



Film

Memory Box review – family secrets and lies from Lebanon’s darkest days

★★★★☆

Drama deftly switches across generations and time to explore the traumas inflicted by the civil war

Leslie Felperin

Mon 17 Jan 2022 16.00 GMT

Like their previous cinema and gallery-based collaborations, this latest work by co-directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige ([A Perfect Day](#), [I Want to See](#)) tackles the painful legacy of the civil war and ongoing troubles of their homeland Lebanon. But while *Memory Box* playfully incorporates different media and filmic textures (8mm and 16mm footage, still photographs that turn into mini-animations, and the like) into its story, as did the co-directors’ earlier work, ultimately it is an eminently accessible feature film about three generations living through intense trauma and coming out the other side, mostly intact. That hopeful note resonates with a literal brightness as the last images capture the sun rising over Beirut, the raggedly indomitable city at the centre of the story and is effectively another character here.

The action properly starts in the present day in Montreal where teenager Alex (Paloma Vauthier) lives with her mother Maia (Rim Turki) and grandmother Teta (Clemence Sabbagh). One snowy Christmas Eve, a huge box of journals, notebooks, cassette tapes and photographs arrives from France, all memorabilia that Maia sent from Beirut to her friend Liza in Paris while the Lebanese civil war of the 1980s was raging. (Some of the contents belonged originally to Hadjithomas.)

Afraid of the painful memories and long submerged secrets that the material might reveal, Alex is forbidden by her grandmother and Maia from looking at the box's contents. Of course, like one of Bluebeard's wives in the fairytale, she goes ahead and dives in. Consequently, she learns how the teenage Maia (played by Manal Issa in flashbacks) clashed with her parents, got obsessed with guys and her own looks, partied and experienced joy in a time when not only were there no mobile phones or WhatsApp, but there was a war going on with constant bombings and militia-run checkpoints where people were frequently killed. (You'd almost think that Hadjithomas and Joreige constructed the film as a service to contemporary parents dealing with privileged first-world teens complaining about trivial problems such as poor wifi or revoked car access.)

In all seriousness though, this is a film with a deep reservoir of empathy for all its characters. While the oldest generation find themselves racked between the conventional expectations of the past and the gravest traumas of the times, the youngest are just as confused and lost, their pain no less real even if the causes seem less dramatic. Edited with minute attentiveness, the film switches back and forth between time periods adroitly in a way that always moves the story forward, while

the outstanding performances from the whole ensemble, especially the watchful Vauthier and the fierce Issa, anchor the film.

Memory Box is released on 21 January in cinemas and on digital platforms.

