



**PRODUCTION NOTES**

**ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEE**  
**Best Foreign Language Film**

# **INCENDIES**

A film by Denis Villeneuve

Starring

Lubna Azabal, Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin,  
Maxim Gaudette, Remy Girard

Release date: April 21, 2011  
Running time: 130 minutes  
Rated: TBC

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## SYNOPSIS

When notary Lebel (Rémy Girard) sits down with Jeanne and Simon Marwan (Mélicha Désormeaux Poulin, Maxim Gaudette) to read them their mother Nawal's will (Lubna Azabal), the twins are stunned to receive a pair of envelopes – one for the father they thought was dead and another for a brother they didn't know existed.

In this enigmatic inheritance, Jeanne sees the key to Nawal's retreat into unexplained silence during the final weeks of her life. She immediately decides to go to the Middle East to dig into a family history of which she knows next to nothing.

Simon is unmoved by their mother's posthumous mind games. However, the love he has for his sister is strong, and he soon joins her in combing their ancestral homeland in search of a Nawal who is very different from the mother they knew.

With Lebel's help, the twins piece together the story of the woman who brought them into the world, discovering a tragic fate as well as the courage of an exceptional woman.

An adaptation of Wajdi Mouawad's hit play, **INCENDIES** is a deeply moving story that brings the extremism and violence of today's world to a starkly personal level, delivering a powerful and poetic testament to the uncanny power of the will to survive.

## INTERVIEW WITH DENIS VILLENEUVE

**How did you discover Wajdi Mouawad's play and what were your first impressions?**

The same impression as when I first saw *Apocalypse Now* – astonished. The play was staged in a very small theatre – Le Théâtre des 4 Sous. I was sitting in the second row, as I'd bought the last tickets for the final performance. The script was like a punch in the jaw and I emerged from the theatre on shaky knees. Right away I knew I was going to make it into a movie.

**The movie is visually sumptuous and truly cinematic. How did you foresee that the play had such visual potential?**

*Incendies* has a script like a great classical composer's score: it directly inspires striking images. Moreover, 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.

**How were you able to convince Wajdi that it was indeed possible to transfer *INCENDIES***

### **from the stage to the screen?**

Wajdi agreed to lend me *Incendies* after reading the rough draft of about fifty pages I sent him. He gave me the best present possible – creative freedom. He simply gave me carte blanche. I think it is the only way to do a successful adaptation. The author has to allow you to make your own errors.

### **Neither the film nor the play explicitly names the Middle Eastern country where the story is set. Can you comment on this?**

Beirut or Daresh? This question haunted me throughout the process of adapting the script to the screen. I decided to follow the play's lead and set my film in an imaginary space like Costa Gavras's "Z" 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 and not to fuel such anger. And the setting of *Incendies* is a historical minefield.

### **INCENDIES is dramatic to the point of being almost operatic. The boldness actually makes the material truly tragic and elevating, rather than hopelessly sad and melodramatic. What inspired you to make a film where emotions are played so strongly?**

To transpose such a dramatic text to the screen while avoiding melodrama, I opted for the sobriety of raw realism, while retaining the mythological factor in the play via natural light and shadows. Emotion had to avoid being an end in itself but a means of achieving the catharsis effect 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. 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!

### **INCENDIES has a stunning cast. How did you find all these great actors?**

**INCENDIES** has a cast drawing on some professional actors and several nonprofessional actors located in Jordan. Lara Attala, the Jordanian casting director, wanted to approach Iraqi refugees to offer them work. They contributed a great deal to the movie. The challenge was to work on everyone's accents and aim for an Arabic accent from the Golan region. Some of the professional actors were North African and had to practically learn another language to be credible.

I saw Lubna Azabal in *Paradise Now* by Hani abuAssad and *Exiles* by Tony Gatlif. Constance DeMontefoy, the Paris casting director, suggested that I meet Lubna. She is an extraordinary actress with Nawal's natural strength and fire in her belly. Lubna is Nawal. Casting the twins was an arduous process. Mélissa DesormeauxPoulin turned up after a very long process. I looked for Simon everywhere and finally found him very close by: Maxim

Gaudette who had appeared in my previous film. I'm very proud of the actors' work in **INCENDIES**.

**Viewers with little or no background on the politics of religion in this unnamed Middle Eastern country in INCENDIES may find it sometimes difficult to figure out whose side Nawal Marwan really is on. In many scenes, your visual language pervades even more a sense of vagueness and unfamiliarity. Somehow, the unknown and lack of knowledge plays to the film's advantage. Can you comment on that?**

I deliberately created a political maelstrom around Nawal. The wars that have wracked this region sometimes involved as many as 17 different factions with alliances and betrayals of a 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.

