

APPRENTICE
TO MURDER

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APPRENTICE TO MURDER

1988

CAST

Donald Sutherland as John Reese

Chad Lowe as Billy Kelly

Mia Sara as Alice Spangler

Rutanya Alda as Elma Kelly

Eddie Jones as Tom Kelly

Knut Husebø as Lars Hoeglin

Mark Burton as Clay Myers

Tiger Haynes as Rufus

CREW

Directed by **R.L. Thomas**

Produced by **Howard K. Grossman**

Executive Producer **Michael Jay Rauch**

Written by **Allan Scott** and **Wesley Moore**

Director of Photography **Kelvin Pike, B.S.C.**

Film Editor **Patrick McMahon**

Music by **Charles Gross**

Production Designer **Gregory Bolton**

Costume Designer **Elisabeth Ann Seley**

SPELLBOUND: RALPH L. THOMAS' *APPRENTICE TO MURDER*


by Paul Corupe

Murder and magic become closely intertwined in director Ralph L. Thomas' 1988 film *Apprentice to Murder*, a journey into the dark heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country. Based on a notorious local killing that shocked the country with accusations of witchcraft, this Canadian-U.S.-Norwegian co-production was born out of the fertile ground of the North American folk horror boom of the early 1980s, a series of supernatural fright films that unfold in the unforgiving American countryside rather than the misty, haunted landscapes of its more recognized British counterpart. As with entries like *Deadly Blessing* (1981), *Eyes of Fire* (1983), and *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Apprentice to Murder* is concerned with the role of folk mysticism in an otherwise deeply religious rural community, but it's also a more grounded work that considers the ways this homespun magic helps bind people together, even if it's for nefarious purposes.

Apprentice to Murder looks closely at a strain of faith healing practiced among the Pennsylvania Dutch since they set across the Atlantic Ocean in the 18th century. The German emigrants who established farming settlements in the area – including Mennonites and the Amish – may have been strict








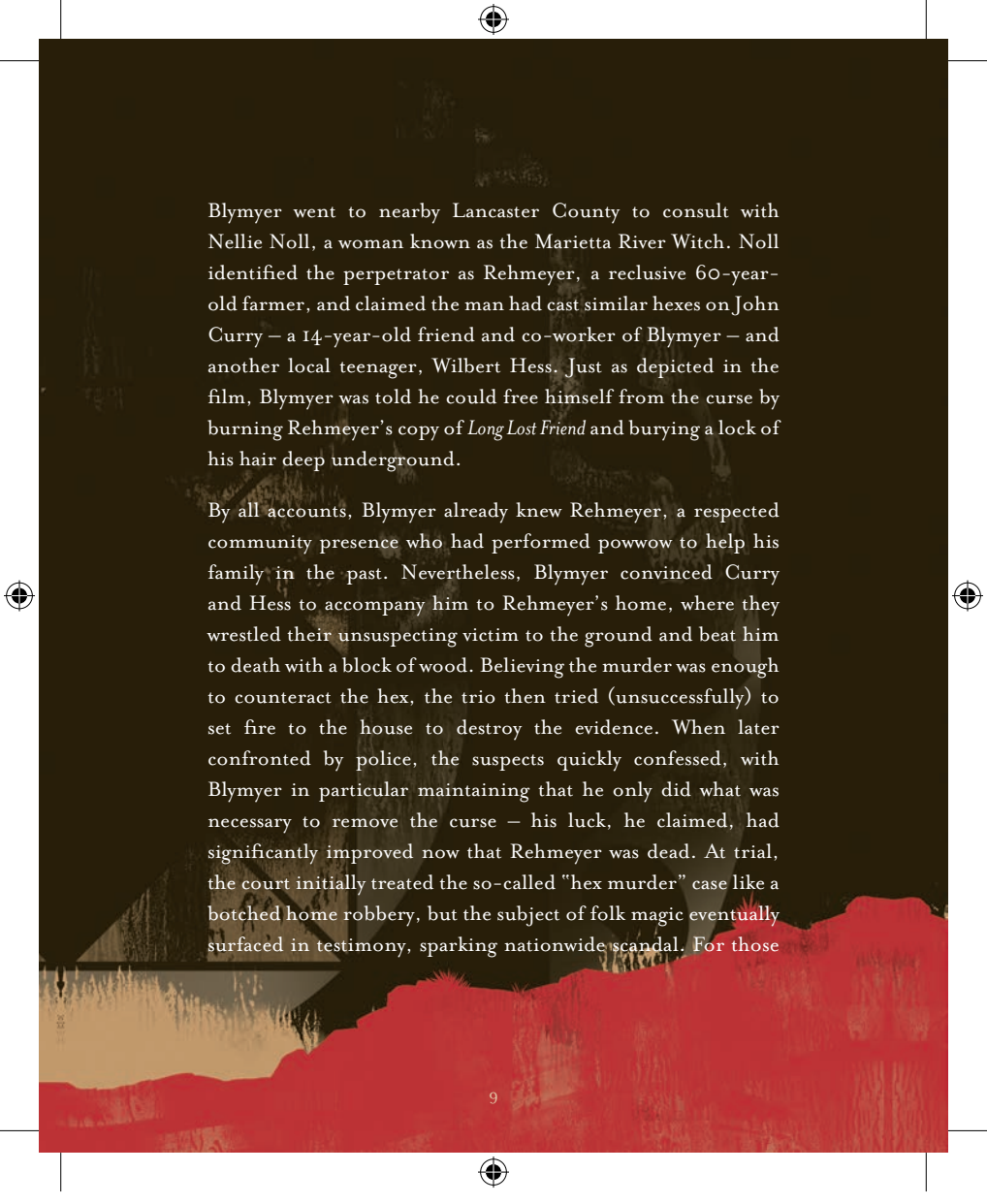
Christian traditionalists, but they also brought with them long-established European folk customs and charms that they adapted for use in the new world as “powwow.” Still performed to this day, powwow refers largely to “white magic” rituals intended to provide blessings and restore health, particularly in southeastern Pennsylvania, but also in communities from the Ozarks to the Midwestern United States, and even as far north as Ontario, Canada (near director Thomas’ adopted hometown of Toronto). Unrelated to Native American powwow social gatherings, the German-derived tradition of powwow is practiced by a “hex master” or “hex doctor,” a kind of devout Christian equivalent to a shaman or medicine man.

