Peccadillo Pictures Presents
A Film by LUCÍA PUENZO

WAKOLDA

Official Entry: Argentina
2014 Academy Awards ©

UK CINEMA RELEASE: 8th August 2014

“A striking and achingly tense drama”
Screen International

Argentina / 2013 / 93 mins / Spanish / Cert: TBC

UK Press Enquiries: Nikki Aslatt / nikki@emfoundation.com

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SYNOPSIS:

1960, a travelling Doctor strikes up a relationship with a local Argentinian family, in particular their daughter Lilith, a lonely 12-year-old girl who unknowingly becomes close friends with one of the world's most terrifying Nazi war criminals, Josef Mengele A.K.A 'The Angel Of Death', who is on the run for his crimes in Auschwitz.

Based on true events, this dark, intense dramatic thriller from acclaimed writer-director Lucia Puenzo (XXY, THE FISH CHILD) is adapted from her novel, WAKOLDA, exposing the hidden identity of the 'German Doctor'.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE – LUCIA PUENZO:

“The time Josef Mengele spent in Bariloche is the most mysterious period of his hideout in Latin America”.

All that is known is he worked as a veterinarian, experimenting with the Argentine cattle, while he secretly continued his research buying blood samples of pregnant women. An old rumour says he also made perfect human-like dolls, which soon became a myth. Mengele was a fanatic who saw himself as a visionary with an extraordinary historical opportunity.

“The essence of his ideology was to achieve biological perfection and to destroy anything interfering with this goal. This bio-medical vision is at the heart of the Nazi movement, and not just tangential to its war”.

I spent almost a year writing the script of WAKOLDA, based on my eponymous novel, submerged in the complex reasons which made the Argentinean government open its doors to so many Nazis, even making a law to allow them the use of their real names, while entire towns – like Bariloche - were openly friendly to welcoming them... Why hundreds of Argentinean families became accomplices to these men? What was the reaction of these closed German communities, settled down in Patagonia long before WWII, when Nazism turned into something hideous? More so, what happened to the teenagers raised in these communities when they became aware of the monsters they were living with? These questions triggered the plot of WAKOLDA: to combine History with the story of a family who could have lived with one of the biggest criminals of all times. While exploring some themes and atmospheres that are part of my previous films (the construction of our sexual and social identities and the political awakenings), I wanted the cinematographic language of WAKOLDA to express the contrast between the grandeur of the Patagonian landscape and the tiny, organic details of the characters’ private worlds.
LUCIA PUENZO – BIOGRAPHY:

Lucía Puenzo was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. After studying literature, film and theatre, she published the novels El Niño Pez (2004), 9 minutos (2005), La maldición de Jacinta Pichimahuida (2007), la furia de la langosta (2010) and Wakolda (2011), all translated in more than fifteen languages. Her first feature film XXY won the Critics’ Grand Prize in Cannes Film Festival 2007 and a Goya for Best Foreign Film. Her second film THE FISH CHILD opened the Panorama section at the Berlin Film Festival 2009. WAKOLDA is her third film.

FILMOGRAPHY:

XXY – 2007
THE FISH CHILD – 2009
WAKOLDA – 2013

Q&A WITH LUCIA PUENZO:

You write novels and direct films. Why did you choose to adapt one of your own novels, Wakolda, for this film and how did you work on the script?

I first wrote the novel Wakolda. I was interested in the voice of that little girl who became fascinated with a German doctor, whom she slowly discovered the true identity. I wrote the novel for one year and a half. I was also writing a script of what was going to be my third film, which was not Wakolda. Then I began to realize that the film I wanted to do was Wakolda and not that other film. I began to work on the adaptation, which actually changes a lot from the novel to the script.

What kind of changes?

In the novel, even if it’s not the voice of Mengele, his character sees the world as if it was a very big zoo. Like a laboratory. In the film, the point of view became the one of that girl. It is through her eyes that we see everything: the relationship with this German doctor, the trip to the end of Argentina and the German community in Bariloche, which was very closed and very pro-nazi at that time, even before the war, and how she began to understand where she is and who these people are.

Did you make some researches about the Nazis in South America?

A lot. The stories of Nazis in South America could be a hundred books and a hundred films. So many Nazi generals of all different hierarchies that disappeared in our country, and in several other countries of Latin America… But I was especially interested in their obsession with genetics, with making the perfect race. It is
almost a paradox that Mengele, so obsessed with racial purity, should end up in a continent (not only in Argentina, he spent year in Paraguay and in Brazil), where we all have mixed blood.