## **ABOUT THE PLAY**

Directed by Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies* premiered in France on March 14, 2003 at the Hexagone Scène Nationale in Meylan, and in Quebec on May 23, 2003 at Théâtre de Quat'sous as part of the 10th Festival de théâtre des Amériques. Part of the original cast included Andrée Lapelle (Nawal), Isabelle Leblanc (Jeanne), Reda Guenik (Simon), Richard Thériault (Hermile Lebel) and Éric Bernier (Nihad).

Since its original production, the play has been staged in Canada (under the English title *Scorched*), France, Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, Holland, Japan, Mexico, Germany, Spain, the United States, Australia, Estonia, and Italy.

The play received many awards including the SACD's "Prix de la Francophonie" in 2004 and the French "Syndicat de la critique" Prize for Best Play in 2004.

## BIOGRAPHIES

### DENIS VILLENEUVE (Director and screenwriter)



Often pegged as one of the most talented filmmakers of his generation, Denis Villeneuve has managed to compel both critics and audiences with his unique visual style and fresh approach to storytelling.

His debut feature, *Un 32 août sur Terre* (*August 32<sup>nd</sup> on Earth*), was selected by over thirty five international film festivals in 1998, and was part of Cannes' Un Certain Regard, Telluride and Toronto's official selections.

In 2000, his followup film *Maëlstrom* was selected by Sundance, Toronto and over thirty other film festivals around the world. The film received over twenty five international awards, including the prestigious FIPRESCI and SACD awards at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival. At home, the film won 9 Jutra and 5 Genie Awards and once again, represented Canada at the Academy Awards.

In 2008, his short film *Next Floor* won the Canal+ Award for Best Short Film at the Cannes' Critics Week. The film was also shown in more than 150 festivals around the world where it received more than 50 awards.

In 2009, *Polytechnique*, his third feature, was released. After a premiere at Cannes' Director's Fortnight, the film was presented in many international festivals including ones in Helsinki, Stockholm, London, Taipei and Gijon. In Canada, *Polytechnique* was honored with the Best Canadian Film of 2009 Award by the Toronto Film Critics Association, as well as 9 Genie and 5 Jutra Awards, notably for Best Director.

His fourth feature length film, **INCENDIES**, an adaptation of Wajdi Mouawad's play, is a Canada France coproduction that was shot in Quebec and Jordan.

### DENIS VILLENEUVE'S FILMOGRAPHY

#### *Polytechnique* (2009)

- Directors Fortnight – Cannes [2009]
- Official selection at Helsinki, Toronto, Stockholm, London, Taipei, Gijon, etc.
- Best Canadian film – Toronto Film Critics Association awards [2009]
- Bayard d'Or– Festival du film francophone de Namur [2009]

#### *Next Floor* (2008)

- Canal+ Award for Best Short Film – Official selection, Critic's Week, Cannes [2008]

- Director's Choice Award – Rhode Island International Film Festival, USA [2008]
- Grand Prize, 14<sup>th</sup> International Short Film Festival, Drama, Greece [2008]
- Best International Fiction, Izmir International Short Film Festival, Turkey [2008]
- Best Live Action Short Film, St. Louis International Film Festival, USA [2008]
- Best Short Film, Whistler Film Festival, Canada [2008]

*Screened in more than 60 festivals around the world. Winner of a dozen of awards.*

### ***Maelström (2000)***

- International Critics Award (FIPRESCI) – Official selection, Berlin [2001]
- 5 Genie Awards (Best Film, Director, Screenplay, Actress, Cinematography) – Toronto [2001]
- 9 Jutra Awards (Best Film, Director, Screenplay, Actress, Cinematography, etc.) – Montreal [2001]
- 2 Awards (Best Film and Best Director) – Bratislava Festival, Czech republic [2001]
- Special Mention for Best Canadian Film – Toronto International Film Festival [2000]
- Award for Best Canadian Film – FFM, Montreal [2000]
- Special Award for Cinematography – FFM, Montreal [2000]
- Official selection Sundance, Berlin, Toronto, etc. (more than 40 international film festivals)
- Represented Canada at the 2000 Academy Awards