One of the essential tools of the powwow trade is John George Hohman’s book *Long Lost Friend* (1819), a collection of healing spells and remedies that makes several appearances throughout *Apprentice to Murder*. The most popular of several grimoires used by hex masters, *Long Lost Friend* catalogues useful folk treatments such as drinking corn silk tea to help cleanse the body or removing warts by rubbing them with a potato under a full moon. In powwow, a hex master doesn’t directly cure ailments but, more accurately, acts as an intermediary who invokes God to perform the required healing. Aside from rituals to ensure health, powwow also encompasses other practices such as displaying Dutch Hex Signs – geometric artwork usually hung on barns as protective “good luck” charms – and other



"superstitious" beliefs, such as keeping a broom by the front door to deter unwanted visitors, or greasing farm equipment to ward off weevils and other pests. Although condemned by some fundamentalist Christians as witchcraft (and therefore Satanic), defenders point out that powwow is only used to affect positive change.

But the line between harmful black magic and helpful white magic isn't always so clear, even among powwow practitioners. *Apprentice to Murder* is inspired by the true story of a conflict between two hex masters in York County, Pennsylvania in 1928 that ended in murder and controversy. The film follows enigmatic Pennsylvania Dutch powwower Dr. John Reese (Canadian screen icon Donald Sutherland), who befriends 16-year-old artist Billy Kelly (Chad Lowe, brother of Brat Packer Rob Lowe) with the hope that he can pass down his accumulated knowledge of charms and spells. The character of Dr. Reese is based on John Blymyer, a real part-time hex master and cigar factory worker who viciously attacked and killed Nelson Rehmyer, a fellow practitioner, and was later sentenced to life in jail for the crime. Blymyer, just 32 at the time of the murder, was consumed by a belief that his own recent hardships, including health issues and the death of his two children, were due to a spell cast by an unknown neighbour. With other powwow practitioners unable to help,



Blymyer went to nearby Lancaster County to consult with Nellie Noll, a woman known as the Marietta River Witch. Noll identified the perpetrator as Rehmyer, a reclusive 60-year-old farmer, and claimed the man had cast similar hexes on John Curry — a 14-year-old friend and co-worker of Blymyer — and another local teenager, Wilbert Hess. Just as depicted in the film, Blymyer was told he could free himself from the curse by burning Rehmyer's copy of *Long Lost Friend* and burying a lock of his hair deep underground.

