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## How ‘Memory Box’ Directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige Mined Their Own Past

By Ben Croll ▾



Courtesy of Berlin Film Festival

When directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige – who are being honored with a retrospective at Torino Film Festival – uncovered a trove of photographs, journals and audio recordings they had made while growing up in Beirut of the 1980s, they knew these personal archives would fuel their next film. Acclaimed artists and documentarians, the creative duo opted to develop these archives into a narrative feature that tells the story of two generations of mothers and daughters.

Set in present-day Canada and 1980s Lebanon, “[Memory Box](#)” – which premiered in competition at Berlin – focuses on an adolescent girl who stumbles upon her mother’s own personal archives, and through them discovers her mother at a wholly different age.

**Why did you want to develop this as fiction feature – your first in over a decade?**

Hadjithomas: We had so much material that we didn’t want to go into a documentary. For us, it was clear to take those existing documents, those pictures and tapes, and work them into narrative fiction.

Joreige: To do an essay-film would have been too easy, in a way. Here, we had to challenge ourselves. It was a long journey – not only by way of production, but also by re-creating the elements we had to deal with.

### **What did that process look like?**

Hadjithomas: We started to put the real notebooks in the story while adding layers of fiction [on top of them]. We liked this flirtation between the fiction and the documents, between the past and the present. We wanted this fiction to speak to our teenage daughter, and to those outside of our generation, who don't know about Lebanon in the 1980s, so we worked that idea the script.

Joreige: Even if we used my original pictures as a base, we had to redo them for the film, bringing in the main characters. We had to redo the notebooks, bringing in the characters. It allowed us to rethink our relation to the past, how we could rearticulate it. This difference strikes at the core of our work, about the writing of history and the question of narrative.

### **How did that affect your work with actors Rim Turki, Paloma Vauthier and Manal Issa?**

Hadjithomas: We didn't give them the full script, so there was a degree of improvisation; the actors took the film in unexpected directions and we [the filmmakers] followed. We would rewrite in the editing room, adapting the notebooks and archival materials to what we discovered in the edit. The script was never fixed. We don't like to control; we prefer to let go and see what happens.

### **Reading her mother's scrapbooks, the young girl creates a kind fantasy world, projecting herself into the scenes. How did you develop the unique visual approach for these sequences?**

Hadjithomas: These couldn't be memories, because she was not there, so it's like an approximate vision [of what could have been]. We didn't want to do something that has the texture of visual effects, so we played with the idea of photographic contact sheets, of what's in the frame and what's out of it. Photography was our first medium, and it remains very central in our artistic lives so here it was the perfect tool. ... We wanted to show that you could put artistic experimentation in a film while keeping it accessible to a wider audience.

### **The film takes on an extra layer of meta-textual poignancy because so many of its Beirut locations would later be destroyed in the August 2020 explosion.**

Joreige: We were in Lebanon when the blast happened. Joanna was in a café, so she escaped by a miracle. She heard the blast and ducked under a table. At first we asked, is the film still relevant?

Hadjithomas: When we screened the film, it felt so strange to see all the areas that were subsequently destroyed. It felt like a time capsule but was also so present.

### **Did you consider making reference to it?**

Joreige: We didn't re-edit anything afterwards, but this idea of suns and cycles of generation that is central in all our work felt suddenly all more relevant.

Hadjithomas: We worked on the idea that after a catastrophe there is regeneration. We wanted to say with the film that we don't have the luxury of despair; we always have to search for light. As the song that ends the film says, there will be light.

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