



# Charlatan

**Director:** Agnieszka Holland

**Country:** Czech Republic

**Date:** 2020

A review by William Repass for *Slant*:

Agnieszka Holland's *Charlatan* centers around Jan Mikolášek (Ivan Trojan), a Czech healer who lived through the meat grinder that was Eastern Europe in the early to mid-20th century. Given its title, one might assume that the film plumbs the ambiguity of whether or not Mikolášek was a quack, but counterintuitively, Holland prefers to depict the man as the healer he claims himself to be. As a result, it's easy to imagine an Oscar-friendly version of the film in which Mikolášek is the steadfast individual victimized by a totalitarian regime, suffering for his principles and loved ones. Except that Holland isn't interested in easily digestible pop-psychology nuggets, which won't come as a surprise to fans of her 2017 film *Spoor*, which revolves around another irreducibly contradictory character.

*Charlatan* opens in 1957 with the death of Mikolášek's most powerful client, President Antonín Zápotocký. Mikolášek works with a younger live-in assistant, František (Juraj Loj), out of his own clinic, where he scrutinizes urine samples in a concentrated beam of light and prescribes herbal concoctions to his clients. (A questionable CGI sequence in which the camera, as though it were an electron microscope, zooms in to the contents of a sample is perhaps too eager to prove his abilities to the audience.) Each day, long queues of people form outside the clinic gates, desperate for a miracle, bottles of urine in hand; others send their samples by post. Mikolášek makes a great deal of money, given the circumstances, but without the president's protection, he's soon accused of poisoning two communist party officials and, before long, he and František find themselves at the mercy of the juridical apparatus.



Periodic flashbacks interrupt *Charlatan*'s narrative to flesh out Mikolášek's past, and in contrast to the dismal mood evoked in the present action, these sequences are awash with warm, nostalgic colors, even as they peel away the healer's enigmatic exterior to reveal the violence underneath. As an adolescent during World War II, Mikolášek (Josef Trojan) is forced to execute a fellow soldier as part of a firing squad, before then attempting to commit suicide and failing. Finally, after the war, he begins an apprenticeship under the witchy Mühlbacherová (Jaroslava Pokorná), who teaches him her method of urine analysis.

As this backstory is delivered, Mikolášek and František begin to have an affair. Though Holland laces her depiction of their relationship with moments of lyrical eroticism, she doesn't idealize it as an act of resistance. We're never allowed to overlook the power imbalance between the men or how the clandestine nature of their love opens the door to jealousy and co-dependence. These are the seeds of the film's culmination—not tragic so much as excoriating.

Despite his sexuality, which puts Mikolášek at odds with the Nazis and the communists, his prodigious talents as a healer make possible his collaboration with both regimes. For Holland, Mikolášek's abilities are by no means miraculous, but rather one side of a terrible coin. He's capable of healing precisely for having witnessed, experienced, and abetted an abundance of suffering. Holland refuses to show us a moralized version of Mikolášek or his world. Even as she recognizes the suffering that he alleviates in ordinary people, not just those with power, her camera never shies from his frailty or hypocrisy.

In order to continue healing people, Mikolášek treats anyone regardless of their politics, and even appears to enjoy the benefits of collaboration. After the Nazis force him at gunpoint to demonstrate his abilities, František chauffers him around town in a top-of-the-line German automobile emblazoned with swastikas. Mikolášek may not be a charlatan in the literal sense of the word, but he's as much an accomplice as he is a victim.

Obscure even to himself, Mikolášek's motives become Holland's real subject—whether he heals as a means of survival, out of altruism, fear, or a messiah complex, in order to offset the cruel, possessive streak in his personality, or to atone for not resisting the order to shoot his fellow soldier. Balking at nothing, Holland scrutinizes Mikolášek's psyche as if it, too, were a urine sample, looking for the impurities that exist in everyone, providing a much-needed dose of psychological realism, however painful it may be to swallow.

*From: <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/charlatan-review-agnieszka-holland/>*