

Incendies

More Middle East turbulence may not be on everyone's list of things to see at the movies, but the new Canadian film "Incendies" takes the troubled region's recent history and crafts from it a terrific family drama.

Based on a play of the same name (and called "Scorched" in its English version) by Wajdi Mouawad and expertly directed by Denis Villeneuve, "Incendies" opens with the Marwam twins, a sister, Jeanne (Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin), and a brother Simon (Maxim Gaudette), being read their mother's will. Their mother, a somewhat haunted woman, had raised the two by herself, and there are no other siblings, so they are stunned to learn that her last wish is for them to deliver two sealed envelopes to their father and their brother, both of whom are utterly unknown to them. This presents difficulties since mom, Nawal Marwam (the remarkable Lubna Azabal), was a refugee from the Middle East who left her home country more than 30 years ago.

The notary/executor reading the will, Jean Lebel (Remy Girard), a family friend who employed their mother, urges them to try and solve these riddles. Thus begins a journey into Nawal's past. Simon sees his mother's request as evidence that she was crazy, and he wants nothing to do with what he feels is a fool's errand. Jeanne, however, looks to respect her mother's wishes and launches a quest to the region (no specific country is named, though a good guess would be Lebanon) to trace her mother's background.

That search comes to reveal a personal history filled with tumult, including a lost newborn, a murder, and a prison term. Nawal, Jeanne learns, is a Christian in a majority Muslim world, and her religion—within the Middle East's pathological hostilities—is at times an advantage to her and at times a curse. Many who knew her mother, it turns out, even refuse to speak to Jeanne.

She ultimately seeks Simon's assistance, and he reluctantly joins her in the Middle East, along with the faithful Lebel. The brother then gets caught up in searching for his elusive father and brother, and the search eventually leads them all back home again. In learning about their mother's past and, thus, their own history, the twins discover why Nawal was the woman that she was, and what they learn provides the stunning twist to this compelling film.

"Incendies" was one of the five foreign language films nominated for the Academy Award this year (it is in French and Arabic), and perhaps it should have won the honor. It combines a forceful script (penned by Villeneuve with Mouawad), top-drawer acting from its principals, and a tense, dramatic setting for its story (location shooting was done in Jordan). The drama can be raw—some prison scenes are not for the squeamish—but it is never less than gripping.

This is the turmoil of the Middle East brought down to the personal, and heartbreaking, level.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 130 minutes.)

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