

## 'Perla': Rotterdam Review

BY **WENDY IDE** | 4 FEBRUARY 2025

**A Czech woman's new life in 1980s Vienna is threatened by secrets from her past**



**SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL ROTTERDAM  
'PERLA'**

*Dir/scr. Alexandra Makarova. Austria/Slovakia. 2025. 108mins*

A single mum who fled the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, Perla (Rebeka Polakova) has carved out a life for herself and her daughter in 1980s Vienna. She's a rising star artist - her bold, sensual canvases have caught the eye of a New York gallerist - and her young daughter Julia (Carmen Diego) is already a gifted pianist. A relationship with an older man, Josef (Simon Schwarz), brings a newfound

stability and security to her life. All of this changes, however, when Perla is contacted by a voice from her past in this taut and satisfying iron curtain drama by Alexandra Makarova.

---

### ***Taut and satisfying iron curtain drama***

---

It's the second feature film from Makarova, who loosely draws inspiration from her own life: she is Slovak-Austrian and moved to Vienna to live with her artist mother. Her debut film, 2018's *Crush My Heart*, also explored ideas of identity and displacement through its story of two Romany teenagers from Slovakia sent to beg in Vienna. *Perla* has plenty going for it: the central character – a feisty, forthright and unconventional young woman with peroxide hair and a wayward streak – is brought to life in a rewardingly textured performance from Polakova. The film's tonal shift, from character study to something closer to a thriller, is also deftly handled. Further festival interest is likely and the picture could find a home on a curated streaming platform. It certainly establishes Makarova's position as a promising talent to watch.

After a brief 1968 prologue in which we hear a news broadcast about Soviet military activities in Eastern Europe (Czech citizens are warned not to resist the advancing troops), the main body of the story starts in Vienna, 1981. Perla's hand-to-mouth existence and free-spirited Bohemian nature frustrate her daughter. "Can't you get a cleaning job?" she pleads, when Perla can't find the cash to pay for Julia's piano lessons. But a birthday party full of art world movers and shakers proves to be more lucrative: Perla charms the birthday boy, Josef, who leaves his partner for the spiky young émigrée artist.

There's a hint that Perla's current life has been built thanks to the careful re-writing of the past. "I didn't flee," she says firmly and repeatedly. "I got a scholarship." Other details, including the identity of her daughter's father, are carefully filed away. Perla shuts down any questions by claiming that he is dead. A phone call from an acquaintance from her former life reveals this to be a lie. Julia's father, Andrej (Noël Czuczor), is due to be released from jail (where, we assume, he has been a political prisoner) and is desperate to meet his daughter. Makarova's sure hand as a director is evident in the terrific scene in *Perla* shares the news with Josef, both seated in the audience for a piano recital in which Julia is competing.

The use of music – the score is sparse, jittery and percussive – adds to tension that ramps up considerably when Perla, using an Austrian passport with an assumed name, Josef and Julia journey to Kosice (now in Slovakia but, at the time that the story is set, still Czechoslovakia under the fist of

Communist rule). For a while at least, Perla is caught up in the thrill of reconnecting with her former lover – to Josef's obvious chagrin, the chemistry between Perla and the lean, tall, poetically tousled Andrej is all too palpable. But Andrej is not the man he once was, and Perla seems blind to the risks she is taking under the watchful eyes of the authorities.

The picture's production design is particularly effective in capturing the shift between the free-thinking creativity of Perla's world in Austria and the austere, oppressive formality of the state-run hotel in Kosice. Even more of a shock is Perla's return to the village where she grew up. A run down, bleak community full of hostile eyes and violence, it reminds her, perhaps too late, of what she ran away from in the first place.

Production company: Golden Girls Filmproduktion & Filmservices, Hailstone, s.r.o.

Contact: Golden Girls Filmproduktion & Filmservices [office@goldengirls.at](mailto:office@goldengirls.at)

Producers: Arash T. Riahi, Sabine Gruber, Tomas Krupa

Cinematography: George Weiss

Production design: Klaudia Kiczak

Editing: Joana Scrinzi

Music: Johannes Winkler, Rusanda Panfli

Main cast: Rebeka Polakova, Simon Schwarz, Carmen Diego, Noël Czuczor, Hilde Dalik