Do you think that, like Lilith’s mother, part of the Argentinian population might have ignored all about the Nazis crimes?
In 1959, everybody was beginning to know what had happened during the Second World War, but probably not everyone knew about the role of German doctors and what had been going on in the deportation camps. That was something that began to be discovered with the trials a bit later…
The German community of Bariloche was well prepared to receive the Germans who came from abroad and needed very quickly a new passport, a new identity, a new job. There were networks to do that and to make these men evaporate. And of course, there was a lot of Argentinians who were not Germans and who knew more or less who these men were. In the school where the kids go in the film, which was a real and openly nazi school before the war. After the war they began to hide all the references of Nazism. Actually Erich Priebeke lived in Bariloche for decades, and was the director that school. When he was discovered and extradited, some citizens of Bariloche said he was “such a nice little old man”. There was a lot of chains of complicity.

How did you introduce fiction in the historical background?
Both the novel and the film work with a combination of real facts of history and some fiction. It is true that Mengele lived in Argentina for 4 or 5 years. He even had his name in the phonebook, he had a pharmaceutical company, he moved around our country with complete impunity. At some point, when Eichmann was captured by the Mossad, Mengele disappeared and reappeared in Paraguay six months later. The film is located in those six months, where his tracks were lost for some time. Some people say he was in Bariloche at some point. The family with whom he lives is part of fiction, though they could have been real. Nora Eldoc, the Israeli spy, is a true life character based on a woman who was found murdered a few days after Mengele is supposed to have left Bariloche. Some say she was a voluntary of the Mossad. There were hundreds of them in Latin America. Others say she was there for a ski week, and that her death was an accident. But people from the Israeli embassy came to look for her body, took some documentation away and archived the episode.

It is the first time you deal with an historical subject. What were you interested in?
_Wakolda_ is very close to other films and stories I made. It has a lot of points of contact with _XXY_… You have this girl who sees the world and understands what is going on; The doctor who wants to normalize the body of Alex in _XXY_ has a lot of points in common with Mengele, who tries to make Lilith’s body grow to a standard height. I began to write both the novel and the script with the fascination of what some aspects of medicine is doing even today, in their constant intention to create perfect bodies. Of course, Nazism took this idea to it’s perfect and fanatic extreme: they crossed the line horribly and in a very perverse way. When I began to write _Wakolda_, I met a lot of historians, but I also interviewed doctors, geneticists and endocrinologists. They kept telling me that the growth treatment Mengele experimented, the growth hormone he used -even completely out of control and in a very perverse way- is the same hormone used today for growth treatments. Ethical issues in many medical treatments is still today a delicate subject.

Would you say that Lilith’s father, who aims at reproducing the mechanism of the human body with his dolls, and Mengele, who is observing, taking notes and making experiments on the family, display two different aspects of science?
When I began to write the novel, the only thing I knew was that the heart of the novel and then of the film would be the theme of “mixed” race or “pure” race. In the novel, there are two dolls. The Mapuche doll called _Wakolda_, almost an alter ego of Lilith: mixed race, imperfect, magnetic and enchanted. Mapuches -our Indians from Patagonia- were wise people, with many esoteric beliefs. The other doll is _Herlitzka_, the Aryan doll that Mengele intends to create in series: a perfect doll. What Lilith’s father does are very small sized, imperfect dolls. In 1960 in Argentina, it is the beginning of industrialization, the jump from handcrafted work to factories. Before that, children sent their broken toys to what was known as _Doll hospitals_. Broken toys were not thrown away but fixed, or cured. That’s what Lilith’s father does: he fixes broken dolls and makes new handcrafted ones.

In the film Mengele’s diaries also became important. They’re based on something I read in many history books: he used to travel with them and to have, even in the camps, many notebooks with drawings and precise (obsessive) information of everything he did. We even tracked some of these notebooks. The drawings were so
childish that it was impossible to use, it was so dense. We created new notebooks for the film and they became very important. With this we found a cinematographic way of including how he saw the world: like a zoo, or a laboratory. This is another point of contact with XXY, in which the girl used to make drawings of her body. Mengele saw the world through the details of bodies, and what he pretended to do with them.

The film also shows how Lilith leaves childhood to become a young woman...

Lilith is in a very particular moment, leaving childhood and entering puberty. She’s beginning to realize what she can provoke in a man, both in an adult and in boys her age. There is an ambiguous attraction between Mengele and Lilith, and it was one of the big issues of the film: how to deal with that attraction… Lilith also suffers the small size of her body. She’s having a tough time at school. I think that we all know how cruel kids can be sometimes when they are at that age and they want to make someone have a bad time…

Lilith is her parents’ little girl, she’s small, and it seems that nobody but Mengele has seen her growing. It is as if Lilith “needs” this man, his way of looking at her...

