

MRS. ASHBORO'S CAT



Press Kit

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Log Line

Wes Merritt and his daughter Natalie (14) get more than they bargained for when they buy an old house that was formerly inhabited by the nice old Mrs. Ashboro and her pet cat, Margaret. When strange things start happening in the house, all fingers point to the presence of Margaret, who died the same day as Mrs. Ashboro. But why has she come back to haunt them?

Short Synopsis

After moving into the old home of the recently departed Mrs. Ashboro and her cat Margaret, Wes Merritt and his daughter Natalie notice strange things happening in the house. It is believed that these mysterious occurrences might be the handy work of Margaret who is said to have died from a broken heart following the loss of her loving owner. Located across from the big old house is a struggling animal shelter run by Brenda Yancey who is under increasing pressure to sell her shelter to developer, Gordon Riker.

The plot becomes more complicated as Mrs. Ashboro's nephew and only heir Boyd Ashboro becomes involved. Boyd has embezzled money from the bank where he works and must locate the whereabouts of \$50,000 that Mrs. Ashboro had taken out of her estate just days prior to her death.

Helping Natalie solve the mystery of the ghostly presence in her house is the rebellious Kurt (15) who works part-time at Brenda's shelter, and his younger brother Pearson (11). Natalie soon discovers a secret about Kurt that ultimately places suspicion upon him when things start to go bad at the shelter. As the drama reaches a climax Margaret appears to save Kurt and Natalie from a deadly situation and help solve the mysterious troubles plaguing all involved.

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Long Synopsis

In an attempt to start a new life after the death of his wife, Wes and Natalie move to a small town where Wes can research a book he's working on, and Natalie can leave behind the sadness of their apartment that reminds her overwhelmingly of her mother. They end up buying the house of Mrs. Ashboro, who has recently passed away, as has her constant companion, the devoted cat Margaret - who some say died of a broken heart.

The big old house is across the field from an animal shelter run by Brenda Yancey, a good friend to Mrs. Ashboro and Margaret. Brenda's place has recently started having financial problems and there have been a couple of incidents of animals getting loose and scaring the neighbors. Brenda is under pressure to sell her place to a developer, Gordon Riker, who has bought most of the surrounding properties to make way for a big new housing development.

In the meantime, Mrs. Ashboro's nephew and only heir, Boyd Ashboro, has been under a lot of financial pressure to replace some cash that he embezzled from the bank where he works to make a risky stock investment. Boyd thought that when his aunt died and he was able to sell her house so quickly that he'd be able to replace the money, but when he settled Mrs. Ashboro's estate he found that she had taken out \$50,000 a few days prior to her death. So Boyd is on a mission to find out what his aunt did with the money that he considers to have been rightfully his, and he's none too pleased when it is uncovered that the money has gone to help Brenda's shelter stay above water.

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Helping Natalie solve the mystery of the ghostly presence in her house is the enigmatic Kurt (15) from next door, who works part-time at Brenda's shelter, and his younger brother Pearson (11). When Natalie starts seeing what she believes to be the ghost of Margaret in their house, Pearson is the only one who sees what she does. Natalie's budding romance with Kurt is put to the test when Kurt is revealed to be working at Brenda's as part of a community service sentence, and when things start to go from bad to worse at the shelter, he's the first to come under suspicion.

In the climactic ending, Brenda's barn is almost burnt down with Natalie and Kurt trapped inside, and it is Margaret who comes to the rescue and leads to the revelation that Boyd Ashboro and Gordon Riker have been responsible for Brenda's troubles all along.

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THE CAST

Shirley Knight

Mrs. Ashboro

A celebrated Tony and Emmy award winning actress who has forged a successful career both on the screen and on stage, Shirley takes on the role of Mrs. Ashboro in Mrs. Ashboro's Cat.

