

Memory Box



An unexpected delivery opens a gateway to the past in both Montreal and Beirut.



Manal Issa

Those key figures in Lebanon's art world Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige were both born in Beirut in 1969, have long worked together and are, indeed, a married couple. When it comes to the form that their art takes, they resist being pigeonholed. They have been joint filmmakers for over twenty years but are also noted for their photographs and for creating video installations for museums. As for their film work, it includes documentaries but extends to works in which that element is handled in unconventional ways (thus in 2008's *Je veux voir* we are shown the actuality of war-torn Lebanon but through the eyes of a visiting actress, that being an acting role taken by Catherine Deneuve). Now in *Memory Box* the filmmakers turn to actual correspondence which Joana Hadjithomas had between 1982 and 1988 with a friend who left Lebanon for France. Both were teenage girls at the time and some twenty-five years later Hadjithomas received back these letters and related items. But, while *Memory Box* derives directly from these events, it is presented as a tale told with actors and Joana has been converted into a character named Maia whose daughter, Alex, secretly studies the diaries, the tapes and the photographs contained in the box received by Maia following the death of her friend, Liza.

Consequently, what we now have in *Memory Box* is a fusion of fact and fiction. The latter aspect may dominate since this is fully an enactment containing a number of fine performances headed by those of Rim Turki and Manal Issa, who play the older and younger Maia, and of Paloma Vauthier in the role of Alex. A third generation is represented too through the film's portrait of Alex's grandmother, Têta (Clémence Sabbagh). But, while *Memory Box* plays as a drama, it is born of its source material including the personal memories that Joana

Hadjithomas has of growing up in her homeland during the Lebanese civil war.

By using the documentary material for fresh ends, *Memory Box* becomes a film which is constantly working on two levels. On the one hand it is about being caught between two cultures, that of Lebanon and that of Canada which has become Maia's home (there's an echo here of the Riz Ahmed film of 2020 *Mogul Mowgli*). But it is no less about the generation gap and how Alex, feeling remote from the outlook of her mother, discovers through the contents of the box that Maia's adolescent experiences were in many ways comparable to her own. Since what she sees brings her mother's teenage years alive for her, this fact is taken as a cue to introduce a degree of stylisation in portraying it. For example, still photographs in the box turn into moving pictures. Such details allow the filmmakers to play at times to their experimental side but stop well short of making this a truly avant-garde picture. And, because these touches fit what Alex is feeling, this is done without coming to seem unduly self-conscious or self-indulgent.

Memory Box contains one other important feature in that what eventually emerges about the family's past history extends to the revelation of a key event that has been kept secret. This adds to the drama but without having the power to turn the film into an outright masterpiece. *Memory Box* carries echoes of another film about past and present and differing cultures, namely *Incendies* made in 2010 by Denis Villeneuve. That work blew one away and, by comparison, *Memory Box* has a lesser impact. But it is nevertheless a wholly worthwhile film.

Original title: *Hatira Kutusu*.

MANSEL STIMPSON

Cast: Rim Turki, Manal Issa, Paloma Vauthier, Patrick Chemali, Halim Abiad, Rabih Mroué, Hassan Akil, Clémence Sabbagh, Rita Bado, Michelle Bado, Nisrine Abi Samra.

Dir Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, **Pro** Christian Eid, Barbara Letellier, Georges Schoucair and Carole Scotta, **Screenplay** Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige and Gaëlle Macé, **Ph** Josée Deshaies, **Pro Des** Mary Lynn Deachman, Franckie Diago and Maia el Khoury, **Ed** Tina Baz, **Music** Charbel Haber and Radwen Moumneh, **Costumes** Lara Mae Khamis.

About Productions/Haut et Court/micro_scope/Téléfilm Canada-Modern Films.
101 mins. Lebanon/Canada/France/Qatar. 2021. UK Rel: 21 January 2022. Cert. 15.