### ***Un 32 août sur Terre (August 32<sup>nd</sup> on Earth) (1998)***

- Official selection at Un Certain Regard – Cannes [1998]
- Award for Best Film s [1998]
- Jutra Award for Best Actor – Montreal [1999]
- 2 Awards (Best Film and Best Director) – Festival SaintJeandeLuz, France [1998]
- Represented Canada at the 1999 Academy Awards
- Official selection Cannes, Toronto, Telluride, etc. (more than 35 international film festivals)
- International distribution

### ***Cosmos (1996)***

- Prix Art et Essai – Director's Fortnight, Cannes [1997]
- Represented Canada at the 1997 Academy Awards

### ***REW FFWD (1994)***

- New York Film Academy Award – Locarno Festival [1994]

**WAJDI MOUAWAD (Author of the play *Incendies*; playwright, director, actor)**



The theatre's most impressive new voice of the last decade, Wajdi Mouawad, is an equally accomplished playwright, director and actor.

Born in Lebanon in 1968, Mouawad was forced by civil war to flee his homeland at the age of eight. His family's exile began with a stay in France, where he lived until he permanently immigrated to Montreal in 1983. There he studied theatre and earned a diploma in acting from the National Theatre School. After graduating he acted in, wrote and directed a number of productions for the company he founded with Isabelle Leblanc, Théâtre Ô Parleur. In 1990 and 1991 alone he wrote three plays and it was during this time that his career as a theatre director truly began. His work as a director led him to explore an eclectic series of complex worlds. In 1997, he made a significant

transition with his play *Littoral* (based on his original idea, written in collaboration with Isabelle Leblanc), an experience he repeated with *Rêves*, and later *Incendies* and *Forêts*. From 2000 to 2004, he was artistic director at Théâtre de Quat'Sous in Montreal. Then, in 2005, he founded a pair of creative sister companies on both side of the Atlantic: Montreal's Abé carré cé carré (co-director Emmanuel Schwartz) and Paris-based *Au carré de l'hypoténuse*. In 2007 he took the reins as artistic director for the French theatre section at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. He also works closely with Théâtre d'aujourd'hui in Montreal.

In 2009, his association with the Avignon Festival signaled the arrival of an artist who for twenty years had been quietly creating a universally recognized body of work of dramatic power. That same year, already an Officer of the Order of Canada and a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Mouawad was awarded the Grand Prix du théâtre by the Académie française, a tribute to his entire body of dramatic works.

**LUBNA AZABAL (Nawal Marwan)**



A native of Belgium, Lubna Azabal studied in Brussels at the Kleine Academie and the Conservatoire Royal before launching her acting career.

She is best known for her performance in Habbu Assad's political thriller *Paradise Now*, which won the 2006 Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film. Additional film credits include

*Loin* by André Techine, *Aram* by Robert Kechichian, *Un monde presque paisible* by Michel

Deville, *Exils* by Tony Gatlif (Cannes 2004 – award for Best Director), *Strangers* by Tadmor & Nattiv (for which she won the Jerusalem Film Festival’s award for most promising new actress), *24 Measures* by Jalil Lespert, *Body of Lies* by Ridley Scott and *Here* by Braden King. She will appear in Alexandre Arcady’s next film, *Comme les 5 doigts de la main*, Gabriel Range’s *I am Slave* and Ralph Fiennes’ *Coriolanus*.

On television, she has appeared in *Bajo el mismo cielo* (*Under the Same Sky*), *On achève bien les DJ* and in the recent BBC drama *Occupation*.

### **MÉLISSA DÉSORMEAUX-POULIN (Jeanne Marwan)**



At six years old, Méliсса Désormeaux-Poulin already had the notion to approach a casting agency. The bold and truly talented little girl made her acting debut in a Post Magic Crunch cereal commercial. Soon after she was cast in *Jamais deux sans toi* (1989-1993), followed by the series *Une faim de loup*, in which she played the pretty young Marie.

Méliсса literally grew up on television. She was casted in *Les Héritiers Duval* (1994-1996) and a diverse series of roles such as that of Madeleine, the handicapped girl in *Asbestos*, a FRAP activist in *Simone et Chartrand, la suite*, Colombe, a drug dealer in *Grande Ourse* and the disorganized rebel Sarah Bernard in *Emma* (2000-2004). Since 2004 she has played the hysterical Julia in *Il était une fois dans le trouble*.

After taking a break in early 2006 to give birth to her daughter Léa, Méliсса made a noticeable return to acting. She appeared in *La Promesse* as Florence Daveluy and is part of the cast of a new Radio-Canada series, *Les Rescapés*. Méliсса also starred in *À vos marques...Party!*, and its sequel, both Quebec box-office hits in 2007 and 2009. She also played Sophie Lajoie, a close friend of Dédé Fortin, in the energetic film *Dédé, à travers les brumes*.

