



**DENIS VILLENEUVE: THE PATH TO DUNE**

# Incendies

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

From the outset, *Incendies* is clearly not going to be your average tale of conflict in the Middle East. We open with a slow, dreamy pan accompanied by a Radiohead song, 'You and Whose Army?' We look out of the window on to a scene of pastoral loveliness: palm trees swaying in a warm desert wind, an oasis alive with birdsong and cicadas (Jordan, as immaculately photographed by André Turpin). The camera pulls back as the music wafts, distantly at first – absurd, like a Noel Coward song played at the wrong speed on an old wind-up gramophone. 'Come on, come on/ Holy Roman Empire/Come on if you think/Come on if you think/ You can take us all on,' Thom Yorke croons in words you can hardly make out. A series of almost static framings follows; the children in the shot seem to have a sad, ethereal beauty. It's puzzling, even as it's affecting, and for a moment the film seems to teeter on the brink of disaster – it really does look like a plausible Radiohead video for the song being played.

Among the children is one angry boy with three dots on his ankle. The camera zooms in closer and ever closer to his eye, into the well of hatred and abuse that will propel the whole movie. The music continues as we glide forward to a different timeframe – contemporary Canada – and alight on a room in a lawyer's office, impacted with paper files. We move in close on a file marked 'Nawal Marwan'. The colour palette changes slightly to a drab, maple beige. It's as if the director, having delivered a quite shamelessly manipulative emotional punch, suddenly takes everything off the stove and stops cooking. We now find ourselves in the lives of a brother, Simon (Maxim Gaudette), and sister, Jeanne (Mélima Désormeaux-Poulin), attending the reading of the will left by their mother, Nawal Marwan, with whom they had a difficult relationship. The will requires them to travel to her (unspecified) country of origin in the Middle East and hand sealed letters to a half-brother they never knew they had and the father they thought was dead.

French-Canadian director Denis Villeneuve – here adapting (and slimming down considerably) an award-winning three-and-a-half-hour play by Wajdi Mouawad – is a director who knows how to deal with complex issues sensitively. His dramatisation of the 1989 Montreal Massacre – Canada's Columbine, when 14 female students were singled out for killing by a gunman – *Polytechnique* (2009) was shot in black and white to minimise its more incarnadine and sensational aspects (the opposite to his thinking in *Incendies*, with its colour-saturated vision of a bus set on fire after all those inside have been shot). *Polytechnique* proved Villeneuve had a steady hand when it came to national trauma; he consulted those bereaved by the massacre and specifically excluded the mention of the gunman's name. This sensitivity is probably the reason why he's so well regarded in Francophone countries, and why he was seen as the right man for the job by playwright Wajdi Mouawad, who told him to do whatever he wanted with his play – which is just what Villeneuve did.

Just as Villeneuve leaves out the name of the killer in *Polytechnique*, so in *Incendies* he leaves out the name of the country. We all know it's Lebanon, but the liberating aspect of the omission is that it frees him from any need to

be literal. As a director he's never been shy of complex narrative structures, on which he usually hangs the consequences of violence – and especially violence against women. *Maelström* (2000) was a black comedy narrated by a fish, involving a woman coming to terms with an abortion and the accidental killing of a man. Such complexity requires precise editing, and Villeneuve is well served on *Incendies* by Monique Dartonne, best known for her work with director Tony Gatlif on *Gadjo Dilo* (1997) and *Exiles* (2004).

In fact Villeneuve must really have liked *Exiles*, since he also cast its lead actress in the central role of Nawal: Lubna Azabal, also familiar to Western audiences on the strength of her performance in the Palestinian film *Paradise Now* (2005), which shares with *Incendies* a dislike of didactic and ideological positioning. She lends a solemn and shell-shocked intensity to her role as Nawal, whom we see mostly in flashback – first as a rustic in love, until her boyfriend is murdered by her family and her baby taken away to become a boy soldier; then as a middle-class professional turned Baader-Meinhof style assassin; then finally as a prisoner who endures rape as a weapon of war.