In Mrs. Ashboro's Cat, Shirley's experience is drawn upon as she portrays a character she describes as "A nice lady from a small North Eastern town." One of the biggest challenges in this role for Shirley was taking on a character that is so crucial to the movie's storyline but not physically present for much of the movie. In the movie, Mrs. Ashboro resides in a large old home typical of those found at the turn of the century in small town America. Her closest companions are her loved cat Margaret and Brenda Yancey, who runs a local animal shelter directly across from Mrs. Ashboro's home. In the movie Brenda's animal shelter has recently started having financial problems and we later learn that before passing away Mrs. Ashboro may have decided to help her friend, much to the dismay of her nephew Boyd Ashboro.

Born in Kansas and always close to animals, including her own family of dogs and cats, Shirley was inspired to take on the role of Mrs. Ashboro. Shot in rural Prince Edward Island, Canada, Shirley was very surprised to find that the landscape and historic buildings were very similar to those she

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remembers from her childhood in Kansas, helping her to manoeuvre comfortably into her role. Shirley strongly believes that animals play a crucial role in our lives because they give so much and ask for so little. Another drawing point for Shirley was the struggles and drama commonly experienced by children who lose a parent at a young age, as does the character Natalie in Mrs. Ashboro's Cat.

Shirley is no stranger to other well-written movies with rich storylines, unfolding drama and strong characters. Beginning in 1960 Shirley took on challenging roles in such movies as **The Dark at the Top of the Stairs** (1960) and **Sweet Bird of Youth** (1962), both of which earned her Best Supporting Actress Oscar nominations. Knight was memorable in **The Group** (1966), **Petulia** (1968), and especially **The Rain People** (1969), a probing proto-feminist road film written and directed by a young **Francis Ford Coppola**. Shirley has become very active in television, winning a 1988 Emmy for her recurring role as Mel Harris' mother on "**thirtysomething**." In more recent years she has played unforgettable roles in movies such as **My Louisiana Sky** (2001) and **Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood** (2002). Although Shirley has earned great respect and admiration in the Industry she is never one to take any credit making it very clear that she was impressed with co-stars, especially Ellen Page and Michael Ontkean, and hopes that she has the opportunity to work with them again.

Michael Ontkean

Wes Merritt

Genie nominated actor Michael Ontkean portrays Wes Merritt, an author of Historical books who moves from New York City to rural New Jersey with his daughter Natalie after the loss of his wife.

For Michael, Mrs' Ashboro's Cat was an opportunity to be part of something unique and an opportunity to work with acclaimed director Don McBreaarty whose work Michael has respected for many years. Michael also found both the cast and crew of the project to be extremely talented and very easy to work with.

Not one to spend time with the "Hollywood Crowd" Michael was also excited to be working on Prince Edward Island. "The people have been great," says Michael, "And the snowy weather is the kind of thing that inspires my adventurous spirit". Speaking on his experience with the movie Michael said, "I am not looking to capture any particular result, rather I focus on the moment so that the audience can truly enjoy my work and believe that I am the character". He continues, "Mrs. Ashboro's Cat has such a strong story with fascinating characters that achieving this has been easy for me."

Michael began his acting career at a young age while working on several projects with the **CBC** in Toronto. Since that time Michael has taken on diverse roles in such Television projects as **Twin Peaks** (1990) receiving a **Soap Opera Digest nomination for Outstanding Hero**, And **A Killing Spring** (2002). Notable film roles include **The Rookies** (1972), **Slap Shot** (1977) and **Bye Bye Blues** (1989) receiving a **Genie nomination for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role**.

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Ellen Page

Natalie Merritt

At the age of 16, Halifax born Ellen Page is building a name for herself in film and television. The successful results of these efforts are evident when you see Ellen take on the role of Natalie Merritt.

Natalie is the very independent but innocent daughter of Wes Merritt and has just moved to Ringwood New Jersey. Still struggling with the loss of her mother, Natalie befriends a young boy named Pearson and a local boy named Kurt as she deals with her loss and the mysterious events, which follow the death of Mrs. Ashboro.

