

9th September 2013

Incendies (15)

Director: **Denis Villeneuve**

Canada/France 2010 In French/Arabic with English subtitles

Running time : 130 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin** (Jeanne Marwan), **Maxim Gaudette** (Simon Marwan), **Lubna Azabal** (Nawal Marwan), **Rémy Girard** (Notaire Jean Lebel).

SCRIPT: **Denis Villeneuve, from a play by Wajdi Mouawad.** PHOTOGRAPHY: **André Turpin.** EDITING: **Monique Dartonne.** MUSIC: **Grégoire Hetzel.**

At the beginning of Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*, we see a brother and sister hearing the peculiar terms of their mother's will from the notary who had also served as her employer. They are jointly charged with locating their long lost brother, and father, in their country of origin, itself unidentified but clearly somewhere in the Near East. Only then may they bury their mother so that she may rest in peace.

The reactions of the siblings are notably different, from meek submission on the part of the daughter to impatient dismissiveness from the son. Truly, this is a film in which it is the woman's perspective that matters, and the narrative is a double ordeal in which the daughter's investigation, in a country where she is at times viewed with hostility, is juxtaposed with the story of the mother, told in flashback.

The superficial similarity between the two actresses when playing younger women may indeed give unguarded viewers cause for confusion, and the bold, red 'Godardian' titles that presage changes of scene and time are more thematic than chronological. That said, after a little adjustment it is possible to slot into the film's narrative aesthetic easily enough, and Grégoire Hetzel's Mahler-inflected score deserves a mention in furnishing an appropriately sombre, portentous tone for what is a steady unveiling of truths too shattering to adumbrate in words, much less betray in a review like this.

The achievement of this French-Canadian film, to my mind, is its total empathy for the collective experience of the Near East over the last fifty years with all its manifold human misery on every side of the faith divide. One thinks of closer testimonies to national tragedy, such as *Bloody Sunday*, or *Indigènes (Days of Glory)*, films which, despite their strengths, fail to move on a

personal level in the ways *Incendies* does. Is it the anonymity of the country involved that makes the drama more pointed and universal? (French links at least suggest the Lebanon as a likely contender.) Or is it the quality of the performances by Désormeaux-Poulin and Azabal?

Whatever the case, and whether or not you guess at the tragic outcome (in the Aristotelian sense) before the film's conclusion, you will follow this westerner's unravelling of her mother's, and her own culture's, trauma with a keenly attuned and mounting sense of dread.

David Clare