### **MAXIM GAUDETTE (Simon Marwan)**



Maxim Gaudette is on track to a superb acting career. Since graduating from the Conservatoire d'art dramatique de Montréal in 1997, he has played numerous roles in the theatre, film and television.

In the theatre, he gave a memorable performance as Dardanin in Fernand Rainville’s *Les trois mousquetaires*, earning a nomination for the Masque for best actor in 2002. He has performed at a number of Montreal theatres, working with



top directors such as Claude Poissant, Denise Filiatrault, Yves Desgagnés, Martin Faucher, Serge Denoncourt, Alice Ronfart, Normand Chouinard and René Richard Cyr.

On television, he landed a part in *L'Ombre de l'épervier*, and he appeared in *Fortier*, *Grande Ourse* and *Virginie*. He is also part of the cast of the miniseries *Lance et compte : la reconquête, la revanche, et le grand duel*. Since 2008, he has appeared in Radio-Canada's *L'Auberge du chien noir*. He will soon play Charles Boivin in Claude Desrosiers' series *Les Rescapés*.

His film credits include *L'Espérance* by Stéphane Pleszynski and *Sans elle* by Jean Beaudin. He also appeared in Patrice Sauvé's *Cheech* and Patrick Huard's *Les Trois P'tits Cochons*. More recently, he played the killer in Denis Villeneuve's *Polytechnique*, a performance that earned him Jutra and Genie awards for best supporting actor. His latest role in **INCENDIES** is his second collaboration with Denis Villeneuve.

### **RÉMY GIRARD (Notary Jean Lebel)**



Rémy Girard is not only one of Quebec's greatest actors, but one of the world's finest, as attested by the 2004 *New York Times* selection of the twenty best actors. The exceptional quality of his performances has earned him countless awards and nominations, and his work has been praised by his peers and by audiences, whose appreciation for him never wanes. In the theatre, Girard has twice won the Gascon-Roux people's choice award for best actor, for his performance as Falstaff in a

French-language production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (TNM, 2002) and for his turn as Galileo in *Galilée* (TNM, 1990). His television work has been rewarded with several Géméaux, including the award for best actor for his character Papa Bougon in *Les Bougons, c'est aussi ça la vie*. He has also received Genies for his performances in the feature films *Amoureux fou*, *Jésus de Montréal*, *Les portes tournantes* and *Les invasions barbares*.

While it is impossible to give a detailed account of a career as tremendously rich and active as Girard's, the highlights alone are impressive. On the big screen, apart from his compelling portrayal of Rémy in Denys Arcand's *Les invasions barbares*, he has appeared in such films as *Aurore* (Luc Dionne), *Un homme et son péché* (Charles Binamé), *Les Boys* (Louis Saia), *La Florida* (Georges Mihalka), *Dans le ventre du dragon* (Yves Simonneau), *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (Denys Arcand) and *Jésus de Montréal* (Denys Arcand).

On television he has been in several series and miniseries, but it is his character, Papa Bougon, of the cult hit *Les Bougons, c'est aussi ça la vie*, that has left an indelible mark on Quebecers' collective imagination.

His many theatrical roles, in both classic and new plays, are a testament to the tremendous talent

of this resourceful, uncannily believable actor. His theatre highlights include Sancho Panza (*Don Quixote*), Argan (*Le malade imaginaire*) and Estragon (*Waiting for Godot*).

### **micro\_scope (Producer)**

micro\_scope is an independent production company. Founded by producer Luc Déry in 2002, the company's main objective is the development and production of innovative, inventive and accessible feature films.

In its first year of existence, micro\_scope participated in two coproduction projects: *A problem with fear* from Gary Burns, director of *Waydowntown*, and Bertrand Bonello's *Tiresia*, a collaboration with French company, Haut et court. *A problem with fear* opened the Perspective Canada section at the 2003 Toronto Film Festival and was selected for the Berlin Film Festival, while *Tiresia* was part of the official competition in Cannes 2003.

