choices are now out in the open.

A trifle too theatrical in its approach, Perfect Strangers is though, captivating and emotionally a blast with the closing shot engaging us with a puzzling twist. In an ensemble cast, it is very difficult to write each character with conviction, but Labaki

(renowned for her Cannes Jury Prize for Capernaum) stands out as one who pushes her guests to start a game whose consequences are completely unexpected, and we see the anguish in her. Another actress, Zaki from Egypt has been bold enough to play a difficult part that has angered many, who have targeted her amid online uproar. They have also called the Netflix work destructive of Arab culture. This may seem out of place, for the plot — with 18 remakes — ought to have been well known, and could not have taken anybody by surprise.

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