For Ellen, the opportunity to act in a movie written by respected author, Heather Conkie, whom Ellen has worked with before, was very exciting. She also felt attracted to the character Natalie saying "Natalie shares a close relationship with her father, almost a friendship. I have the same kind of relationship with my parents so I felt very comfortable in this role." Ellen was also impressed with the depth of the story and felt that its appeal would transcend gender and age. " Most people can't imagine that family films are actually interesting for the whole family" said Ellen, " So much effort has gone into this film that it's like a piece of art. The story has great messages about family, wanting to belong, friendships and dealing with life in general," she continued. She also added that the movies elements of mystery are intriguing for kids while parents and other adults will be caught up in the struggle between the characters as the story unfolds.

Ellen began her career on such projects as **Pit Pony** (1997 - 1998) receiving a nomination for **Best Performance in a TV Drama Series - Leading Young Actress**. This was followed by such projects as **Love That Boy** (2002),

Marion Bridge (2002); the cult hit TV series **Trailer Park Boys** (2001) and **Homeless to Harvard** (2003). Ellen says that her experience working with Michael Ontkean has been great and that the honour of working with an actress the likes of Shirley Knight goes without saying. The rest of the cast a crew for Mrs. Ashboro's Cat have no doubt that Ellen Page is a true rising star.

Shawn Roberts*Kurt*

19 year old Shawn Roberts is once again back on Prince Edward Island to play the role of Kurt in Mrs. Ashboro's Cat. Shawn spent several years on Prince Edward Island playing the character Teddy Kent opposite such actors as **Richard Donat (Trudeau)** and **Michael Moriarty (Law and Order)** on the Gemini award winning series **Emily of New Moon**.

Shawn's character, Kurt, is a teenage boy who lives in Ringwood New Jersey and after ending up on the wrong side of the law, is sent to work at Brenda's animal shelter. After meeting Natalie and forming a relationship, Kurt helps try to save Mrs. Ashboro's farm. Having grown up in the country just south of Toronto and having spent a great deal of time around animals, Shawn has a great appreciation for this movie. He was particularly pleased with the opportunity to participate in scenes with fairly intense action, stating, "In one scene when the barn is burning, I had to run through a burning doorway wearing protective clothing, everything went perfectly and it was a great experience". What inspired Shawn to accept this role? "There aren't too many times either in real life or on television that we hear about good stories with good people who triumph over evil" stated Shawn, " In this movie we see different types of people come together to overcome the obstacles. Simply put, this is a great story!"

Shawn is no stranger to great stories. On television Shawn has acted in roles on programs that include **Earth: Final Conflict** (1997), **Jett Jackson** (1998) and **Degrassi High**. Notable films include another Shaftesbury production called **Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang** (1999) featuring **Gary Busey** and **X - Men** (2000) with **Patrick Stewart**. Commenting on his experience with the cast and crew of Mrs. Ashboro's Cat Shawn said,

"Considering that most of us do not know each other and come from different places, the bond that has been formed by the cast is incredible." Shawn also feels that the professionalism of the crew from Toronto, Halifax and Prince Edward Island has been second to none.

Barreta

Margaret the Cat

Another important addition to the cast is Barreta the cat who plays Margaret, the beloved and devoted cat, who lives with Mrs. Ashboro. In the movie Margaret dies not long after Mrs. Ashboro passes away. Many speculate that she died of a broken heart. Barreta plays a key role in the movie as her character Margaret comes back as a “ghost cat” in an attempt to help Natalie and the others solve recent mysteries.

16 year old Barreta lives just north of Toronto at Canadian Wrangler Motion Pictures Limited with her handler Sue Parker who operates the ranch with her husband. Sue and her animals have worked on such productions as **The Crossing with Jeff Daniels**, **The Blues Brothers 2000** and **The Freshman with Matthew Broderick**. With several types of animals, costuming for almost every occasion and about 30 vehicles, Canadian Wrangler is no small operation and Sue did have other cats to choose from. So why Barreta? The simple fact that she has been performing since she was a kitten and possesses the skill needed to be part of a production in which her character is present throughout the entire shooting schedule.

