

“RAISING HELL: KEN RUSSELL AND THE UNMAKING OF ‘THE DEVILS’ ” (Book Review)

Written by Kelly Michael Stewart
Monday, 17 December 2012 12:07



The U.S. might not be familiar with him, but Richard Crouse has very much been the face of popular film criticism in Canada for at least the past decade. He’s been featured on radio, television and in newspapers across the country, and has written several books; his latest, **RAISING HELL: KEN RUSSELL AND THE UNMAKING OF “THE DEVILS,”** charts the history of the still-controversial 1971 film.

For the uninitiated, the late director Russell’s **THE DEVILS** is a stylized, dramatic account of the rise and fall of Urbain Grandier (Oliver Reed), a 17th-century Roman Catholic priest executed for witchcraft. The film, then and now, has faced harsh reactions from more conservative pockets for its violent, sexual and religious content, especially the infamous “Rape of Christ” sequence. Originally, the film received an X rating in both Britain and in North America; banned in several countries and eventually heavily edited for release in others, it is to this day largely unavailable in the home-video market. So bravo to the publisher ECW Press for putting out a companion book to a film that remains so elusive.



RAISING HELL is very much a personal journey for Crouse. Its opening chapter chronicles what is likely the last time Russell saw **THE DEVILS** on the big screen (at the Bloor Cinema in Toronto), an event Crouse hosted. (While there was no question that Russell’s spirit and wit were still present, they came in waves, and Crouse seriously questioned how he would make it through the screening in his frail condition.) In a way, **RAISING HELL** is also the story of two of the wild men of 20th century cinema, Russell and Reed. They were two of cinema’s great eccentrics, and there is no shortage of great stories about them in these pages.

“RAISING HELL: KEN RUSSELL AND THE UNMAKING OF ‘THE DEVILS’ ” (Book Review)

Written by Kelly Michael Stewart
Monday, 17 December 2012 12:07

The book is additionally packed with interview with directors influenced by THE DEVILS, like Alex Cox, Guillermo del Toro and even Fango editor-in-chief Chris Alexander. Crouse probably didn't need to include so many quotes from other critics/filmmakers singing THE DEVILS' praises, but this is a minor quibble. The author does an excellent job conveying his well-researched but concise information on the historical context of the film's production, and why it was such a hot-button movie for its time.

In the end, Crouse has perhaps created the definitive chronicle of Russell's masterwork. RAISING HELL works both as a guide to THE DEVILS and as a call to action to have this important work of cinema finally released on international home video the way it was intended. For fans of Russell and THE DEVILS, and for those just starting their journey into that world, RAISING HELL is essential reading on an essential film.



See Fango #317 for an interview with Crouse about RAISING HELL.