I think children and teenagers are sometimes in contact with darker sides and they can there cross the line to certain aspects of their personalities that maybe they don’t know so much. Lilith is discovering some aspects that maybe she doesn’t yet know about herself. The way Mengele looks at her, or men look at her, she’s growing up through that. In the same time, she’s beginning to have a political conscience. It’s not only the sexual aspect, I think she’s beginning to understand certain other aspects of politics and ideology: which is going on in her school, in her house, what is happening all around her...

How did you choose your main actors?
The casting was a very long process in “Wakolda”. First we began to look for the girl, Lilith, and for Mengele. They were of course two difficult castings. For Mengele, we needed an actor who would not only speak very fluently Spanish and perfect German but who also had to look very much alike Mengele. He needed to be the same age more or less. Alex Brendemühl has everything we needed. He speaks perfect German, he would make the accent that Mengele had, from the region he was from. He also speaks very good Spanish. He took out his Spanish accent to make it an Argentinian accent and he’s incredibly similar to Mengele. If you put one photo beside the other, it is scary. For Lilith, we made an 8 month casting. We saw hundreds of girls. It was very difficult to find a little girl that would be in any scene of the film. She had to have both the freshness of a very young girl and also a kind of a sexual intensity, which I think Florencia Bado has. Natalia Oreiro plays her mother. I was actually looking for a German actress or an Argentinian actress who would speak perfect German. Then I saw Natalia Oreiro in the film Enfance Clandestine (which we also produced in my company, Historias Cinematográficas). I was impressed with what she was doing. I asked her if she would be able to learn to speak German, even by phonetics, in 2 months, and she began to take classes every day. Natalia is a singer and she speaks perfect Russian for example. She made it, she learnt.

Where did you shoot the film?
We shot almost the whole film in Bariloche and Patagonia, and only two weeks in Buenos Aires. We shot the film in six weeks, which is very short. We lived in the same hotel where we shot the film. It was a lot of fun and a lot of concentration for the team because we were far away from Bariloche. The rooms of all the team were beside the set, besides the rooms of the fiction, and we ate in the same dining room and everything was there. It was good for all actors, especially for the children. They were there with their parents, they could be playing in their rooms and they would come when everything was ready for the shooting and were free again to rest immediately after we finished.

The first sequences on the road to Patagonia are incredible. Why did you choose to shoot in cinemascope?
There is something about Patagonia: it seems to be infinite. Argentina is so huge, especially for Europeans! There are such huge distances to reach one city to another. There is something about trying to transmit the immensity of our country. I think that the first sequences can transmit how huge Argentina is.

You mix both paradisiac places and a really thrilling atmosphere. How did you manage to do so?
From the very beginning, with all the team, we wanted to work on this aspect of how in the middle of paradise, something so dense would be happening. Bariloche and all Patagonia are a paradise, it is not a casualty that this
man arrives there and feels safe. He feels home because it looks exactly the same as Switzerland. At the same
time, we worked on creating the dark aspects of this paradise in every location. We all worked together to
create the atmosphere and rhythm of a story that had to have create this paradox.

Your first film, XXY, was shown in Cannes in 2007. What do you expect with the screening of Wakolda at
Un Certain Regard this year?

XXY had such a long and happy life probably because of how it began: here in Cannes, winning the Critics
Grand Prix and several other prices. Before that, I wrote the film in the Cinefondation. When I got the news that
Wakolda would be in Un Certain Regard, for me it was the best place for the film to begin its life, to be part of
Cannes’ Official Selection.

WHO WAS JOSEF MENGELE?

Josef Mengele was one of the most infamous men associated with the death camps and the Holocaust. Josef Mengele gained infamy for his experiments on twins while at Auschwitz-Birkenau - though he also worked at other camps during World War Two. Mengele was born on March 16th, 1911. His early years seemed normal - he was deemed to be an intelligent and popular person in his home town. After leaving school, Mengele went to Munich to study philosophy. After this, he studied medicine at Frankfurt University. By the time he had finished his medical studies, his beliefs were starting to show in Nazi Germany where racism was rife. His dissertation was a study into the differences in the lower jaw between different racial groups.

In 1937, Mengele joined the Nazi Party and one year later he joined the SS. Mengele fought in the Russian campaign but he was so badly wounded that he was considered unfit for frontline military service. After recovering from his wounded, Mengele volunteered to work in concentration camps. He was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

It was Mengele who is principally associated with selecting those who were gassed on arrival and those who survived. Known as the "Angel of Death", a flick of the wrist immediately condemned some to the gas chambers, while others were deemed able to work for a while before being murdered. In his 21 months at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mengele was a regular figure on the platform when the trains came. Those who survived the camp, remember Mengele as being immaculately dressed as he indicated those who should go to the left (immediately to the gas chambers) of him, and those who should go to the right - to work.