*Incendies* may cover similar literal territory to Samuel Maoz's 2009 Golden Lion-winner *Lebanon*, but there's also a sense of almost trashy, coincidence-based melodrama at work here that's not usually seen in sombre, sectarian-issue dramas of this kind. The extraordinary thing is that it works. Like *Lebanon*, it has its roots in that country's 1980s conflict between Christian and Muslim militias, but where *Lebanon* toils in the noise and darkness of a tank in battle, *Incendies* unfolds mainly in the quiet of offices and homes where family relationships break down under intolerable strain.

In some respects, it could be seen as an old-fashioned familial mystery story couched as a war film – for there is war in this film, unfair, stupid and reckless, with whole busloads of people massacred and little children shot down like dogs in ruined streets by stone-cold snipers. This is not war about identity, ideology and explosions; this is war as rape and incest – and parents eating their children, like Saturn in Goya's famous painting.

Canada's submission for this year's Best Foreign Language Film Oscar (it lost out to Denmark's *In a Better World*), *Incendies* is what's known in Hollywood parlance as a breakout film, with which a director lauded on home territory suddenly becomes known to a far wider international audience. Aside from *Lebanon*, one comparison would be with Villeneuve's Canadian compatriot Atom Egoyan. In another universe Egoyan might have pulled off something similar with *Ararat*, his anguished 2002 misfire about the legacy of the Armenian Massacres. *Incendies* acquires its heft from some very deep places – Greek tragedy rather than newsflashes. With its shattering encounters between sons and their long-lost parents, it's almost an anti-Oedipus. (This intertwining of the archaic and the new was something Pasolini understood very well.)

In the end, though, we find ourselves not on the battlefields of Lebanon but on the grey streets of Canada, where the climax comes with the brother and sister's final delivery of the sealed letters their mother left them, which turn out to go to the same man – a man with a trinity of dots on his ankle. As a moment of revealed horror it is as startling and bare as any in cinema; the summation of all those years of pain and killing is quiet, disgusting – and true.

**Roger Clarke, *Sight & Sound*, July 2011**

Denis Villeneuve on negotiating the politics of ‘Incendies’

When I saw Wajdi Mouawad’s play *Incendies* it was like a punch in the jaw. I emerged from the theatre on shaky knees. Right away I knew I was going to make it into a movie. I decided to follow the play’s lead and set my film in an imaginary space like Costa-Gavras’s *Z* [1969], so as to free it from any political bias. The film is about politics, but is also apolitical. The play’s purpose was to delve into the subject of anger – not to fuel such anger – and the setting of *Incendies* [the Lebanon] is a historical minefield.

The wars that have wracked this region sometimes involved as many as 17 different factions, with alliances and betrayals of baffling complexity for neophytes. To remain faithful to this reality, the political situation had to remain complex without undermining the storyline. 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. Wajdi’s staging is riddled with very powerful theatrical images, of a rare beauty. I couldn’t use them because they belonged to the theatrical alphabet, but I was able to go back to their source and translate them into film language. Wajdi provided me some helpful keys.

To transpose such a dramatic text to the screen while avoiding melodrama, I opted for the sobriety of raw realism, retaining the mythological factor in the play via natural light and shadows. Emotion had to avoid being an end in itself, but instead a means of achieving catharsis. *Incendies* is also Jeanne and Simon’s journey towards the source of their mother Nawal’s hatred. This is a very universal quest and it touches me deeply. But I admit that it took a long time to achieve the film’s dramatic balance in the screenplay. Each sequence could have inspired a feature film!

