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**THE PEREZ FAMILY**

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Directed by Mira Nair  
Written by Robin Swicord  
With Marisa Tomei, Alfred Molina,  
Chazz Palminteri, and Anjelica  
Huston.

By Anthony Puccinelli

**ACTING THE PART**

**A**lmost 50 years ago, when fair-skinned Oklahoman Jennifer Jones played a Native American in *Duel in the Sun*, her makeup artists went overboard in their efforts to attain authenticity, taking the "redskin" slur literally: Jones looked as if she'd been dipped in a vat of red paint. In a recent Hollywood romance, *Don Juan DeMarco*, Johnny Depp's Latino part apparently required a tiny Ritz Brothers mustache (circa *The Three Musketeers*) and a Ricardo Montalban *Fantasy Island* accent. Continuing in Hollywood's great tradition of "ethnological studies" is Marisa Tomei in *The Perez Family*. One can imagine her prepping for her role as a Cuban prostitute by consuming vast quantities of junk food (to add 30 voluptuous pounds to her skinny frame) while lying on a tanning bed (her body glows with irradiated heat) watching Carmen Miranda videos (to acquire that *Down Argentine Way* accent).

Director Mira Nair begins *The Perez Family* promisingly, on a white beach where we see two nuns drifting across the frame in slow motion. A

**movies**

large family dressed in their Sunday best are picnicking in the blinding sun. The sound of crashing waves swells on the sound track, and with the next shot we're out over the water

looking back at the figures onshore. In one cut Nair has communicated a sense of how fragile the family's pleasures are, how the forces of history are waiting to swallow them up.

When Nair cuts back to the shore, the camera cranes up and over a barren tree. The whole clan have entered the water in all their finery and are gazing at the horizon. Are they look-

ing for Cuba or America, for the past or the future? When a wave washes in, soaking the shoes of Juan Raul Perez (Alfred Molina), his shoes are so polished and pristine that the indignity is funny. When the wave recedes, a crab is clawing at the leather.

Though this scene convincingly conveys a sense of magic realism, that sense evades Nair for most of the rest of the film. All too quickly the mysteries are explained, and the magical universe becomes prosaic. When we're told that the opening sequence is a dream, it's almost like hearing a campfire horror story that concludes: "And then . . . I woke up." Perhaps the constraints of Hollywood storytelling—the need to spell out the obvious so nobody in the audience is (heaven forbid!) confused—made it impossible for Nair to follow the almost subliminal storytelling pattern the opening promises.

It turns out that Juan is dreaming of his wife, Carmela (Anjelica Huston). The former owner of a sugar plantation, he's been imprisoned by Fidel Castro for 20 years while she's emigrated to the United States. When U.S. authorities allow political prisoners to seek asylum in 1980, Juan travels to America to search for his wife. On the boat he meets a prostitute, Dottie (Tomei), whose last name is also Perez. Her express purpose for going to America is to sleep with John Wayne, and her sex-bomb act dancing aboard the boat gets all the repressed Cuban passengers to loosen up, then applaud this perfect model of Cuban womanhood.

After arriving in the promised

**film ratings**

- ★★★★ Masterpiece
- ★★★ A must-see
- ★★ Worth seeing
- ★ Has redeeming facet
- Worthless

land, Juan and Dottie are welcomed and quarantined in the Orange Bowl. Families are given priority in the process of assimilation, and Dottie wants to speed things up, so she begins assembling her own Perez family, with Juan as her husband and a homeless street urchin as her son. Juan considers Dottie low-class, but we in the audience can tell she's the whore with a heart of gold he's looking for. To give him time for his love to blossom, Juan is continually frustrated in his efforts to contact his wife, who is conveniently falling in love with a cop. This is Hollywood, so a happy ending is required—which we get, however illogically, with the requisite gunfire.

Dottie represents the life force, and like most life forces in movies she's crude, foulmouthed, unfettered by the repressions of civilized folk, and sexy. To baldly state the movie's simple scheme, Juan is a walking corpse, killed by his 20 years in prison. Dottie is the infusion of life he needs.

