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'The Perez Family': Saga in Need of a Thermostat

MOVIE REVIEW

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"I am like Cuba. Used by many, conquered by none!" This is the anthem of Dottie Perez (Marisa Tomei), the Mariel boat-lift refugee and hip-swinging free spirit of "The Perez Family." And if you can believe anybody actually saying a line like that and meaning it, backed by the full, gleeful endorsement of the filmmakers, you may be able to buy into this movie, which is chock-full of such ringingly phony moments.

Everything in "The Perez Family" is overheated and undercooked. Set mostly in Miami in 1980, it's a pastel-colored jamboree of clichés about the family and romantic love in which just about everyone is

hotblooded or hot-under-the-collar or hot-to-trot or just plain hot. That heat represents the Life Force. It's as if all of Miami were a griddle for its populations.

The 1988 Christine Bell novel upon which the film is based was larky and bustling and crammed with folksy-phony epigrams. Director Mira Nair and screenwriter Robin Swicord have taken Bell's salsa rhythms and jacked up the volume a full notch. They're trying for something voluptuously ecstatic to match the mood of the Cuban immigrants awash in their new-found capitalist wonderland. The results are certainly giddy, but are they good?

Dottie Perez, who is in love with John Wayne and rock 'n' roll and all things "American," has come ashore with Alfred Molina's Juan Raul Perez (no relation) on the last Mariel boat lift to Miami. Released from a Cuban jail after 20 years, Juan hopes to be reunited

with his wife, Carmela (Anjelica Huston), and his now-grown daughter, Teresa (Trini Alvarado).

Dottie and Juan connect with two other Perezes, the young street urchin Felipe (Jose Felipe Padron) and a batty codger, Armando (Lazaro Perez)—also no relation. Because it is easier to remain in America as a family, they become one: They fob themselves off to the immigration authorities as married couple, son, grandfather.

The inevitable happens—the fake family becomes a real one. The movie becomes a paean not so much to family as to love. Family is where you find it.

At least that's the game plan. The problem is that this "family" never really comes across as anything more than a conceit. The actors are so frenetically "ethnic" that they never convince as real people. Tomei, normally one of the most likable of actresses, traipses about in a heavy Coppertone tan and flouncy garb and a Charo.

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accent. Molina is so intensely sodden that he's like a great big scowling dark cloud.

And then there's Juan's real family, equally cartoony. As Juan's pining, forever hopeful wife, Huston at least fills the screen. She looks like an empress, and her imperious sensuality has a real kick to it. But her brother Angel (Diego Wallraff) is another yammering hotblooded hell-raiser—we're introduced to him when he buys his sister a pistol for safe-keeping. Later, in a fit of pique, he rams his fist through a wall.

There's also a baffling subplot involving the local police lieutenant (Chazz Palminteri) who casually romances Carmela. We're supposed to regard these tentative love birds as a fairy-tale couple—they parallel the twinkling rapport that develops between Dottie and Juan.

Nair ("Salaam Bombay," "Mississippi Masala") is a gifted filmmaker, but her best range doesn't get full play here. She has a strong

eye for documentary detail, and she fills the screen with color, but she can't reconcile her performers to her feeling for realism. She captures the florid carnival atmosphere of Miami in glints and spurts. Whenever the performers take center stage, which is most of the time, the film turns into a play-act charade.

■ **MPAA rating: R, for some sexuality and language. Times guidelines: It includes a mild love scene and some milder violence.**

'The Perez Family'

Marisa Tomei..... Dottie Perez
Alfred Molina..... Juan Raul Perez
Anjelica Huston..... Carmela Perez
Celia Cruz..... Luz Paz
A Samuel Goldwyn Co. presentation of a Samuel Goldwyn Co. production. Director Mira Nair. Producers Michael Nozik and Lydia Dean Pilcher. Executive producers Julia Chasman and Robin Swicord. Screenplay by Robin Swicord, based on the novel by Christine Bell. Cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh. Editor Robert Estrin. Wardrobe supervisor Linda Peirce. Music supervisor Alan Silvestri. Production design Mark Friedberg. Set decorator Stephanie Carroll. Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes.

■ *In general release throughout Southern California.*