

Incendies: Trauma and tragedy in the Middle East

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Directed by Denis Villeneuve; written by Villeneuve, based on the play by Wajdi Mouawad

French Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve's new film *Incendies* (Scorched) evokes Lebanon's terrible conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s with a sympathetic eye towards its victims. Villeneuve has directed a number of feature films, including *Polytechnique* (2009) and *Maelstrom* (2000).

In the end, unfortunately, the movie—based on the acclaimed play by Wajdi Mouawad—is vague enough regarding history and location as to encourage a fair amount of wishful thinking a propos the nature and origins of the Lebanese troubles.

The film's preamble presents a familiar image of young boys in a military-training camp some place in the Arab world. Set to Radiohead's song, "You and Whose Army," the adolescents are having their heads shaved. The camera zooms in on one boy's haunting face and records a vanishing innocence.

In Montreal, a notary (Rémy Girard) meets with adult twins Jeanne (Mélicha Désormeaux-Poulin) and Simon (Maxim Gaudette) for a reading of their mother's will. He hands them two letters, one to be delivered to the father they have never met, and assumed to be deceased, and the other to a brother they did not know existed. Their mother Nawal (Lubna Azabal) had always been a somewhat enigmatic figure, and they know little about her life before she came to Canada.

Jeanne is curious about her mother's history and sets off to a country that is never specified, but looks very much like Lebanon, while her brother stays behind, stewing in his resentments towards their mother. As the complexities of Nawal's story unfold, he eventually joins his sister.

The film intercuts the twins' experiences in their mother's homeland with flashbacks of the young adult years of Nawal, a Christian. Her political life begins in 1970 when her brothers murder her Muslim lover, the father of her unborn child. To avoid the wrath of the community, she is sent to live with a relative in the city after the birth of a son who is promptly

whisked away. A political maelstrom develops when Christian nationalists attack Muslim schools and refugee camps in the south, where Nawal heads in search of her son.

Incendies' locations are fictitious and events that occurred in Lebanon during the civil war are deliberately amalgamated. For example, one of the most horrifying incidents—the 1982 massacre at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps by the fascist Phalange, with the complicity of the Israelis—is never dramatized, but the viewer feels its presence in the film's fabric.

Moreover, the depictions of burnings, torture and repression ring true. In one of the movie's most memorable scenes, Nawal rides a bus disguised as a Muslim. The vehicle, transporting Muslims, mostly women and children, is attacked by right-wing Christian forces, who open fire, killing most of the passengers. Nawal lays on the bus' floor next to a terrified mother and her young daughter as the militia douses the vehicle with gasoline. Nawal pulls out her crucifix and is saved but not before she attempts in vain to rescue the young Muslim child.

It is a harrowing segment, creating white-knuckle tension and an immediate emotional connection with the victims. In this sharp, brief moment, Villeneuve captures some essential, intimate truth about the nightmare in the Middle East.

Well-paced, the movie skillfully maneuvers between past and present as Jeanne and Simon visit places where brutal events occurred in their mother's life. Uncovering these traumas help the twins better understand Nawal's emotional aloofness as a parent. One of the hardest revelations to digest was her 15-year incarceration in a gruesome prison for killing a right-wing nationalist leader. Repeatedly tortured and raped, she became known in the region as "the woman who sings" and is celebrated because she survived concerted efforts to destroy her intransigent spirit.

Nawal's travels through the dry white terrain of the south of Lebanon are beautifully filmed, with the soul of the country and its painful history ever-present in the cinematography.

Villeneuve does a remarkable job fashioning images that disturb and operate on the gut level. The film is at its best when it is historically concrete.

Unfortunately, even some of those moments are deliberately ambiguous. This ambiguity, as it turns out, is employed in the service of a finale that dissolves the historically tangible into a cloud of liberal confusion. *Incendies*' ending cuts the ground from beneath the structure of a film that Villeneuve worked hard to assemble and set in motion—with actors who deliver committed performances.

In the film's production notes, Villeneuve talks about dispensing politics in an apolitical way. He lauds Mouawad's play for delving into the subject of anger without fueling anger. "Emotion," says the director, "had to avoid being an end in itself but a means of achieving the catharsis effect [hard-to-swallow ending] sought. *Incendies* is also Jeanne and Simon's journey towards the source of their mother's hatred. This is a very universal quest and it touches me deeply...

"The wars that have wracked this region sometimes involved as many as 17 different factions of alliances and betrayals...Viewers of the film need to understand the gist of what can be understood while accepting that the situation has become too complex to be boiled down to black and white."

In an April interview with *movingpicturesnetwork.com*, Villeneuve boils the situation down to his own black-and-white interpretation: "[C]ivil war is about brothers killing brothers...That's the thing that I love about the play, this idea that everybody is linked together, and it's more terrible thinking that everybody's killing each other and everybody is linked in a way, like a huge family." Without disclosing the film's ending and central conceit, it can be said that in *Incendies*, fascists, torturers, rapists and victims are improbably connected at the biological level.

In another interview with *comingsoon.net*, the filmmaker claims that "the key to freedom as an adult—getting rid of anger you have towards your parents in order to understand your childhood and the links between past and present."

First of all, one has to question the wisdom of a parent (Nawal) sending her children into a war zone so that they could discover through an extremely high-risk process what she could (and should?) have told them in the safety of Montreal's environs. This incongruity is manhandled by Villeneuve to fit the needs of his narrative.

Leaving this aside, there are many problems in the film. Reconciliation and forgiveness on the individual plane is one thing, but it does not alter the historical facts: the intervention

of world imperialism in the Middle East, its machinations via Israel and fascist movements, such as the Phalange, not to mention the impotence and the subservience of the bourgeois national movements (the PLO and Hamas). For an individual to be encouraged to forgive someone who has done him or her personal injury is not the same thing as attempting to sooth an oppressed population with liberal platitudes in the face of a global exploiter and its local agents.

Entire classes or peoples, for the sake of an abstract and hollow amnesty, don't throw themselves into the arms of deadly enemies, nor should they. The real features of the contemporary situation in the Middle East are blurred by *Incendies* to be wiped away and replaced by simplified schema.

Villeneuve engages, no doubt unintentionally, in a sort of intellectual sleight of hand. He creates powerful, emotionally engaging moments out of specific, verifiable historic episodes of injustice and oppression. He implicates the viewer strongly and then pulls away and more or less absolves those forces who carry out the atrocities. One is driven to want to know what took place, not least of all to understand how to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies. This is in interest of clarity and justice, not vindictiveness.

The job is to root out the social reality that makes the awful events possible, to grapple with the contradictions that cause atrocities to repeat themselves, and not only in the Middle East. The real social relations need to be dissected—not sanitized—in whatever method the artist deems appropriate. In its best moments and at its most responsible, *Incendies* shows that historical truth can be artistically rendered.

Communalism in Lebanon will not be exorcized simply by the milk of human kindness. Big power politics and class divisions fuel the social and ethnic tensions. To think otherwise is chimerical and weakens the film.

How aware is Villeneuve that his hard work, with all its gems, lets Israel and the United States in particular off the hook?



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