Some of the biggest challenges for Barreta working on Mrs' Ashboro's Cat included working with cast she is unfamiliar with and the cold weather. Sue explained how this was handled saying, “All the cast were extremely caring when working around Barreta and I was very impressed with how well they worked as a team, especially considering that very few of them know each other. This makes Barreta's job much easier”. She continued, “To combat the cold we use a stand in stuffed animal cat we call “Stuffey” so that Barreta doesn't get exhausted”.

Baretta is no stranger to working with other talented actors. She has appeared in such series, features and mov's as **Twitch City, Dangerous Child with Delta Burke, Scrooge with Cicely Tyson, Kids in the Hall, Harriet the Spy with Rosie O'Donnell, Short Circuit** and **Last Best Years of my Life with Mary Tyler Moore.**

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THE CREW

Don McBrearty

Director

An impressive track record in film and television production and direction is brought to Mrs. Ashboro's Cat with Don McBrearty, Gemini nominated and well-respected Director. Don's love of directing began in University when he developed an appreciation for foreign films. After working in London, Don returned to Canada and in 1976 where he wrote, directed and produced his first half hour drama, which was quickly followed by another drama series for the CBC.

Don's familiarity with both Shaftesbury and some of the cast was one of the reasons he was attracted to this project. This coupled with his own experience of growing up in a small rural community, not unlike the city of Ringwood, enabled him to create an inspiring movie under tight time constraints and great pressure.

For the director of such successful television productions as "My Secret Identity" (1988) and "Emily of New Moon" (1998) one of the biggest challenges in directing this movie was working with animals. The greatest challenge, however, was finding the perfect balance between Drama and pure Entertainment. "Mrs. Ashboro's Cat is an extremely well written movie that brings together a light-hearted theme of mystery with strong dramatic scenes," says McBrearty. "This makes it extremely appealing to younger viewers as well as the adult audience" says McBrearty.

Having directed several of the cast in past productions including Mark Rendall, Lori Hallier and Nigel Bennette was a great advantage for the director. Additionally, the professionalism of other cast members including Wade Lynch, Pam Stevenson and Kelti MacMillan helped to keep shooting on schedule. In particular, Don noted Ellen Page and Michael Ontkean saying "Ellen was great to work with and I had wanted to work with Michael for some time. I would gladly work with any of the cast again.

Adding to this comment, Don also had great praise for the crew of the movie and its location saying "I've always wanted to do something on Prince Edward Island and the enthusiasm of the crew made up of experienced professionals from the Island, Halifax and Toronto along with Charlottetown's Cellar Door Productions made it possible".

Over the years Don has made a name for himself as a director who brings out the best in the cast and crew by directing with patience, guidance and in many cases humour. This coupled with his dedication to capture a perfect scene every time has earned him the respect of the Industry. This drive for excellent filmmaking can be found in such productions as **Boys and Girls** (1982), **Ray Bradbury Theatre** (1985), **21 Jump Street**" (1987), **Road to Avonlea**" (1989), **Butterbox Babies** (1995), **The Arrow** (1997) , **Christy, Choices of the Heart, Part II: A New Beginning** (2001) and **The Interrogation of Michael Crowe** (2002).

Christina Jennings

Producer

Christina founded Shaftesbury Films in 1987. She began the company producing feature films but has expanded Shaftesbury into one of Canada's leading television producers of both television movies and series.

Christina has an ability to find creative projects which attract significant international cast and when commenting on Mrs. Ashboro's Cat says, "'I have always wanted to make a movie that was set in the winter. So often in Canada, our films are made during the summer and fall and as a result they all have a similar look. How fortunate that we picked the winter of 2003 and PEI to make Mrs. Ashboro's Cat. Lots of wonderful white snow!"

Christina also knew that making this film would pose several challenges, one of which was having a cat as a main character throughout the film. "From the beginning, I liked the idea of making a film that had a cat as a central character. I had heard how difficult it was to train cats – but this didn't deter us. We cast a wonderful cat, and were amazed every day of what it could be directed to do."