By all accounts, Blymyer already knew Rehmyer, a respected community presence who had performed powwow to help his family in the past. Nevertheless, Blymyer convinced Curry and Hess to accompany him to Rehmyer's home, where they wrestled their unsuspecting victim to the ground and beat him to death with a block of wood. Believing the murder was enough to counteract the hex, the trio then tried (unsuccessfully) to set fire to the house to destroy the evidence. When later confronted by police, the suspects quickly confessed, with Blymyer in particular maintaining that he only did what was necessary to remove the curse — his luck, he claimed, had significantly improved now that Rehmyer was dead. At trial, the court initially treated the so-called "hex murder" case like a botched home robbery, but the subject of folk magic eventually surfaced in testimony, sparking nationwide scandal. For those

outside of the community, the practice of powwow – deemed “witchcraft” by the press – seemed like it had suddenly emerged out of dark pagan past.


Shot in the fall of 1986 in picturesque rural Norway and released in 1988 – 60 years after the actual events took place – *Apprentice to Murder* carefully recreates a tight-knit Pennsylvania Dutch settlement, with an eye for period detail and an overall faithfulness to powwow beliefs and traditions. In bringing to life this folk horror-inspired tale, the film incorporates historical accounts, such as teenage Blymyer controlling a rabid dog with powwow hand motions and Nellie Noll revealing Rehmyer’s identity by causing an image of the man’s face to appear in Blymyer’s palm. But Thomas, along with screenwriters Wesley Moore and Allan Scott, also takes several dramatic liberties with the story. While Billy is clearly meant to stand-in for John Curry, the film passes over the third killer, Wilbert Hess, and instead introduces a love interest in Alice (Mia Sara), the niece of Dr. Reese’s landlady who meets Billy at his job in a tannery. Alice’s role here serves to complicate the relationship between the two men, as she tells Billy about rumours that Dr. Reese was once committed to a “funny farm” and tries to convince him that they should run away to Philadelphia and start a new life.

But the film’s most significant change is to refocus the narrative away from the murder itself to explore the curious friendship









that develops between Dr. Reese and Billy. Physically abused by his father, Billy is initially skeptical of powwow until he comes under the charismatic spell of the wise and gentle hex master. The pair forges a bond that significantly evolves over the course of the film, beginning when Billy presents Dr. Reese with a hand-drawn portrait in exchange for a simple folk remedy to help cure his father's alcoholism. Soon after, Dr. Reese agrees to teach Billy to read and, believing he can pass on his knowledge of healing, pulls the boy deeper into powwow traditions by bringing him along on house calls. Although their attachment initially appears paternal, it sometimes veers into co-dependency and even homoeroticism, with Dr. Reese fighting for Billy's attention and exhibiting undisguised jealousy towards Alice.

This unspoken rivalry appears to escalate once Billy gathers his courage and reveals that he intends to leave town with his new girlfriend. That evening, Dr. Reese is afflicted by hallucinations and convulsions, which worsen after he attempts to work powwow against a fatal disease affecting local livestock. Against Alice's wishes, Billy takes his sick mentor with them to Philadelphia to see mystic Mama Isobel (Minnie Gentry), who helps Dr. Reese come to the realization that he has been hexed by a local hermit, Lars Hoeglin (Knut Husebø). Billy, who assists Mama Isobel in the ritual, readily agrees to help Dr.

Reese remove the hex under the mistaken belief that Hoeglin was also responsible for the death of his parents in a recent house fire.


While such a careful exploration of human relationships is perhaps unusual for a genre film, Thomas employed a similar approach in his award-winning Canadian drama *Ticket to Heaven* (1981), based on a real account of cult deprogramming. This earlier film follows a young Canadian man who, while visiting a friend in San Francisco, attends a meeting of a religious group that soon refuses to let him leave their compound. Over the course of several weeks, the cult leader and others aggressively indoctrinate the man until he achieves a sort of religious hysteria and happily renounces his family and friends. As in that film, *Apprentice to Murder* provides a methodical look at how emotionally unfulfilled victims can be manipulated in their relationships with charismatic figures, and the way that religious or mystical faith can intensify that.

