

## Document Citation

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## THE PEREZ FAMILY

A Samuel Goldwyn Co. production and release. Produced by Michael Nozik, Lydia Dean Pilcher. Executive producers, Julia Chasman, Robin Swicord.

Directed by Mira Nair. Screenplay, Swicord, based on Christine Bell's novel. Camera (color), Stuart Dryburgh; editor, Robert Estrin; music, Alan Silvestri; traditional music, Arturo Sandoval; music supervisor, Jellybean Benitez; production design, Mark Friedberg; art direction, Kenneth A. Hardy; set decoration, Stephanie Carroll; sound (Dolby), Henri Lopez; makeup, D'Amore, Jay Cannistraci; assistant director, Eric N. Hefron; casting, Ellen Jacoby, Jose Calleja (Miami), Laura Ekstrand (N.Y.), Jennifer Low Sauer (L.A.). Reviewed at DeMille Theater, Culver Studios, Culver City, April 12, 1995. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 112 MIN.

Dottie Perez ..... Marisa Tomei  
 Juan Raul Perez ..... Alfred Molina  
 Carmela Perez ..... Anjelica Huston  
 Officer Pirelli ..... Chazz Palminteri  
 Teresa Perez ..... Trini Alvarado  
 Luz Paz ..... Celia Cruz  
 Angel Diaz ..... Diego Wallraff

**A**n enormously likable ensemble, headed by Marisa Tomei and Anjelica Huston, struggles hard to give the proper color, texture and mood to "The Perez Family," Mira Nair's serio-comic exploration of Cuban immigrants in Miami at the time of the 1980 Mariel boatlift. But with half the cast overacting and the other underacting, and with writing that is at best uneven, result is a disappointingly messy picture that seldom finds its dramatic or emotional core. B.O. outlook is lukewarm, with the Goldwyn release also suffering from inevitable comparisons with Gregory Nava's far more accomplished and enjoyable multigenerational Hispanic saga "My Family," which is in theaters now.

In her third and most ambitious outing, following the admirable childhood expose "Salaam Bombay!" and the spicy interracial romance "Mississippi Masala," Nair confirms her attraction to the cinema of outsiders, people living on the margins of society but yearning to establish a "home."

Based on Christine Bell's popular

novel, adapted to the screen by Robin Swicord ("Little Women"), "The Perez Family" chronicles the entangled lives and romances of Cuban immigrants as they forge a new existence — and new families.

For two decades, Juan Raul Perez (Alfred Molina) has patiently endured hard prison life by dreaming about a reunion with his wife, Carmela (Anjelica Huston), who's had to raise their daughter, Teresa (Trini Alvarado), alone in Miami.

Finally free and on board a boat to the promised land, Juan meets Dottie Perez (Marisa Tomei), a spunky prostitute who proudly proclaims, "I'm like Cuba, used by many, conquered by no one." The voluptuous, free-spirited Dottie has absorbed the symbols of the American Dream, rock 'n' roll and John Wayne, though she'd settle for meeting Elvis Presley if Wayne isn't around.

Once they arrive in the U.S., the immigration authorities erroneously enlist Juan and Dottie, who have the same surname, as a married couple. On the other side of town, Carmela's eager anticipation to meet her hubby turns to disappointment in the mistaken belief that he has not made it over. Remainder of the sprawling, episodic tale details how Juan and Carmela deal with their apparent abandonment.

An indefatigable survivor, Dottie takes advantage of Juan's frustration, realizing that if they want to stay in America they'll need to become a family. And the wistful, melancholy Carmela finds herself drawn to John Pirelli (Chazz Palminteri), a charming police officer who finds excuses to pay regular visits to her house.

A major problem is the film's relentlessly incoherent, often soft gaze at its characters. Attempting to make at once a charmingly free-wheeling and socially poignant movie, director Nair can't find the right balance among the tale's multiple facets.

Indeed, the personal, touching stories of exile and hope only seldom cohere with the story's more political dimensions. End result is an inconsistent movie whose tone and mood change from scene to

Turn to page 104



**HONEYMOON IN MIAMI:** Alfred Molina and Marisa Tomei are Cuban refugees mistaken for a married couple in "The Perez Family."



# THE PEREZ FAMILY

*Continued from page 95*

scene — as does the quality of writing and acting.

As she has demonstrated before, Tomei is a spunky, attractive performer who has the audience on her side, but it's still hard to determine whether she can carry a movie. Though alluring in appearance, Tomei is loud and overemotive, sporting an often-jarring heavy accent.

In contrast, the usually reliable Huston underacts, rendering one of her most low-key performances. Though basically miscast, she still has some effectively quiet moments with Alvarado and Palminteri. The two women have no scenes together; when the saga switches from Tomei to Huston, the texture changes so radically that they seem to belong in different movies.

The men — Molina in the lead role, Palminteri as the romantic cop — acquit themselves with more credible perfs. Their acting is more naturalistic; they don't push so hard for humor, pathos and emotional effect.

Mark Friedberg's resourceful production design, Stuart Dryburgh's detailed, often exuberant location lensing and Alan Silvestri's boisterous music all contribute to a colorful sense of time and place. But Nair's muddled *mise en scene* is accentuated by Robert Estrin's editing, which pushes along from one key encounter to another, seldom finding those pauses where quiet emotion and meaning count. The scenes remain scenes — they don't flow together, and, ultimately, they don't add up. —*Emanuel Levy*