With Christina Jennings' leadership, an international cast, a relentless crew and the involvement of respected production companies including Prince Edward Island's Cellar Door Productions; Shaftesbury has succeeded once again.

Heather Conkie

Writer

“Imagine the unimaginable and never give up!” This is how Heather Conkie, writer for Mrs. Ashboro’s Cat, describes this movie. Heather’s past works are representative of her love for great family dramas and include:

ROAD TO AVONLEA. Disney/CBC/Sullivan Films. (1993)

EMILY OF NEW MOON. Cinar/Salter Street Films/W.I.C./CBC (1996)

7th HEAVEN. Spelling Entertainment/Warner Bros. (1997)

PACIFIC PALISADES. Spelling Entertainment/Fox Television. (1997)

THE MYSTERY FILES OF SHELBY WOO. Cinar Productions/Nickelodeon. (1998)

BOB AND MARGARET. Nelvana/Global Television. (2000)

TEAM RIDERS. Nelvana Los Angeles. (2001)

THE STRIP. YTV. (2002)

The recipient of multiple awards and nominations including a 2000 Gemini nomination for Best Writing in a Children’s or Youth Series, a 1999 Day Time Emmy Award for Best Writing in a Children’s Special, a 1996 Cable ACE Award for Best Children’s Series 7 years and older and a 1993 Gemini nomination for Best Writing in a Dramatic Program or Mini-Series; Heather was excited that Shaftesbury had decided to put Mrs. Ashboro on the screen and that Don McBrearty, whom she had worked with before, was chosen as director.

Inspiration for the script came from a close source. A close acquaintance of Heather's had lost a parent a number of years ago and in writing Mrs. Ashboro's Cat, Heather wanted to accurately capture the emotional struggles faced during such a time. She was able to do this through the character Natalie.

One of the biggest challenges for Heather was the ghost cat Margaret. "Writing a story with a main character you can't see half the time was a big challenge," says Heather. "Keeping a heightened suspense regarding the identity of the ghost was very difficult".

Given that two of her past works, ROAD TO AVONLEA and EMILY OF NEW MOON, were both productions based on events which took place on Prince Edward Island, Heather was pleased that this location was chosen for the Television production of her work. "I have a great soft spot for the east coast," says Heather, "As far as scenery, weather and culture are concerned, it is also the perfect place to emulate any New England location".

Heather was very pleased that some cast and crew she had worked with on previous projects were involved with Mrs. Ashboro's Cat, including Ellen Page who acted in Heather's series Pit Pony. "Ellen is a great talent and it's been a thrill to watch her develop," says Heather. "In general I'm very pleased with the choice of cast, crew and the director," continued Heather. "I'm not sure that many other teams would have been able to bring this story to the screen with such a successful result".

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Mrs. Ashboro's Cat proves to the audience that good people working together can uncover the truth and triumph over evil, especially with a little help from a "ghostly cat"

With a talented cast of both seasoned actors and rising stars including Shirley Knight, Michael Ontkean, Ellen Page, and Shawn Roberts, the skillful direction of Director Don McBrearty and a professional crew, Shaftesbury Films has brought together the best and succeeded in bringing this light-hearted dramatic mystery to the screen.

Filmed during the winter on Prince Edward Island, production of Mrs. Ashboro's Cat was successfully completed on a very tight budget. "With a cast of about 15, crew of 50, shortened daylight hours and unpredictable weather the accomplishment of filming such a high quality movie is a testament to the work ethic, flexibility and devotion of everyone involved" says director Don McBrearty, "A great family movie has come together". Special credit has to be given to McBrearty for accomplishing in 18 days what might have taken others much longer. With the use of high-definition video cameras and his pursuit for the perfect take, McBrearty has given a tightly produced movie the look and feel of a movie produced under idealistic circumstances.