In January 2004, producer Kim McCraw joined micro\_scope for its first solo production, *Familia*. This first feature film by director Louise Archambault which stars Sylvie Moreau and Macha Grenon was released in September 2005. The film participated at the Locarno Film Festival's International Competition and opened the Canada First section at the Toronto Film Festival where it won the City TV Award for Best Canadian First Feature. *Familia* also screened in many other international festivals like Goteborg, Sao Paulo and Hong Kong and sold in France and United States. At the 2006 Canadian Genie Awards, *Familia* was nominated in 7 categories including Best Picture and Best Director and won the Claude Jutra Award for the Best First Feature Film.

*Congorama* was released theatrically in Canada in October 2006. Philippe Falardeau's second feature stars Olivier Gourmet (winner of the 2002 Cannes Festival Best Actor prize for its role in *The Son*, by the Dardenne brothers) and Paul Ahmarani (*The Left-Hand Side of the Fridge*). The film is a coproduction with Tarantula Belgium (*Batalla en el cielo, A Piece of Sky*) and Tarantula France (*Fratricide, Organik*). *Congorama* premiered at Cannes in May 2006 as the closing film of the Director's Fortnight. The film was also part of the Special Presentation category at the Toronto International Film Festival and was chosen as the opening feature for Montreal's Festival du Nouveau Cinema. *Congorama* also screened in many international festivals like Munich, Namur, Pusan, Goteborg and Halifax where it won the Best Canadian Film Award. At the 2007 Quebec Jutra Awards, the film won five prizes including Best Film, Best Director and Best Script. *Congorama* is scheduled to be released in a halfdozen countries including France (UGC PH), Belgium (Lumière) and Portugal. *Congorama* was sold internationally by London-based The Works.

In November 2007 micro\_scope released its latest project, *Continental, un film sans fusil* (*Continental, A Film Without Guns*), a first feature film by Stéphane Lafleur. Distributed by Christal Films and financed by SODEC, Telefilm Canada, The Harold Greenberg Fund and Télé-Québec, the film stars Gilbert Sicotte, Réal Bossé, Fanny Mallette and MarieGinette Guay. It premiered at the end of August 2007 at the prestigious Venice International Film Festival, in the

section Venice Days, and was also selected in many other festivals around the world, such as Thessaloniki, Goteborg, Rotterdam, Jeonju and the AFI Film Festival in Los Angeles. Continental also made its mark at the Toronto International Film Festival where it won the CityTV Award for Best First Canadian Feature. It was also awarded the Bayard d'Or for the Best Film at the Namur International Francophone Film Festival and the Borsos Award for Best New Canadian Feature Film at the Whistler Film Festival. In March 2008, the film gathered four Jutra Awards for Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor (Réal Bossé).

In September 2008, Philippe Falardeau's third feature, *C'est pas moi, je le jure! (It's Not Me, I Swear!)*, is released in Canada. Based on a novel by Bruno Hébert, the film stars Antoine L'Écuyer, Suzanne Clément and Daniel Brière. Following its premiere at the Toronto Film Festival (Special Presentations), it was shown at the Berlinale in the Generation section where it won the Crystal Bear and the Deutsche Kinderhilfswerk Grand Prix for Best Feature Film. The film also won many awards among which Best Canadian Film and Best Actor (Antoine L'Écuyer) at the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax, and Vancouver Film Critics Circle's Best Canadian Film and Best Supporting Actress (Suzanne Clément). *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* was sold in 40 countries by Paris-based sales agent Films Distribution.

micro\_scope is currently working on *Bachir Lazhar*, Philippe Falardeau's newest feature film adapted from the stage play by Evelyne De La Chenelière and finishing the post production of *En terrains connus*, Stéphane Lafleur's latest feature film.

### **TS PRODUCTIONS (Co-producer, France)**

Miléna Poylo and Gilles Sacuto have worked in the film industry since 1986. Since 1996, it is with their company, TS Productions that they develop and produce French and international projects.

Graduate of The Femis, Anthony Donckue joined the team as producer, and Céline Loiseau as head of documentaries, in 2005. In 2009, Delphine Morel, independent documentary producer, screenwriter and director also joined the company.

TS Productions has produced 15 feature films, 21 documentaries and 29 short films. In 2009, TS Productions received 7 Caesar Awards including one for Best Film for *Séraphine* by Martin Provost.

### **PHI GROUP (Associate Producer)**

PHI is a business dedicated to developing in cultural property that reflects our evolving understanding of the impact of art.

PHI hires the best creative minds to find modern solutions to produce, promote, and distribute artist driven projects in the fields of music, film, architecture, design and new media.

PHI has created a diverse portfolio of innovative and audacious projects, which have garnered international acclaim.

PHI has built international partnerships in London, New York, and L.A. offering support to artists on a worldwide stage.