Sight & Sound, July 2011

INCENDIES

A film by: Denis Villeneuve  
©: Incendies inc. (a micro\_scope inc. company), TS Productions sarl  
Production Company: micro\_scope  
In co-production with: TS Productions  
In association with: Phi Group Inc.  
With the financial participation of: Téléfilm Canada, SODEC, Tax Credit for Film and Television - Administered by SODEC, Mini-treaty Canada-France, Radio-Canada Télévision, COGECO Program Development Fund, Super Écran, The Movie Network, C.N.C., Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit, The Harold Greenberg Fund  
Presented by: Christal Films  
Produced by: Luc Déry, Kim McCraw  
Co-produced by: Miléna Poylo, Gilles Sacuto, Anthony Donckue  
Line Producers: Stephen Traynor, Sylvie Trudelle,  
Montreal Crew, Stephen Traynor Jordan Crew  
Associate Producers: Phoebe Greenberg, Penny Mancuso, Ziad Touma  
Post-production Supervisor: Érik Daniel  
1st Assistant Director: Éric Parenteau  
Casting: Lucie Robitaille, Lara Atalla, Constance Demontoy  
Screenplay and Dialogue: Denis Villeneuve  
With the collaboration of: Valérie Beaugrand-Champagne  
Based on the play by: Wajdi Mouawad  
Cinematography: André Turpin  
Digital Visual Effects: Rodeo FX  
Special Effects Supervisor: Jacques Langlois  
Special Effects: L’Intrigue  
Film Editing: Monique Dartonne  
Production Design: André-Line Beauparlant  
Set Decorator: Diane Gauthier

Costume Design: Sophie Lefebvre  
Wardrobe: Martin Tarte  
Original Score / Music Composed by: Grégoire Hetzel  
Music Directed by: Grégoire Hetzel  
Electroacoustic Programmings and Realisation: Grégoire Hetzel  
Music Supervisor: Pascal Mayer  
Sound / Sound Engineer: Jean Umansky  
Sound / Re-recording Mixer (Paris): Jean-Pierre Laforce  
Sound / Supervisor and Sound Editor: Sylvain Bellemare  
Stunt Co-ordinator: Stéphane Lefebvre

Cast  
Lubna Azabal (Nawal Marwan)  
Mélicssa Désormeaux-Poulin (Jeanne Marwan)  
Maxim Gaudette (Simon Marwan)  
Rémy Girard (Jean Lebel, notary)  
Abdelghafour Elaaziz (Abou Tarek)  
Allen Altman (Maddad, notary)  
Mohamed Majd (Chamseddine)  
Nabil Sawalha (Fahim)  
Baya Belal (Maïka)  
Mustafa Kamel (militia barber)  
Hussein Sami (Nihad (5 years old))  
Dominique Briand (Professor Niv Cohen)  
Frédéric Paquet (emergency doctor)  
Hamed Najem (Wahab)

Canada/France 2010  
131 mins

DENIS VILLENEUVE: THE PATH TO DUNE

Enemy

Wed 1 Sep 14:30; Sun 12 Sep 12:20; Tue 21 Sep 20:55

Prisoners

Wed 1 Sep 20:00; Tue 14 Sep 14:15; Sat 25 Sep 17:00

August 32nd on Earth (Un 32 août sur terre)

Thu 2 Sep 20:50; Thu 16 Sep 18:20

Blade Runner 2049

Sat 4 Sep 20:00; Sat 18 Sep 17:15; Fri 24 Sep 14:15; Sun 3 Oct 17:30

Maelström

Mon 6 Sep 18:15; Fri 17 Sep 20:55

Polytechnique

Fri 10 Sep 21:20; Sun 19 Sep 12:15; Thu 30 Sep 20:50

Incendies

Sat 11 Sep 20:30; Fri 17 Sep 17:50; Sun 19 Sep 14:45

Sicario

Sun 12 Sep 18:10; Wed 22 Sep 20:40; Sat 25 Sep 20:40

Arrival

Thu 16 Sep 20:45; Tue 28 Sep 14:15; Sat 2 Oct 17:30

NFTS AT 50

The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30

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