Playing a life force can't be easy, and unfortunately Tomei reduces Dottie to a Latin stereotype, a "hot tamale." Tomei has given wondrous performances before, especially in *Untamed Heart*, but as she drifts far-

ther from her Brooklyn essence she also drifts farther from a three-dimensional character we can care about. Dottie has only one dimension—the sexual. One wonders if the role appealed to Tomei because, under the guise of the narrative, she's allowed to strut and look sexy and tropical in a variety of colorful, revealing costumes. In one scene she dives into the ocean and emerges dripping, beaming with self-satisfaction, her arms raised ecstatically above her head, 15 feet tall on the screen, embodying Cuban sex appeal. We're not looking at a Cuban refugee; we're looking at a movie star. We're not watching Dottie, we're watching Marisa. It's Hollywood's slightly more tasteful take on a wet T-shirt contest.

Another problem (whose source may also be actorly egos) is that the actors confuse accents with acting. Tomei talks as if her lips were so swollen with collagen that enunciation hurts. This puts her at the end of a long and questionable tradition, that of actors learning to speak English with a foreign accent to communicate that they're speaking "another" language. Of course learning to speak accented English can be appropriate, as when Englishman Daniel

Day-Lewis pretends to be Irish or Australian Mel Gibson pretends to be American. It even makes sense when Depp is speaking in Spanish-accented English to Marlon Brando in *Don Juan DeMarco*, since presumably Brando's psychiatrist character doesn't speak Spanish. But why on earth would the Cuban characters in *The Perez Family* speak English to one another even on the boat when they're traveling to the United States for the first time? Instead of mastering their characters, the actors spend two hours pretending they're trying to master a foreign tongue.

Most Americans go to movies to watch, not to read, so subtitles are out of the question (or the picture). If the audience for *The Perez Family* consisted only of fans of the Christine Bell novel it's adapted from, the film would be a box-office disaster. Audiences are often willing to suspend their disbelief, however. In *The Beast* the Russian soldiers spoke English without noticeable accents. In *The Hunt for Red October* the Russian submarine commander played by Sean Connery sounded Scottish. In Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* both Jesus and Judas seemed to be Brooklynites. But at least the actors in those films were

speaking naturally and fluently. The focus wasn't on their accents but on the performances. If an accent were the key that unlocked character, Dan Aykroyd would be the greatest actor of his generation. In *The Perez Family* Tomei does what Aykroyd has done throughout his career: create a caricature instead of a character.

This is distressing, because Nair's previous work (*Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala*) was remarkable for its compassionate vision of fully rounded characters. Even in *The Perez Family* there are occasional hints of Nair's intelligence. When Juan hears for the first time that Elvis Presley is dead, he remarks in wonder, "So many assassinations!" When all the refugees are going to be shipped out of the Orange Bowl, an official informs them, "The Miami football teams are beginning their practicing, so you have to get out tomorrow." And when Juan finally decides to make love to Dottie he tells her, "Sometimes you start out with this moral impulse. But hell is waiting for your execution, and it never comes. Hell is waiting for the best, and it never comes. Our only deliverance is to stop waiting. To expect nothing, to love desperately without hoping for another." Alas, Dottie's response

is "Jooo smell like roses." As if to prove that this unlikely comment isn't as ridiculous as it sounds, an effects specialist proceeds to dump rose petals on her stomach.

These failures of taste are even more unfortunate because Nair and her cinematographer (Stuart Dryburgh of *The Piano*) have created a striking visual universe. When we watch Carmela make a glass of freshly squeezed lemonade, the colors are so vibrant, so glistening and sparkling, that the sensual surface gives the simple ritual meaning, and we begin to feel Juan's thirst, to understand why he dreams of Carmela. With Arturo Sandoval's sensual music bubbling beneath the images, Nair's vision of Miami is so intoxicating that when Juan overhears two strangers reminiscing about home and says, "Look around you, my friends—Cuba is here," it makes perfect sense.

If only Cubans were more visible in *The Perez Family*. Molina is Italian. So is Tomei. Thirty-five years ago Natalie Wood used dark makeup to transform herself into a Latina for *West Side Story*, but today Hollywood producers no longer hire fair-skinned actors to play Latinos. They hire Italians.