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BY Rachel Montpelier

August 5, 2022

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Family secrets always seem to get spilled during the holidays, don't they? They definitely do in "Memory Box," Joana Hadjithomas' [semi-autobiographical](#) drama centering three generations of Lebanese-Canadian women coming to terms with their cultural and familial history.

It's Christmas Eve in Montreal and Alex (Paloma Vauthier) is chatting with her grandmother, Téta (Clémence Sabbagh), as she waits for her mother, Maia (Rim Turki), to get home. When an unexpected package is delivered, Téta recognizes the return address and insists they hide it until after the holidays – she's sure that whatever's inside will upset Maia. But the deception doesn't last for long. Maia finds the box, which contains journals, photos, letters, and tapes from her teen years. As Téta predicted, Maia is shaken at the prospect of coming face-to-face with her past; Alex, meanwhile, is curious. Against her mother's express wishes, she digs through the memory box in secret, getting to know Maia's younger self.

This is where "Memory Box" proves itself to be a major filmmaking feat, a cinematic scrapbook of sorts. Alex's journey into her mother's past is brought to life with innovative multi-media techniques. A photograph of teenage Maia (Manal Issa) and her friends slowly begins to move, like a flip book, and then suddenly we are with Maia in '80s Lebanon, as she comes of age against the backdrop of the civil war and the personal tragedy that accompanies it. The recorded messages young Maia sends to a friend abroad provide insight into her internal life; this narration serves as the film's throughline, connecting Maia's adolescence to Alex's.

Similar to a couple other Picks of the Day I've covered this year, ["Alma's Rainbow"](#) and [the second season of "Russian Doll,"](#) "Memory Box" recognizes how complex the bond between mothers and daughters can be, and displays a great amount of empathy and grace toward its characters. Maia isn't intentionally trying to shut Alex out of her life; she views the package as Pandora's Box – if she opens it, will she be able to handle the flood of emotions and memories it will surely inspire? Meanwhile, Alex isn't trying to violate her mother's privacy; she's attempting

to understand a woman who has never really opened up to her, and learn about her own roots. And Téta doesn't see herself as meddling or overstepping; she believes she is protecting her daughter and granddaughter, and is making the best of their holiday together.

None of these three main characters are wrong or right – they're just doing their best, even if they seem misguided at times. Maia, Alex, and Téta lie, refuse to communicate, avoid hard conversations, and will be completely recognizable to anyone who has a family. The memories of the Lebanese civil war and the experiences of Lebanon-to-Canada migration are very specific, but the presence of family secrets feels pretty universal. Next time a bombshell is dropped at Christmas dinner, I'll try to keep "Memory Box" in mind – and remember that everyone has their reasons for sharing or not sharing parts of themselves – before I freak out.

"Memory Box" is now [playing at Film Forum in NYC](#). Hadjithomas directed with Khalil Joreige, and wrote the script with Joreige and Gaëlle Macé.

MEMORY BOX Trailer



Family Films Mother-Daughter Pick of the Day Women Directors Women Writers

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