Stories of Mengele's cruelty abound. On one occasion, it is said that a blockhouse housing 750 women became infested with lice. Mengele ordered that all of the women in the hut should be gassed and then the blockhouse should be deloused. Another story states that he condemned a whole train load of Jews to be instantly gassed when a mother refused to be separated from her daughter and attacked a SS guard who tried to separate them.

However, it is his experiments on twins that have condemned Mengele to infamy. Mengele was fascinated by the study of genes and he wanted to find out if he could 'change' identical sets of twins by operating on them and performing experiments on them that had no scientific basis. There can be no doubting the known outcome of such experiments as Mengele built his laboratory next to one of the crematoriums at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Mengele experimented on three thousand sets of twins at the camp. Before they were experimented on, Mengele did all in his power to calm them. The children were given clean clothes and sweets. They were allowed to call him "Uncle". They were driven to his laboratory in either his own staff car or in a truck with a red cross painted on the side. They were then subjected to appalling experiments - surgery without anesthetics, blood
transfusions from one twin to the other, the deliberate injecting of lethal germs into the twins, sex change operations.

Mengele sent all his findings to his mentor Dr Verschuer at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. It took two trucks to carry all of his 'findings'. Verschuer destroyed them - so the full extent of what Mengele did at Auschwitz will never be known. If Mengele himself kept any notes, they have never been found.

As the Russians advanced towards Poland, and it became clear that the Germans were losing the war on the Eastern Front, many records at Auschwitz-Birkenau were destroyed by the SS guards there. They then disguised themselves in a variety of ways. Mengele became a German infantry soldier as he moved west. As he moved west away from the Russians, he also did work at camps at Gross-Rosen and Matthausen. Mengele was captured as a German infantry soldier near Munich. The Allies released him as there seemed little point in keeping in custody an infantryman. Mengele had managed to disguise himself well. After the war, Mengele managed to avoid arrest by keeping a very low profile. However, by 1948, he decided that his future lay elsewhere and not Germany.

Mengele decided to go to Argentina. He was unwittingly helped in this by the International Committee of the Red Cross who provided travel papers for people as a humanitarian gesture. With a false name, identity and Italian residency papers, Mengele moved to Argentina in 1949. He moved from one South American country to another to avoid being captured like Adolf Eichmann. He also lived under a number of aliases.

In 1979, while swimming in the sea in Brazil, Mengele suffered a stroke and drowned. He was buried as 'Wolfgang Gerhard' at Embu. However, his family later admitted that they had sheltered him and that Wolfgang Erhard was indeed Mengele. In 1992, DNA samples from the body matched those of his son and wife.

Source: credit to History Learning Site UK

CAST:
Alex Brendemuhl Josef Mengele
Natalia Oreiro Eva
Diego Peretti Enzo
Elena Roger Nora Eldoc
Guillermo Pfening Ana Pauls
Ana Pauls Nurse
Alan Daicz Tomas
Florence Bado Lilith

CREW:
Director Lucia Puenzo
Screenplay Lucia Puenzo adapted from the novel by Lucia Puenzo
Cinematographer Nicolas Puenzo
Editing Hugo Primero
Sound Fernando Soldevila
Set Design Marcelo Chaves
Music Daniel Tarra, Andres Goldstein, Laura Zisman, Dirty Three (Warren Ellis, Mick Turner, Jim White) featuring Nick Cave
Producer Lucia Puenzo
Executive Producer Nicolas Batlle
Produced By Historias Cinematograficas
‘Historias’ general producer Luis Puenzo
In Co-Production With: Pyramide Productions, Fabienne Vonier, Stephane Parthenay, Wanda Vision, Jose Maria Morales, Miguel Morales, HummelFilm: GudnyHummelvoll, MovieCity, The Stan Jakubowicz Co. Distribution Company
Photos Sebastian Puenzo


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ABOUT PECCADILLO PICTURES:

Peccadillo Pictures is an award-winning UK film distributor of Art House, Gay & Lesbian and World Cinema titles with an impressive collection of films from across the world. Launched in 2000, Peccadillo nurtures new and upcoming talent alongside established directors. In addition, Peccadillo Pictures also distributes short films and rereleases of classic titles. As well as bringing an array of films to cinemas across the UK and Ireland, Peccadillo provides film viewing on a variety of platforms, from online, video on demand, iTunes, Blu-ray and DVD.