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## ‘Memory Box’: Film Review | Berlin 2021

Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige explore the importance of personal and historical memory in a drama bouncing between Montreal and Beirut.

BY DEBORAH YOUNG MARCH 1, 2021 3:45AM



COURTESY OF HAUT ET COURT ABOUT PRODUCTIONS/MICROSCOPE The tragedy of the Lebanese civil war extends far beyond the 1980s and into the third generation of a family resettled in Canada in the affecting drama *Memory Box*. It marks the first film in nine years from the award-winning team Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, whose work has ranged freely over feature films, docs, installations and performance art.

Though *Memory Box* shows the sophisticated modernity of their artistic approach, it is also one of the most accessible of their films, thanks to a winning cast of fine actresses and an engrossing back-and-forth timeline that jumps from wartime Beirut under the bombs to the staid

## THE BOTTOM LINE

*A warm, dense tale about women.*

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Among other things, the film is an extremely dense fusion of elements that make up our sense of time and memories, including collages of hundreds of old photos, grainy super 8 footage, notebooks, songs and music, sound bites and newspaper articles. These voices from the past unexpectedly arrive during a blizzard at the Canadian home of Maia (Rim Turki) and her teenage daughter Alex (Paloma Vauthier), in a big box sent from France. It contains the pictures and notebooks she sent to her best friend Liza circa 1983 after the girl moved to Paris, minutely recounting her daily life during the civil war. Now Liza is dead and the “memory box” has been returned to sender.

Alex is highly intrigued, but her grandma Teta (Clemence Sabbagh) deviously persuades her to hide the box from Maia until “after the holidays” because “the past drives your Mom crazy.” And indeed, when Maia learns about the box, she is furious. Exactly what it contains that is so upsetting is the mystery at the heart of the film. But the dark family secret, once revealed, turns out to be much less interesting than the way the box’s contents connect mothers and daughters across time and generations. As Alex sneaks down to the basement to read Mom’s teenage notebooks, the photos come alive, along with those terrible-wonderful years in Beirut.

How movies both witness and rewrite history is a theme floated in other films by Hadjithomas and Joreige like *A Perfect Day*, in which a young man and his mother attempt to bury their ghosts from the war, and *Je Veux Voir*, where Catherine Deneuve, faced with the devastation of Beirut, embodies cinema itself. While *Memory Box* is a recognizable extension of these cerebral films, its story is much easier to connect to, and the engaging cast of strong actresses widens its appeal.

Through Alex’s eyes, her mother appears as a head-strong teenager growing up in Beirut. Young Maia (passionately played by Manal Issa with a stillness that goes deep) lives with her parents in a middle-class home engulfed in mourning. Her father, a principal who refuses to leave his school, and her nervous mother Teta (Sabbagh) can’t shake off the pall of her brother’s death in a shooting.

Left on her own, Maia roams the streets and discos with her girlfriends, until one day she meets the dark-eyed Raja (Hassan Akil in a dreamlike role of few words). In a sequence full of visual effects, she rides with him on his motorbike while the city explodes behind them like a cartoon; in another, they make out in his car on a lonely hill while bombs rain down on the city below.

an exuberant group dance to Blondie's 80's hit "One Way or Another," linking the present to the collective joy of young Maia and her teenage friends. It is one way to visualize the immaterial nature of memory and how it is transmitted from one generation to the next.

*Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Competition)*

*Production companies: Haut et Court, About Productions, Micro-Scope*

*Cast: Rim Turki, Manal Issa, Paloma Vauthier, Clemence Sabbagh, Hassan Akil*

*Directors: Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige*

*Screenwriters: Gaelle Mace, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige*

*Producers: Carole Scotta, Georges Schoucair, Christian Eid, Barbara Letellier, Luc Dery, Kim McCraw, Jasmyrh Lemoine*

*Director of photography: Josee Deshaies*

*Production designers: Maia El Khoury, Mary Lynn Deachman, Franckie Diago*

*Costume designer: Lara Mae Khamis*

*Editor: Tina Baz*

*Music: Radwan Ghazi Moumneh, Charbel Haber*

*World sales: Playtime*

*100 minutes*

*In French, Arabic*