PHI will soon occupy two amalgamated historic buildings in Old Montreal, equipped with two multipurpose performance venues and multidisciplinary production facilities. The team will curate these public venues to showcase PHI projects, as well as projects in collaboration with other likeminded art institutions.

The PHI centre will house the largest short film archives for the purpose of research.

## CAST

Nawal Marwan  
Jeanne Marwan  
Simon Marwan  
Notary Jean Lebel

LUBNA AZABAL  
MÉLISSA DÉSORMEAUX-POULIN  
MAXIM GAUDETTE  
RÉMY GIRARD

Abou Tarek  
Notary Maddad  
Chamseddine  
Fahim  
Maïka

ABDELGHAFOR ELAAZIZ  
ALLEN ALTMAN  
MOHAMED MAJD  
NABIL SAWALHA  
BAYA BELAL

## CREW

Director and Screenwriter  
Based on a stage play by  
Script Coach

DENIS VILLENEUVE  
WAJDI MOUAWAD  
VALÉRIE BEAUGRAND-CHAMPAGNE

Producers  
Co-producers

LUC DÉRY, KIM MCCRAW  
MILÉNA POYLO & GILLES SACUTO  
ANTHONY DONCQUE

Associate Producers

PHOEBE GREENBERG, PENNY MANCUSO  
ZIAD TOUMA

Line Producers

SYLVIE TRUDELLE, STEPHEN TRAYNOR

Director of Photography  
Editor

ANDRÉ TURPIN  
MONIQUE DARTONNE

Production Design  
Costumes Design

ANDRÉ-LINE BEAUPARLANT  
SOPHIE LEFEBVRE

Original Score  
Sound Engineer  
Sound Design  
Mix

GRÉGOIRE HETZEL  
JEAN UMANSKY  
SYLVAIN BELLEMARE  
JEAN-PIERRE LAFORCE

Casting

LUCIE ROBITALLE, LARA ATALLA  
CONSTANCE DEMONTOY

## Hollywood Reporter

By Stephen Farber

TELLURIDE, Colo. -- At every film festival, there's at least one movie that slips in under the radar and ends up taking the crowds by surprise.

In Telluride this year, the movies with all the early buzz were such high-profile titles as "127 Hours," "The King's Speech" and "Black Swan." But one of the films that most impressed audiences was the France-Canada film "Incendies," an unknown commodity when the festival started. It will not be a box-office bonanza, but strong reviews could propel it to significant art house success. It was picked up Monday by Sony Pictures Classics.

Based on an acclaimed stage play by Wajdi Mouawad, Denis Villeneuve's film tells a complex story with admirable lucidity. Villeneuve effectively intercuts two parallel stories: At the start, an attorney in Montreal meets with two adult twins, Jeanne (Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin) and Simon (Maxim Gaudette), to read them their mother's will. He startles them by presenting two letters -- one to a father they thought was dead and another to a brother they never knew existed -- that their mother would like them to deliver. Simon initially is irritated by this request, but Jeanne is intrigued, and she travels to Lebanon to try to locate her father and brother.

The rest of the film intercuts the twins' adventures in Lebanon with scenes from the early life of their mother, Nawal (Lubna Azabal), as she lives through the civil war between Christians and Muslims in her country during the 1970s. Nawal is a Christian, but her life is intimately intertwined with the Muslim community in Lebanon until she finally immigrates to Canada. The picture unfolds like a complex puzzle; only gradually do all the pieces fall into place as we discover the secrets that Nawal kept from her children during her lifetime.

The deepest theme of the film is quite riveting -- the idea that children have only the vaguest idea about their parents' lives before they were born. We imagine that we must know how our parents' early lives unfolded, but it requires a huge leap of imagination to enter into the worlds that formed them. That is the odyssey that Jeanne undertakes, and she finally entices Simon to join her. The surprise that awaits them at the end of their journey drew audible gasps from the Telluride audience.

"Incendies" occasionally reveals its theatrical origins but on the whole is re-imagined through vivid cinematic sequences. One of the flashbacks in which Christian troops attack a bus filled with Muslims is one of the most powerful depictions of a wartime atrocity seen in any recent film. Villeneuve exhibits impressive control over the logistics of this ambitious production.

Performances by Azabal, Desormeaux-Poulin and Gaudette are thoroughly persuasive, and Remy Girard brings warmth and wisdom to the role of the concerned lawyer.

Although the film runs more than two hours, the story is so compelling and the production so beautifully controlled that we are gripped by the characters' quest right up to the shocking end of the story.

