

Persian Lessons

Directed by **Vadim Perelman**



127 minutes / Russia / Germany / Belarus - 2.39 - 5.1



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SYNOPSIS

Occupied France, 1942. Gilles (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart) is arrested by SS soldiers alongside other Jews and sent to a camp in Germany. He narrowly avoids sudden execution by swearing to the guards that he is not Jewish, but Persian.

This lie temporarily saves him, but Gilles gets assigned a life-or-death mission: to teach Farsi to Head of Camp Koch (Lars Eidinger), who dreams of opening a restaurant in Iran once the war is over.

Through an ingenious trick, Gilles manages to survive by inventing words of "Farsi" every day and teaching them to Koch. The particular relationship between the two men sparks the jealousy of other prisoners and SS guards towards Gilles. And while the suspicions of Koch grow every day, Gilles understands that he will not be able to keep his secret very long.

DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

What drew you to this story, how did you find out about it?

I first heard about "Persian Lessons" from producer Timur Bekmambetov when he shared some of his upcoming projects with me. I fell in love with the project right away. I was very impressed and inspired by it. I immediately realized the potential of the story and the effect it may have on the audience. And I thought: it's just a wonderful project, I have to get on board!

Is it based or inspired by a true story?

The film is based on a short story written by Wolfgang Kohlhaase called "Erfindung einer Sprache." That being said, there are hundreds of similar stories, in which wit and smart-thinking enabled people to survive. I would like to think that "Persian Lessons" is a compilation of these.

In fact, a friend of Wolfgang Kohlhaase told him a similar story some years after the war. But it only had some similarities. Kohlhaase's adaptation used totally different detail. There are stories that are united in only one thing: they are insane, precisely because it required courage, luck, quick thinking and the help of individuals to escape the relentless pursuit of German fascists and their supporters.

How realistic did you want the film to be and what type of research did that entail? How did you recreate the camps, for example?

I wanted the film to be very realistic, that's why we did quite an extensive research to know what the transit camps looked like, how long did the people stay in there... We were inspired by a camp called Natzweiler Struthof that was located between France & Germany, in the North East of France. We also did a patchwork of other elements from a selection of various camps: the main gates in our movie were from Buchenwald, for instance. We recreated our transition camp being based on different photos and video footage that we found. We tried to make it as truthful and as authentic as possible.



What made you choose Lars Eidinger and Nahuel Pérez Biscayart for your main protagonists? (Especially for Nahuel, since this is quite a departure from his previous roles!)

Both Lars and Nahuel are outstanding actors. They have accumulated their experience in other films and were wonderful and perfect for the roles. They were our main choices from the start, I couldn't even imagine anyone else playing Koch and Gilles. Especially now, looking back, it's impossible. Lars and Nahuel inhabited their characters, they lived in them. I'm glad that Nahuel could embrace this new role, I think change is always good! I trusted him to do it, even though he has never tried anything like it.

What preparation did the actors have to go through for the roles (did Nahuel speak German, for instance?)

Yes, of course, they did a lot while preparing for the film. Lars Eidinger and Alexander Beyer (who played Commandant) knew a lot about the history of concentration camps. Nahuel spoke German, Italian, Spanish and French, which made it easier for us, as his character had to be bilingual. Nahuel's native language is Spanish, he is from Argentina. He was incredible, the way he picked up the language and pronunciation is just out of this world. He was actually very good at speaking German, my German friends and co-workers were really impressed. The way he learns a language is truly a talent.

We had a great help from our history consultant Jörg Müllner, who was constantly in touch with our German actors regarding the way Nazis would behave and act.

One very strong theme of the film is memory, especially emphasized in the opening and closing scenes: memorizing a language, and the role of language in memory, especially since so much evidence has been destroyed before the end of the war. Can you tell us about that?

You're correct, memory is one of the strongest themes in the film, and also inventiveness. I think human inventiveness and what the strong human spirit can do to survive is truly amazing. I think you can actually feel it in the script. And the incredible outcome of this story is that the way Gilles transforms prisoners' names into foreign language words is immortalizing them. During the war there were all those people who have vanished completely and remained unknown because all the archives and all the registers of the camp were burnt by the Nazis.

The film is also about the link between language and immigration. You had to learn English before immigrating to Canada as well. What does that process of learning a language mean to you, and why is it important in that story?

I think particularly immigration in this film only applies to Hauptsturmführer Koch as he wants to immigrate to Iran in order to open a German restaurant which is his sacred dream. He realized he must know the local language in order to be able to survive in a country, to be functional. He has to fit in, he has to adapt, assimilate and he has to make his accent disappear.

The film depicts a complex, uncomfortable relationship, based on mutual interests but that at times seems to go deeper than that. What did you try to show through that relationship?

Well, I think I try to show that we are all people, we are all capable of love and we're all capable of evil things as well as horrific acts of hatred. There is no such thing as an absolute good and absolute evil. It's always somewhere in the middle. I always try to see my characters under different angle and see their various shades. I wanted to show the transformation Koch goes through: he is able to communicate things in invented farsi language, things he couldn't say in German, taboo things. It's not a coincidence that when Gilles asks him "who are you?" in fake Farsi, he doesn't answer "Hauptsturmführer Koch", he says "Klaus Koch". So I found it fascinating to portray the growth of this person, his humanization and the fact that through this language he is able to reach and show certain parts of himself that he wasn't able to perform in German.

You succeed in making the spectator at times empathize with all the characters of the film, especially the officer trying to learn Persian. How did you achieve that, and was that important for you?

Absolutely, It was important for me. I'm trying to do it in all my films. I'm trying to create characters that are worth our empathy. How have I achieved that? I think, through humanization. There are films that show Nazis as robots, automatons, screaming, speeding, horrific, evil, very one-dimensional characters. And I think we can't forget that they were people too. They were loved and they were jealous, they were scared – they had all human qualities. And that in a way makes their acts even more horrific.

