



IFFR 2025 review: Perla (Alexandra Makarová)

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“Makarová has a keen eye for storytelling as she manages to turn Perla into a compelling portrait of a woman confronting her past to forge out a path to her future.”



A struggling artist in the Vienna of the early '80s, Perla (Rebeka Poláková) can barely pay for the piano lessons of her talented daughter Julia (Carmen Diego). Things are looking up when Josef (Simon Schwarz) enters her life after a chance meeting at a birthday party. Though Perla is very evasive about the reasons she exchanged communist Czechoslovakia for Austria a decade prior, they quickly form a happy couple (though not until Josef leaves his wife rather unceremoniously). Then Perla receives a fateful phone call from her native country. After some trepidation she is contacted by her former lover and the father of her child, Andrej (Noël Czuczor). He is out of prison, he says, and suffering from cancer; can she please come see him. Josef is obviously not too keen on the idea, but not wanting to deny his new wife a bit of closure and his adoptive daughter a chance to meet her biological father, the family crosses the border despite the danger for Perla. Slowly but surely Andrej tries to pry Perla away from her husband and daughter, to the increasing anger and frustration of Josef. Perla finds herself at a crossroads: does she rekindle the old flame, or does she definitively choose her new life. Pressure mounts with the realization that any moment spent lingering on this choice endangers her more...

In her second feature, Slovak-Austrian director Alexandra Makarová no doubt delved into her own memories to tell the story of a woman caught between two worlds (Makarová made the same move as her protagonist, although much later and presumably under better circumstances). There is a palpable sense of authenticity in *Perla*, even if its tension relies a bit too much on the spy thriller vibe of men lurking in corners surveilling Perla and her family, culminating in Ingrid Timková's almost-caricature secret agent that blows Perla's cover. The film's greatest strength is in the psychological struggle, wonderfully rendered by Poláková, of a woman having to choose between heart and reason. On the surface this should be an easy decision, in part because Andrej isn't presented in the best light, but her dark paintings are an early indication of an event in her and Andrej's relationship that has left an indelible mark on Perla.

That event is shown in a scene that forms the connective tissue between the first and second acts, a drawn-out static shot in which the young couple are harassed by two border patrol officers, who subsequently sexually assault an already pregnant Perla while holding Andrej at gunpoint. It is suggested that this is the incident that put Andrej in jail while Perla either escaped or was let go; in the film's opening scene we see a woman in similar woodland, who hesitates before crossing a river, suggesting this is Perla sneaking across the border. This has led to feelings of guilt and shame on her side, countered by anger and a sense of entitlement

on Andrej's part. This psychologically complex situation draws the characters together, culminating in a moment of very raw sex, which gives Perla the closure that Andrej can't reach. It takes an act of cruelty for Perla to definitively draw the line, finally speaking the words that the film seemed to have in the back of its mind since she first picked up the phone in her Viennese apartment: "*You have no idea who I am.*" It is only at this point that she herself has an answer to that question, and it took Andrej to get her there. 

DP Georg Weiss's lensing appropriately evokes the film's era, something the meticulous production design by Klaudia Kiczak also contributes to. Makarová makes good use of these elements, and her assured direction ensures that there's always a sense of unease hanging between the film's two central characters. The work is not flashy, but the decision to shoot the pivotal assault scene in one long, static take pays dividends to the portrayal of their relationship afterward. With lesser impact, Perla's decisions to cling onto Andrej for as long as she does would have been harder to swallow, but the intensity of the scene strongly underlines the deeply felt emotional connection that Perla has to her former lover. Moments like these lift the film above the average festival fare and show Makarová has a keen eye for storytelling as she manages to turn *Perla* into a compelling portrait of a woman confronting her past to forge out a path to her future.

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