

# Film review – Wakolda (Lucía Puenzo, 2013)



In almost every scene of Lucía Puenzo's chilling *Wakolda*, the foreground is overshadowed by the looming Argentinian mountains in the distance. This overpowering vision is akin to that of the film's subject – a war criminal, pleasant if unexplored, but hiding something altogether more abhorrent.

*In Argentina, a family reside in their currently empty hotel by a great lake, eager to relax in to the beauty of their surroundings. A traveling doctor follows them, asks for a room and becomes company to them, insisting he does everything to help their medical ailments. His secrets are unknown to almost everyone.*

Puenzo's latest work documents the life of a runaway Josef Mengele, one of World War Two's most infamous war criminals famous for experimenting on children and the disabled during the war years, dubbed 'The Angel of Death'. Set 15 years post-war in 1960, the man has resumed an assuming and almost normal presence, if not for his ink-riddled diaries, full of anatomical sketches of the most absurd, twisted kind.

It's execution is beautiful in many respects. Cinematographer Nicolás Puenzo layers a cold, noir like filter over the story, delivering stunning wide shots of snow laden Argentina, as well as intimate shots of freckled faces and bruising skin. Very few cinematographers succeed in portraying either of these, Mr Puenzo does a gorgeous job of both. The cast deliver great performances individually, especially young Florencia Bado as the object of Mengele's persistent experiments, whose subtle embrace of her own juvenility echoes the effortless performance of Ivana Baquero in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's*

Labyrinth.

It does, at times, enjoy nudging the viewer on the arm and letting them know this man is actually evil. What should be subtle is sometimes a little condescending, translating into ITV daytime drama rather than a serious war film as it veers of the path it's trying to follow. However these encounters are thankfully a rarity.

Twisting and deceptive, *Wakolda* unfolds like a platonic, biological *Lolita*. Bleak, chilling and hard to shake, Puenzo's adaptation of Josef Mengele's infatuation with experimentation and the body is as powerful and uncomfortable as you would expect.

**Wakolda opens at Filmhouse, Lothian Road on Friday 22nd August**