



INCENDIES

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Denis Villeneuve on *Incendies*

The French-Canadian filmmaker talks local secrets and Middle Eastern tragedies with Tom Dawson of Sight & Sound:

“I don’t think of it as a movie about war: I think of it as a movie about family”, says Québécois writer-director Denis Villeneuve of his acclaimed fourth feature *Incendies*. A strikingly cinematic adaptation of Lebanese-born French-Canadian Wajdi Mouawad’s 2003 play of the same name, this intimate epic interweaves the personal, political and mythical, gripping the viewer right from its opening sequence of child soldiers having their heads shaved to the soundtrack of Radiohead’s ‘You and Whose Army?’.

Spanning some four decades, *Incendies* shifts between two parallel narratives. In the present, adult Canadian twins Jeanne (Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin) and Simon (Maxim Gaudette) find themselves in the unnamed Middle Eastern homeland of their recently deceased Arab mother Nawal (Lubna Azabal), whose will stipulates they track down a father they presumed was dead and an older brother they didn’t know existed. And in the past we witness Nawal herself being tragically caught up in a civil war that pits Christians against Muslims.

Villeneuve originally saw Mouawad’s play at a small theatre in Quebec back in 2004, and was profoundly affected. He was already preparing another film called *Polytechnique*, which explored a real-life massacre of female students at a Montreal engineering college. “I switched between the two projects, spending three months on each in turn”, he explains. “Both were ready to shoot at the same time, but *Polytechnique* was less complicated logistically and easier to finance. I remember going to Cannes for 24 hours to do press on *Polytechnique*, then flying straight back to the shoot of *Incendies*.”



The director is quick to praise Mouawad, not just for giving him the rights to film the play, but also for giving him complete creative freedom in his adaptation. “That was the most beautiful artistic gift,” enthuses Villeneuve. “He told me to do whatever I wanted, whether I wanted to use just the title, a scene or a character. I always tried to stay faithful to his vision, even while removing big chunks of the play. I kept the dramatic structure, the key ideas and main characters.

“The hardest thing was working in a milieu outside my own,” he continues. “I’d been to the Middle East before, but I still felt like a total

tourist – unlike Wajdi, who was born in Lebanon and had left with his family during the civil war. I think that’s why I approached the story from the angle of the family: like me, the twins are outsiders in this Arab culture.”

Indeed, it’s Jeanne and Simon’s quest to uncover the mysteries of their mother’s early life which gives *Incendies* such universal resonance. “The life experiences of your parents affect you as an adult,” says Villeneuve. “You can see that anger has been passed down from Nawal to her children – but by finding out the truth about what happened to her and why she became how she was, they can start to be free. Of course it’s a painful process, but the idea of change is really important in the film. People can evolve and cycles of violence and hatred can end.”

It was the part of Nawal which proved hardest to cast, and Villeneuve assumed that he would need to find two or even three actresses to play the character at different stages of her life. His casting director in Paris suggested Lubna Azabal, best known for her roles in *Paradise Now* (2005) and *Exiles* (2004), and her screen test was exceptional. “We got her to read out some letters, and she looked about 18, even though in real life she’s 30,” Villeneuve recalls. “I knew that with makeup we could age her for the scenes in Canada. Artistically, I fell in love with her immediately. She simply *was* Nawal.”

Shot in Jordan and Quebec, *Incendies* boasts an impressive visual sweep, yet Villeneuve stresses he wished to keep his *mise en scène* “as humble as possible. The goal was not to be stunning, not to show off, especially in the scenes concerned with war. I wanted to show the victims’ point of view and not make the action exciting,” he says. “It was important that there was a relationship between the landscapes and the inner feelings of the characters walking through them. I tried never to fall into the trap of exoticism.”

Will Villeneuve himself be heading back to home territory after finishing his promotional work on *Incendies*? “I’ve been asked to direct an American film, *Prisoners*, in the autumn. It’s a great screenplay but it’s about torture, and after *Polytechnique* and *Incendies* I think it’s too dark and tough for me at the moment. I want to get back to directing my own projects.”