



Film

Interview

'It took months for the glass to leave her body': making Memory Box and surviving the Beirut blast

Cath Clarke

Lebanese film-makers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige explain how their experiences of war shaped their new film - and how art freed them

Thu 13 Jan 2022 14.20 GMT

On 4 August 2020, a catastrophic explosion ripped through Beirut's main port and into the city. In total, 218 people were killed. At the time, around 6pm, the artist and film-maker Joana Hadjithomas was in a cafe with a friend, around the corner from the studio she shares with her husband. The first thing she heard was a strange sound. "My friend and I just looked at each other. Instinctively, we went underneath

the table. I curled up and protected my face.” As a teenager, she had lived through Lebanon’s civil war; taking cover was second nature, a survival reflex. Then came the massive blast.

Afterwards, walking back to her apartment, she had no idea what was happening. An attack? An explosion? It was beyond comprehension. People were covered in blood; there was dust and rubble everywhere. “Wherever you looked, everything was destroyed. The scale was terrifying,” she says. In a state of shock, Hadjithomas had left her phone behind. When her husband, Khalil Joreige - frantic with worry - telephoned a couple of minutes later and a police officer answered, he feared the worst. Joreige tells the story with a shrug of helplessness, his face crumpling at the memory.

The couple met as teenagers and have been working together ever since. Living between Beirut and Paris, they make feature films, documentaries, video projects and photographic installations (their art is in the permanent collections of the [V&A](#) in London and the Guggenheim in New York City). He seems serious, intellectual. She is warm, with a gift for intimacy; happy to chat about art, kids, anything. They have two children, Alya, 21, and Ramzi, 11.



📷 Film-makers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige pictured in Paris in 2021. Photograph: Alain Jocard/AFP/Getty Images

When we meet, it is a little more than a year since the blast. The buzzy creative neighbourhood where they live and work, Gemmayzeh, was directly in the path of destruction.

They lost friends and colleagues. Hadjithomas had minor injuries; her back was studded with little shards of glass. It is Joreige who tells me this: “It took months for the glass to leave her body.” Later, he explains that people of their generation snapped into survival mode during

the explosion - moving away from windows, ducking under tables - just as they had learned as kids during the civil war. “Younger people went to the windows to film it; the young were hurt.” It is a horrible detail.

But there were miracles, too. That afternoon, Joreige had wanted to stay late to work at the studio, which overlooks the port. But their kids pestered him into playing tennis in the mountains - “for the first time in 30 years”, he says with an expression somewhere between a grin and a grimace. Alya had recently flown back from England, where she is a student at University College London. She was meant to be quarantining; it was her last day, but she had snuck out of the apartment to play tennis. “They were lucky,” says Joreige. They left 30 minutes before the explosion. If he had stayed in the studio, if Alya had stayed at home ... it doesn’t bear thinking about. “It’s not possible that nothing would have happened.”



📺 A gem, full of thoughtfulness and quiet intensity ... Clémence Sabbagh, Paloma Vauthier and Rim Turki in *Memory Box*. Photograph: © Haut et Court, Abbout Productions, micro_scope

Hadjithomas and Joreige are in London for a screening of *Memory Box*, their first feature film in nine years, shot before the blast. It is a gem, full of thoughtfulness and quiet intensity, following three generations of women in Canada. Maia (played beautifully by Rim Turki), a psychoanalyst, left [Lebanon](#) at the end of the 80s and never went back. She lives in Montreal with her mother (Clémence Sabbagh) and her teenage daughter Alex (Paloma Vauthier).

The film opens on Christmas Eve, when a large box arrives from Paris, full of notebooks that Maia wrote, during the civil war, to a friend, who has recently died. Her daughter reads the notebooks in secret; her mother is terrified that they will unearth a dark family secret. There are also flashbacks to Lebanon in the 80s, where Maia (played as a teenager by Manal Issa) is rebelling against her parents, living each day with intensity, as if it were her last - which, of course, it might be.

The film tells a personal story. In 1982, during the civil war, when Hadjithomas was 13, her best friend moved to Paris. “We were devastated. We promised to write to each other every day.” She smiles gently. “It was a very teenage promise.” But they kept it up. For six years, she wrote daily, filling notebooks, sometimes 40 pages in one sitting, and recording voice memos on cassette tapes. “It was like a diary. I told her everything. I think it kept me alive in a way, emotionally.”



📺 Living each day with intensity ... Memory Box. Photograph: © Haut et Court, About Productions, micro_scope

After the war, she lost contact with her friend. Then, in 2013, the two women met for coffee in Paris and exchanged notebooks. Hadjithomas had the unnerving experience of meeting herself as a teenager. “This?!” she exclaims, burying her face in her hands. “This is who I was?” She didn’t recognise the girl on the page. Memory Box explores this gap between memory and history.

The film has a beautiful, handcrafted feel, full of photos and art from the couple’s archive. Much of it is now gone. “Our artistic work is completely gone, blown away,” says Hadjithomas. Her husband nods: “Completely destroyed.” For weeks after the blast, they would come across their photos that had fluttered across the neighbourhood in the street, one time in a car park.

Alya was 13 when the notebooks arrived, exactly the same age as her mum when she started writing. She begged to be allowed to read them. But the couple were adamant: no. It didn’t feel healthy. Especially not the bits about when they met, at 19. “No! No!” says Hadjithomas with mock-horror.

But these conversations gave them a good idea for a plot: a daughter learning about her mother, who has always been a distant figure to her. “Here, but not present,” is how Hadjithomas describes Maia. She has met many people like that, living with trauma.

As parents, Hadjithomas and Joreige have agonised about how to explain their experiences growing up in wartime to their kids. But they were never traumatised, Hadjithomas insists. Art and films saved them: “We lived violent things, but art led us out of it. We didn’t let the ghosts fill our life.”

Memory Box is released in UK and Irish cinemas and through [virtual cinema platforms](#) from 21 January

... as you’re joining us from France, we have a small favour to ask. Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian’s fearless journalism since we started publishing 200 years ago, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million supporters, from 180 countries, now power us financially - keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent.

Unlike many others, the Guardian has no shareholders and no billionaire owner. Just the determination and passion to deliver high-impact global reporting, always free from commercial or political influence. Reporting like this is vital for democracy, for fairness and to demand better from the powerful.

And we provide all this for free, for everyone. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can keep track of global events, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action. Millions can benefit from open access to quality news, regardless of their ability to pay for it.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and sustains our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as €1 -**