Just as in *Ticket to Heaven's* harrowing conclusion, in which the cult's core beliefs are debunked as part of the deprogramming process, powwow's legitimacy is called into question over the course of *Apprentice to Murder*, especially as Dr. Reese's sanity becomes less certain. At one point, the older man even admits to Billy that he was institutionalized, but suggests it was only

because powwow is simply beyond the understanding of most people, including law enforcement. While Billy appears impressed by some of Dr. Reese's early successes, it's worth noting that the powwower is always alone when he sees physical manifestations of evil spells that he believes have been cast against him, from violent windstorms that whip through his boarding-house room to an unseen presence that almost tosses him from a farmhouse window. It's only in the film's climax that Billy finally experiences his own moment of quasi-religious hysteria; a shared hallucination of sorts in which he and Dr. Reese see Hoeglin as a demonic, fire-breathing witch. It's this scene that represents the culmination of the pair's increasingly intertwined existences, as apprentice takes his place alongside the master.

In this context, it's easier to understand why Thomas seems more interested in the attachment between Dr. Reese and Billy than the more sensationalistic aspects of the "hex murder" story. *Apprentice to Murder* is primarily concerned with the question of why Billy is quick to abandon his life and future — including Alice — to help Dr. Reese commit murder based on perhaps nothing more than a mutual delusion. Billy only realizes what his association with Dr. Reese has cost him when the police reveal that Hoeglin's home still stands, with no evidence of the fire he presumed burned the structure to the ground. As





they're taken away to jail, Billy makes his tearful goodbyes to Alice while Dr. Reese remains undeterred, still declaring to Billy that "We are joined in God's work!"

Whether Blymyer himself was entirely rational is addressed in the two main accounts of the murder and subsequent trial – Arthur H. Lewis' book *Hex*, and the 2015 documentary *Hex Hollow: Witchcraft and Murder in Pennsylvania*. Both note that, although lawyers claimed Blymyer was "feeble-minded" and not in his right mind when he attacked Rehmeyer, he still was given a life sentence for murder, prompting newspaper headlines like "Belief in Witchcraft Not Insanity." And yet, the courts came to a different conclusion only a few years later after a second, similar slaying in the Pennsylvania Dutch community. In 1936, taxi driver Albert Shinsky shot to death a local woman known as the "Witch of Ringtown Valley," who he believed had cast a hex that caused a huge black cat to descend from the sky and attack him during the night. This time, the accused was deemed insane and did not stand trial.

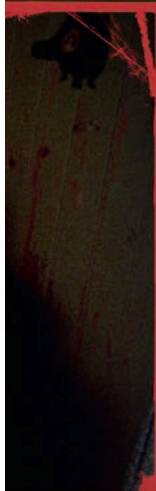
Like Shinsky, Dr. Reese appears to be plagued more by internal demons than external monsters – a noted departure from the supernatural menaces of most North American folk horror films, such as *Deadly Blessing's* incubus, or *Children of the Corn's* He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Though perhaps more of a thriller

in the North American folk horror tradition than a genuine entry itself, *Apprentice to Murder* illustrates how the tension between mysticism and religion can produce a tangible human evil that's in many ways just as potent as any hex supposedly conjured by a neighbour. In the end, *Apprentice to Murder* argues that the most powerful magic spell is the one that ties Dr. Reese and Billy Kelly together in their murderous destiny.

Paul Corupe explores and documents the secret history of Canadian genre movies on Canuxploitation.com. A regular columnist for *Rue Morgue* magazine, Paul's writing has also appeared in *Cinema Sewer* and the *Spectacular Optical* book series, among others.







ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Apprentice to Murder was exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound.

The original 35mm interpositive was scanned in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director at EFilm, Burbank. The film was graded and restored at Pinewood Studios Group, London. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve and restoration was completed using PFClean software. The original audio mix was remastered by Lakeshore Entertainment.

Restoration supervised by
James White, Arrow Films

David Morales / EFILM

John Pegg, Jon Mann, Patrick Wilbraham, Jake Chapman, Jashesh Jhaveri,
Darren Rae, Leigh Reid / Pinewood Post
Mike Lechner / Lakeshore Entertainment

All original materials supplied for this restoration were supplied by
Lakeshore Entertainment.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Blu-ray Mastering **Visual Data Media Services**
Subtitling **The Engine House**
Artist **Haunt Love**
Design **Oink Creative**

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