Another challenge facing the director, as well as the cast, was trying to keep the drama light for younger audiences while maintaining a sense of mystery that everyone would find appealing. It might be assumed that the cast' lack of familiarity with each other might have made this more challenging. This, however, was not the case. Many of the

Cast mentioned that the strict and smooth shooting schedule allowed them to spend time together off camera. “Few of us have worked together but the fact that we had time to spend together off-set enabled us to form a bond very quickly”, says actor Shawn Roberts. “We have become a very tight group”.

THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

SHAFTESBURY FILMS

Founded by Christina Jennings in 1987, Shaftesbury Films is a well-respected and successful Film and Television production company committed to creating and delivering distinctive, high-quality filmed entertainment to the world.

Recent productions include **HEMINGWAY vs. CALLAGHAN**, adapted from Morley Callaghan's memoir, *That Summer in Paris*. The mini-series is set during the writers' friendship with Hemingway through the 1920's. The four-hour mini-series features:

Vincent Walsh (Random Passage)

Robin Dunne (Dawson's Creek)

Gordon Pinsent (Shipping News)

Maury Chaykin (A Nero Wolfe Mystery)

And Aida Turturro (The Sopranos)

In 2002 Shaftesbury produced **THE ATWOOD STORIES**, a dramatic anthology series based on six short stories by acclaimed author Margaret Atwood. The series pairs award winning writers and directors in the exploration of a wide range of themes contained in Atwood's work. This exceptional series features:

Starring David Sutcliffe (Gilmore Girls)

Brigitte Bako and Gabrielle Rose (The Sweet Hereafter),

Jonathan Scarfe (The Sheldon Kennedy Story)

And Sonja Smits (Traders)

Another successful film production to come from the creative team at Shaftesbury is **SCAR TISSUE**. Adapted from Michael Ignatieff's 1993 Booker Prize nominated novel, the drama is a searching and poignant account of a mother's descent into Alzheimer's and its ramifications on the two brothers who are forced to confront their mother's demise, their relationship with each other and their family legacy.

Directed by Peter Moss (*External Affairs*), Scar Tissue features:

Roberta Maxwell (Last Night, The Dinosaur Hunter)

Shawn Doyle (Cletis Tout, Frequency)

Aidan Devine (Net Worth, The Arrow)

And Paul Hecht

Other celebrated productions include:

- **Torso**
Won best Gemini (2002)
- **Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity (feature)**
Official selection, Toronto Int. Film Fest (2002) and Sundance Film Fest 2003.
- **External Affairs**
Five Genie Nominations (1998)
- **Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang**
2 Gemini Nominations – Awarded Best Song (2000)
- **Swann**
Four Genie Nominations (1996)
- **Conquest**
Best Canadian Film, Atlantic Film Festival
Genie Award for Supporting Actress Monique Mercure (1998)
- **The Home for Blind Women**
Genie Award for Best Short Film (1996)
Golden Spire Award, San Francisco Film Festival
Prix du Jury Canal, Creteil Festival in France

CAST

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|------------------|-----------------|
| Wes Merritt | Michael Ontkean |
| Natalie Merritt | Ellen Page |
| Brenda | Lori Hallier |
| Mrs. Ashboro | Shirley Knight |
| Kurt | Shawn Roberts |
| Pearson | Mark Rendall |
| Boyd Ashboro | Tom Barnett |
| Riker | Nigel Bennett |
| Jan | Kelti MacMillan |
| Terry | Wade Lynch |
| Sandra | Pam Stevenson |
| Margaret the Cat | Baretta |
| Comfort the Dog | Harley |

CREW

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Don McBrearty | Director |
| Larry Ketron and Heather Conkie | Writer |
| Christina Jennings | Executive Producer |
| Orly Adelson | Executive Producer |
| Gretha Rose | Co-Executive Producer |
| Jan Peter Meyboom | Producer |
| Scott Garvie | Co-Producers |
| Laura Harbin | |
| Suzanne French | |
| David Perrault, CSC | Director of Photography |
| Ralph Brunjes | Editor |
| James Oswald | Art Director |
| Robert Carli | Composer |
| John Buchan | Casting |
| Lawrie Rotenberg | |