## Ain't It Cool News

The write-up of *INCENDIES* in the TIFF festival guide did not grab me, probably because they could only describe the first few minutes of the film so as not to give away the major twists. But after hearing some good buzz, including the rumor that it will probably be Canada's selection for Best Foreign Film, and seeing it on some "movies to watch at TIFF" lists, I decided to give it a shot. Boy, I'm glad I did. Adapted from an acclaimed play by Wajdi Mouawad and directed by Denis Villeneuve, *INCENDIES* is epic, spanning two generations, a war, and several cities and villages scattered across two continents. It is a deeply personal story involving a series of mysteries, a journey of discovery, shocking revelations, and life-and-death drama. It is by far my favorite film of the festival, and probably the best film I've seen all year.

From the opening scene of *INCENDIES*, you know you are in for something special. It is a slow zoom in at what looks to be an extreme Madrassa, or possibly a war camp, of boys getting their heads shaved set to a Radiohead's "You and Whose Army." The focus is on one boy in particular, and his stare, directly into the camera, is haunting. The meaning of this scene won't become clear until much later in the film. Immediately after, we cut to a notary telling a twin brother and sister that their mother, Nawal, who has just passed away, has left them two letters. In one, she tells them that their father, who they both thought was dead, is actually alive. The girl, Jeanne, must find him and deliver a letter to him. In the other letter the mother reveals that the twins have a brother they didn't know about, and the boy, Simon, must deliver a letter to him. She gives no clues as to how to go about this – they only have a single picture of their mother when she was young to go on.

The twins think their mother is basically crazy, and the son refuses to participate. But the daughter feels duty-bound to take this opportunity to learn more about her heritage. So she begins her quest, and starts to uncover the secret life her mother had before she moved to Canada. Meanwhile, we cut to the mother when she was young, and her story is shown intercut with the modern story of the twins. I won't give anything away, but it is safe to say that the mother was a participant in, and survivor of, gruesome events and a savage Christian-Muslim war.

One reason *INCENDIES* is so compelling is that it is told as a mystery and a series of jaw-dropping revelations about the epic struggle of one woman to survive under horrible circumstances. In the process, the film comments on the treatment of women in Muslim society, "honor" killings, religious warfare, the construction of identity, and dark secrets. It would be easy for the film to fall into the trap of being didactic and preachy under these circumstances, but it never does, mainly because these things are just part of the landscape – obstacles that operate on the characters that seem absolutely genuine. Nor does the film take sides in the war – this is a human-scale drama, where the horrors unfolding around the characters can take many forms.

An epic film like this, spanning decades, and requiring gut-wrenching emotion, can only be pulled off if the performances are outstanding. They are. Lubna Azabal takes center stage as the young mother, who starts off innocent and in love, but is utterly transformed by series of personal unholy devastations. She delivers one of the best performances in recent memory. Meanwhile, Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin and Maxim Gaudette are magnificent as the twins whose world is upended. The supporting cast is equally great – some of the performances are in French, some in English, and some in the local dialect of several villages in the Middle East.

The director makes some bold choices that set this film apart. The structure of the film is unconventional – it is divided into chapters, announced with bold red letters filling the screen, each with a different character at the center. Several scenes are set to Radiohead songs, which perfectly evoke a dystopian, meditative atmosphere. Thom Yorke's wailing voice – simultaneously mournful and revelatory, could almost stand in for the Muslim call to prayer. But here it's the diametric opposite, heralding personal discovery rather than dangerous conformist groupthink.

With a tightly woven, driving plot, captivating characters, superb acting, and bold direction, *INCENDIES* will surely make best-of lists in 2010. It is a rare gem that is as entertaining as it is important. I can't wait to see it again. Fortunately, I'll get a chance to -- in Toronto, Sony Pictures Classics picked up the film for US distribution. And I can't wait for the next film from Denis Villeneuve. He's a director to watch.



## THE MONTREAL GAZETTE

Five stars out five

Incendies floored me from the very first scene. It's an extraordinary moment of big-screen poetry as we watch a room full of kids being prepared for war and, as they have their heads shaved, the ethereal yet jagged sound of Radiohead's "You and Whose Army?" adds real poignance to the sequence.

In the space of a couple of minutes, Montreal filmmaker Denis Villeneuve brilliantly sets the tone for what follows. It's a heartbreaking snapshot of the ultimate horror of sectarian conflict - turning children into gunmen -- but there's still a harsh beauty to the portrait.

