

MEMORY BOX



By Christopher Reed / August 5, 2022 / 0 Comments



(Check out Chris Reed's movie review of *Memory Box*, now playing at the [Film Forum](#) in New York. Seen it? Join the conversation with HtN on our [Letterboxd Page](#).)

The 15-year [Lebanese Civil War](#) was a devastating conflict. It ripped apart a nation that had spent the years since its 1943 liberation from [French occupation](#) attempting to balance the competing needs of its diverse population. Many people suffered and were killed, and many fled. In their latest film, *Memory Box*, married filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (*The Lebanese Rocket Society*), themselves born in Beirut (in 1969), revisit a past that they experienced in an innovative trip through trauma and renewal. The memories prove vivid, indeed.

As an opening title card informs us, the movie is "freely adapted from the correspondence of Joana Hadjithomas, 1982-1988." We can only assume, then, that this is personal. Joana's sort-of stand-in is Maia Sanders (Rim Turki), an early-fiftysomething resident of present-day Montréal, Québec, who lives with her mother and daughter. This latter is Alex (Paloma Vauthier), a young woman who longs for contact with a parent who keeps her inner life closed off. When a box of Maia's teenage diaries and other mementos arrives from Lebanon, Alex dives in, despite her mom's command to keep away. Little by little, Alex learns all about Maia's formative years.

Maia was a 1980s teenager in Beirut, and her family was deeply affected by the war. She wrote letters and sent photos and audio cassettes to her best friend, Liza, who had decamped for Paris. These, along with the diaries, are what Alex peruses as the flashbacks come alive, incarnated by actors playing younger versions of Maia, her parents, and her social circle. Yes, it was a fraught time, but this didn't stop Maia from falling in love, as well as struggling to discover who she was.

And so *Memory Box* goes, plunging us into the dangerous melee of conflict and dire consequences that follow. Along the way, Hadjithomas and Joreige display great visual talent, animating still pictures via simple, yet effective, means and recreating the violence of a city under siege. They also explore the lasting impact of emigration and loss of connection to one's culture. The result is a moving cinematic treatise on identity and its reconstruction, buoyed by fine performances all around, proving that out of pain can come a salve to heal it.

– Christopher Llewellyn Reed ([@ChrisReedFilm](#))

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige; *Memory Box* movie review

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