

'Memory Box' is a haunting look at love in battered Beirut



CHENNAI: A compelling work about love, life and loss packaged neatly and executed with brilliance, “Memory Box” competed for the Golden Bear at the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part of the reason why the movie is so touching is its story and script, which drew inspiration from Lebanese co-director Joana Hadjithomas’ letters and diaries penned during her teens. Made with Khalil Joreige – the duo is known for their range of documentaries, features and performance art – “Memory Box” covers three generations of women from 1980s war-ravaged Beirut to icy Montreal. The writing — by the directors — is tight and leaves no room for confusion in this back-and-forth narrative.



[For the latest updates, follow us on Instagram @arabnews.lifestyle \(https://www.instagram.com/arabnews.lifestyle\)](https://www.instagram.com/arabnews.lifestyle)

The first film from by the award-winning directors in nine years, it has a picturesque start. It is Christmas Eve in Montreal, but one woman carries in her heart the ravages of the war, the loss of her love and the distress of seeing a sibling and parent die.

Hundreds of grainy old photos, notebooks, newspaper articles and cassettes arrive in a huge box without warning during a snowstorm at the Montreal home of Maia (Rim Turki) and her teenage daughter, Alex (Paloma Vauthier). The parcel is from Paris, and it contains just about everything Maia sent to her best friend, Liza after she left Beirut in 1983. Maia had put down every thought, every feeling, every sorrow in letters, notepads and cassettes and mailed them to Liza. Now that she is dead, the boxful of memories has been returned to the sender.

Alex is infinitely curious to see what the parcel contains, but her grandmother, or Teta (Clemence Sabbagh), discourages her, telling the young girl to hide it and wait for the holidays to be over before informing Maia. But in the middle of the night, Alex sneaks into the basement and discovers the ecstasy and agony of her mother's youth, her love, her stolen kisses inside a car with bullets flying all around or sometimes in the darkened auditorium of a cinema.

Alex finds out that her mother, Young Maia (passionately played by Manal Issa) was strong-willed and lived with her parents, who struggled to accept the death of their son in the war. The father was a principal who refused to leave his school, and the mother a nervous wreck living each minute in fear. But carefree Maia roamed the streets with her girlfriends, until she meets the handsome Raja (Hassan Akil). And then there was no stopping them — in a visually engaging sequence we watch the two zip along on a motorbike with the city in flames. This is one of the impressive visual effects by Laurent Brett. Josee Deshaies' cinematography offers some arresting moments. The contrast between a city living under falling bombs and the tranquility of the Canadian metropolis, where snow-white clouds hang tantalizingly low, is striking, to say the least. And the last shot of the sun rising over post-war Beirut infuses certain warmth.

It is a heady cocktail of a mother-daughter struggle and a story on the overwhelming power of memories. But the end is a tad too tame, even slightly contrived, which rather lets a wonderful film down.