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REVIEW

Memory Box

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Directed by
JOANA HADJITHOMAS
KHALIL JOREIGE

Starring
MANAL ISSA
PALOMA VAUTHIER
RIM TURKI

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige craft a thoughtful collage that blends personal archives with intergenerational traumas.

In this thoughtful and textured examination of one family's approach to archiving memories, directing partners Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige draw upon their vast multimedia expertise to craft a moving tale about intergenerational documentation and its poignant implications.

ANTICIPATION.
A film that promises to be formally daring in its approach to generational memories.

Set in present day Montreal, Maia (Rim Turki) is single mother to teenage daughter Alex (Paloma Vauthier). When a box containing Maia's old diaries, albums and cassettes is mailed to her by an old friend – to whom she had entrusted these treasures when she fled Lebanon in the late '80s – Alex decides to pore over her mother's keepsakes in private.

From this viewpoint, the film takes daring leaps into several mediums to transport us into Maia's adolescence (where she's played by Manal Issa) in Beirut, at once alive with the music of The Stranglers and fraught with fear as the country's civil war raged on.

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ENJOYMENT.

Thin characterisation means there's no dipping-the-madeleine moment of emotional nostalgia.

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IN RETROSPECT.

Still, there are so many textures at play here – a real sense of cinematic alchemy.

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A patchwork of deftly stitched vignettes, the film is successful in analysing how two disparate generations can connect over their parallel obsession with audiovisual documentation. Videos, photographs, holograms, internet searches, phone notifications, selfies, dreams: the film is a labyrinth of mediums that reflect the slipperiness and fallibility of memory.

It's also, fittingly, an oblique ode to archivation and the preservation of physical media – it offers a welcome argument against facile cries of 'live in the moment!' as well as a dutiful appreciation of the emotional weight that can be attached to compulsive record-making.

Hadjithomas and Joreige are artists as much as they are filmmakers, and their disciplines span between documentaries and photographic installations to sculptures and lectures. Needless to say, their artistic dexterity is on full display in

Memory Box. Gunfire in Lebanon becomes light damage on a piece of film: a fogged photograph – developed 30 years after it was taken – acts as a stand-in for a faded memory, the intrinsic and the intangible rendered in pixels.

While Alex bonds with her grandmother over their Lebanese culture by eating kibbeh and rolling vine leaves, the film pays due diligence to the particular disorienting power in disembodied voice recordings in triggering emotions across generations.

While it's joyous to experience the texture of such memories echoed in the fabric of the filmmaking, perhaps Memory Box struggles to coalesce its formal rigour with fleshing its characters into something beyond the invocation of digital ghosts. As a piece of fiction, there's little to truly be swept up in in terms of plot or characterisation – the framing device in particular leaves little room for Alex to grow in the audience's mind as someone who does anything other than turn the pages for us, as it were.

Falling short, too, is any substantial interrogation of the effects of the Lebanese Civil War: for Maia, personally, or her generation as a collective. But despite a prioritisation of visual effects over story, Memory Box makes a compelling case for chronicling the big and small parts of your life, if only to share with generations to come.



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