Many films have been made about WWII. Did you draw inspiration from any specific film or director, and how did you want to distinguish this film from others about that same period of time?

No I didn't really draw any inspiration from other films or directors. It's a unique story which was turned into a unique script which I hopefully was able to turn into a unique movie.

Watching the film, Victor Klemperer's book, "The Language of the Third Reich," comes to mind. Was the contemporary political discourse an inspiration for this story?

Nope. It wasn't. The book actually was quite unknown to me until I read this question and I was fascinated to read it. So thank you for that recommendation.

DIRECTOR – VADIM PERELMAN

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2018: KUPI MENYA

Moscow International Film Festival

2016: YOLKI 5

2015: IZMENY (TV MINI-SERIES)

2013: PEPEL (TV MINI-SERIES)

2007: THE LIFE BEFORE HER EYES

With Uma Thurman, Evan Rachel Wood

2003: HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG

3-time Oscar-nominated: Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Best Original Score



CAST

NAHUEL PÉREZ BISCAYART as Gilles

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2019: SICK, SICK, SICK – Alice FURTADO

Cannes Film Festival (Directors' Fortnight)

2017: AGADAH – Alberto RONDALLI

2017: IF YOU SAW HIS HEART – Joan CHEMLA

Toronto International Film Festival (Platform Section)

2017: SEE YOU UP THERE – Albert DUPONTEL

Winner of 5 Césars (Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography Best Costume Design, Best Production Design, Best Director)

2017: BPM (BEATS PER MINUTE) – Robin CAMPILLO

Cannes Film Festival (Grand Prize of the Jury), Winner of 6 Césars (including Best Film and Most Promising Actor for Nahuel Pérez Biscayart)

2016: THE FUTURE PERFECT – Nele WOHLATZ

2016: STEFAN ZWEIG: FAREWELL TO EUROPE – Maria SCHRADER

LARS EIDINGER as Koch

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2019: DUMBO – Tim BURTON

2018: HIGH LIFE – Claire DENIS

San Sebastián International Film Festival (Official Selection)

2017: SENSE8 (TV SERIES)

2016: PERSONAL SHOPPER – Olivier ASSAYAS

Cannes Film Festival (Official Selection)

2014: CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA – Olivier ASSAYAS

Cannes Film Festival (Official Selection), Winner of 1 César (Best Supporting Actress)

JONAS NAY as Max

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2018: THE ACCIDENTAL REBEL – Randa CHAHOUD

2015 - TODAY: DEUTSCHLAND 83 / DEUTSCHLAND 86 / DEUTSCHLAND 89 (TV SERIES)

2015: LETNIE PRZESILENIE – Michał ROGALSKI

LEONIE BENESCH as Elsa

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2017 - 2020: BABYLON BERLIN (TV SERIES)

2015: 8 SECONDS – Ömer FARUK SORAK & Birkan PUSA

2009: DAS WEISSE BAND, EINE DEUTSCHE KINDERGESCHICHTE – Michael HANEKE

Nominated for 2 Oscars (Best Achievement in Cinematography, Best Foreign Language Film), Cannes Film Festival (Winner of the Palme d'Or)



PRODUCERS – HYPE FILM

Ilya Stewart & Murad Osmann & Pavel Burya

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2018: LETO – Kirill SEREBRENNIKOV
Cannes Film Festival (Official Selection)

2016: THE STUDENT – Kirill SEREBRENNIKOV
Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard)

2015: COLD FRONT – Roman VOLOBUEV

CAST LIST

Gilles	Nahuel PÉREZ BISCAYART
Koch	Lars EIDINGER
Max	Jonas NAY
Elsa	Leonie BENESCH
Commandant	Alexander BEYER
Jana	Luisa-Céline GAFFRON
Paul	David SCHÜTTER

CREW LIST

Production Designers: Dmitriy TATARNIKOV, Vlad OGAI
Costume Designer: Alexey KAMYSHOV
Sound: Boris VOYT
Make-up Artist: Ekaterina ODINTSOVA
1st AD: Aleksey SMOLYAR
Editors: Vessela MARTSCHEWSKI, Thibault HAGUE
Music: Evgueni GALPERINE, Sacha GALPERINE
Director of Photography: Vladislav OPELYANTS
Line Producer: Daniil MAKHORT
Co-Producers: Ilya DZHINCHARADZE, Elizaveta CHALENKO, Sol BONDY, Jamila WENSKE, Leonid SHPOLSKIY, Galina MALYSHEVA, Dmitry MALYSHEV, Vladimir STAETSKI, Mikhail GILMAN, Maria ZATULOVSKAYA
Producers: Ilya STEWART, Murad OSMANN, Pavel BURIA, Ilya ZOFIN, Vadim PERELMAN, Timur BEKMAMBETOV, Rauf ATAMALIBEKOV
Based on the story "ERFINDUNG EINER SPRACHE" by Wolfgang Kohlhaase
Written by Ilya ZOFIN
Directed by Vadim PERELMAN

PRODUCTION CREDITS

HYPE FILM producers

Ilya Stewart

Murad Osmann

Pavel Burya

LM MEDIA producers

Ilya Zofin

Vadim Perelman

Timur Bekmambetov

Rauf Atamalibekov

HYPE FILM co-producers

Ilya Dzhincharadze

Elizaveta Chalenko

ONE TWO FILMS co-producers

Sol Bondy

Jamila Wenske

Co-producers

Leonid Shpolskyi

Dmitry Malyshev

Galina Malysheva

Vladimir Staetski

Mikhail Gilman

Maria Zatulovskaya

Malaya Nikitskaya 20

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