There is a lot more horror to come in the next two hours of Incendies as Villeneuve takes us deep into the darkest moments in a bloody civil war that is more than a little reminiscent of the strife that tore apart Lebanon in the '70s. But like Villeneuve's previous film, Polytechnique -- another exploration of rage at its most primal -- there is at least a sliver of hope here, a notion, however idealistic, that it might finally be possible to stop the cycle of hatred.

Villeneuve -- who wrote and directed this adaptation of the acclaimed 2003 Wajdi Mouawad play -- has made a real masterwork, and it's so heartening to see that it's already garnering more international attention than any Quebecois film in years.

This modern-day Greek tragedy begins with a death, which also serves as the start of a sort of detective story. Nawal Marwan (Lubna Azabal) has left two letters with her notary, Jean Lebel (Remy Girard), which he has been instructed to present to her twin children in Montreal, Jeanne (Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin) and Simon (Maxim Gaudette). Jeanne is given an envelope that she is to deliver to her father, who both kids believed was long-dead, and Simon is to deliver the other letter to a brother they didn't know existed.

That leads to a huge argument between the siblings. Simon is in a white rage and says he'll have nothing to do with his mother's last wishes. He's fed up with dealing with her neurosis. But Jeanne, a mathematician, is intrigued by this puzzle and she soon sets off for the unnamed country in the Middle East where their family's from. (Shot in Jordan, the country remains fictional, just like in the play, but it's clearly modelled on Lebanon, Mouawad's homeland.)

From there, Villeneuve shifts back and forth in time, hopping from Nawal's early life to her daughter's present-day quest to unravel the mysteries of her family.

Nawal comes from a Christian background, but she isn't willing to side with her family in the violent conflict between Christians and Muslims in their country, and she pays a huge price for that. It's a sometimes dizzyingly complex narrative, but Villeneuve is smart enough to keep focused on the essence of this story about sectarian hatred and family bonds that cannot be broken.

Azabal -- a Belgian actress of Moroccan origin -- is simply astonishing as Nawal, giving ferocity to this portrayal of a woman who won't give in to anyone. Gaudette, who played the killer in Polytechnique, is also very good as the son who is reluctant to delve into this family history, and Girard is a real presence in a relatively small role as the notary who helps guide them through this odyssey. But the revelation here is Desormeaux-Poulin as Jeanne. This actress, best-known in film for the forgettable teen series A vos marques ... Party!, brings a remarkable force to this young woman who goes to hell and back to find out what made Nawal such a troubled mother.

Kudos goes to cinematographer Andre Turpin for capturing the terrible beauty of this drama in images, but in the end, the real credit has to go to Villeneuve for taking this rich, complicated play and transforming it into a devastatingly powerful film that isn't the least bit theatrical.

## FILM THREAT

By Mark Bell

4 1/2 out of 5 stars

Denis Villeneuve's latest film is a spectacular experience; the type of epic family mystery that is a Greek tragedy delivered to modern times.

The set-up for the film is thus: Nawal Marwan (Lubna Azabal) has died. Her former boss, notary Lebel (Rémy Girard), has become the executor of her estate and is reading Nawal's will to her two children, twins Jeanne (Mélicha Désormeaux-Poulin) and Simon (Maxim Gaudette). All seems innocent enough, until Lebel hands over two envelopes to the twins, with instructions from Nawal for Jeanne to deliver one envelope to their father, and for Simon to deliver one envelope to their brother, otherwise Nawal will not be at peace, and will not approve of being buried in a respectable fashion. Simple enough, except the twins were told their father has been dead for a very long time and this is the first either has heard of another sibling. So how do they deliver the letters?

From that point on, the film moves first with Jeanne as she attempts to make good on her mother's request (Simon, thinking their mother went nuts in her final days, is less receptive to the mystery). As Jeanne gets her starting point, the film tells the tale of Nawal simultaneously, hopping back and forth between time periods to reveal the story of one woman's tragic life amid religious conflict in the Middle East. I'd say more, but from what I've seen, by even reading the basic synopsis of the film myself, nothing written seems to do the film its full, deserved justice. You just need to see it.

"Incendies" is a mystery to rank at the top of the list with the best of them, revealing itself slowly at some points and rapid at others (but perfect all the while). Also like the best films, nothing is wasted. Seemingly unimportant moments on screen pay off somewhere and, for the first time in a long time, I couldn't predict where the film was going. The cinematography is haunting, the acting emotionally resonant and the entire film compelling from frame one to the finish.