

## ‘Memory Box’ Review: A Collection of Family Artifacts Spark Links to the Past

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige deliver a beautifully poignant intergenerational story that acts as a multimedia scrapbook of Beirut.

By Jay Weissberg ▾



Courtesy of Berlin Film Festival

Perhaps it's because “[Memory Box](#)” is freely adapted from co-director [Joana Hadjithomas](#)' teenage letters and diaries that this is the most affectingly Proustian of the filmmaker's works made with [Khalil Joreige](#). “Perhaps” because it would be wrong to treat this richly multi-layered exploration of memory and how it's processed across generations as a standard fictionalized memoir. Well-known for how they organically incorporate experimental techniques into films tackling the traumas of Lebanese society since the Civil War (“[Je veux voir](#),” “[A Perfect Day](#)”), the duo here weave together what starts as an almost too-traditional mother-daughter struggle today with visualizations of life in Beirut during the early 1980s. The combination becomes an intoxicating cocktail of recollections while also addressing how different generations process the touchstone triggers of memory.

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Through an ingenious blend of image and music, “Memory Box” opens channels that allow our own experience to empathetically blend with those of the characters in a mix of imagination and reality. Hadjithomas and Joreige’s creative treatment of the image, including meaningful juxtaposition of different gauges and textures, has never felt so accessible to audiences unused to avant-garde practices, and while this is a deeply personal film, it will have overpowering resonance with multitudes of viewers.

The opening sequences, with their pale, diffused Canadian light following a snowstorm, set a deceptively average scene: Teenage Alex (Paloma Vauthier) texts with friends and then prepares stuffed vine leaves with her t ta (grandma) (Cl mence Sabbagh) while waiting for her mom Maia (Rim Turki) to get home for Christmas Eve. A large carton arrives for Maia from France, but t ta tries to decline the delivery, visibly disturbed by the return address.

The package is from the parents of Maia’s classmate from Beirut days, Liza, recently killed in a car accident, and it contains the daily letters, photos and cassette tapes Maia mailed her best friend after Liza’s family left Lebanon. The contents are too painful to process, so she puts the box on a shelf and forbids Alex from looking at them. Just as t ta pushes away all talk of the past in the belief she’s protecting her loved ones from trauma, so Maia perpetuates her mother’s behavior with her own daughter, not realizing that the wall of silence prevents Alex from understanding her mother and her own heritage.

The temptation proves too great, however, and Alex secretly goes through the contents, discovering her mother’s world and thoughts from around the time Maia was her age. What’s revealed, starting with photos that become animated like a flipbook and then full flashback sequences, is a Beirut on the brink of being torn apart, but also a city where a teenager grows into herself and finds first love. Maia in the early 1980s (Manal Issa) hungers for life while everything around her is teetering toward tragedy: Her younger brother’s recent killing left a pall over the family, making her mother (Nisrine Abi Samra) over-protective while plunging her school principal father into depression. Yet notwithstanding these pressures, she’s still a student pushing boundaries, falling in love with Raja (Hassan Akil) and embracing life.

The film depicts this duality beautifully, acknowledging the rising strains throughout the city and the stifling blanket of unspoken grief in the apartment but also capturing energetic friendships, surreptitious date nights at the cinema, and the way dancing to Blondie’s “One Way or Another” releases the pressurized tensions of teenage turmoil mixed with life in a city under siege. To convey the fullness of these emotions, the directors imprint the images with burns and expanding explosions, using the materiality of cinema much like a painter creates turbulence with scraped paint and impasto.

In a world of messaging apps, Facebook and Instagram, it’s easy to forget how streams of letters, photographs and cassettes once allowed us to share our souls with others (they last a lot longer, too). The directors parallel these modes, showing Alex on her cell phone sharing her mother’s contact sheets with friends and setting down her thoughts in tandem with Maia’s analog communiqu s with Liza 40 years earlier. One of the strengths of “Memory Box” is the way it folds together past and present, making Alex’s discovery of her mother’s passions as vital a part of the story as Maia’s life in Lebanon. Indeed, it’s only through Alex’s insistence on confronting the past that the adult Maia is able to reconnect with the vitality she locked away in a carton.

If there’s a weak link here it’s t ta, whose character is too easily pigeon-holed, and a little more boldness in the Canadian scenes might have given her more depth. But this is a minor quibble about a side figure, and the “normal” quality of those early scenes acts as a counterpoint to how the rest of the film blooms. While all the actors are strong, it’s necessary to single out Rim Turki’s deeply expressive performance. Though Maia walled-off a part of herself decades earlier, she’s no cold fish; yet watching her become reacquainted with her wounds through her daughter’s persistence (the film’s matriarchal emphasis is an additional strength), and seeing her incorporate her past once again into her present, is a stirring transformation.

Time periods are delineated via tone and texture, the matte qualities of the Montreal scenes contrasted with deeper, richer hues in the Lebanese sections, which also mix Super-8 and 16mm to evoke a tangible sense of a past that avoids period fetishization. Tina Baz’s editing is wondrously on point, not so much juggling as absorbing the different formats and styles as if we’re presented with multimedia scrapbooks seamlessly melding into flashes of memory, dream-states and reality.

As much as “Memory Box” is a film about one particular story, it’s also a love letter to Beirut, that battered jewel of the Mediterranean whose recent blasted wounds add an inescapable layer of poignancy. The final shots, of the sun rising on the city, are accompanied by the indie Lebanese band the Bunny Tylers’ “Let There Be Light,” given a 1980s revamp, and as the words are intoned like an optimistic grace note, it also becomes an urgent prayer.

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Berlin Film Festival 2021, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Memory Box

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#### ‘Memory Box’ Review: A Collection of Family Artifacts Spark Links to the Past

**Reviewed at Cinema Giulio Cesare, Rome, Feb. 25, 2021. (In Berlin Film Festival – competing.) Running time: 102 MIN.**

**Production:** (France-Lebanon-Canada) An Haut et Court release (in France) of an Haut et Court, About Prods., Micro\_Scope production, with the participation of TV5Monde, in association with Playtime, Haut et Court Distribution, La Banque Postale, Image 12, Sunnyland Film, Doha Film Institute, Les Films Opale. (World sales: Playtime, Paris.) Producers: Georges Schoucair, Christian Eid, Carole Scotta, Barbara Letellier, Kim McCraw, Luc Déry, Jasmyrh Lemoine.

**Crew:** Directors: Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige. Screenplay: Gaëlle Macé, Hadjithomas, Joreige. Camera: Josée Deshaies. Editor: Tina Baz. Music: Radwan Ghazi Moumneh, Charbel Haber.

**With:** Rim Turki, Manal Issa, Paloma Vauthier, Clémence Sabbagh, Nisrine Abi Samra, Hassan Akil, Rabih Mroué. (French, Arabic dialogue)

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