

# Weaving Myths and Legends with Director M. Knight Shyamalan on LADY IN THE WATER

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- THE LADY IN THE WATER is a loving contemporary bedtime fable with the power to teach the hearts and ignite the imagination of the child that lives in all of us. The tale focuses on Cleveland Heep (PAUL GIAMATTI), who has been quietly trying to disappear among the residents of the Cove apartment complex. However, on the night Cleveland finds someone hiding in a modest building, a mysterious young woman named Story (BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD). She has been living in the passageways beneath the buildings swimming pool. Cleveland soon discovers that Story is actually a "narf" - a nymph-like character from an epic bedtime story who is being stalked by vicious creatures determined to prevent her from making the treacherous journey from our world back to hers. Story's unique powers of perception reveal the fates of Cleveland's fellow tenants, their destinies tied directly to her own. They must work together to decipher a series of codes that will unlock the key to her freedom. But the window of opportunity for Story to return home is rapidly closing. Cleveland must face the demons that have followed him to the Cove as the other tenants seize the special powers that Story has brought out in them if they hope to succeed in their dangerous quest to save Story and our world. It is a timeless tale of hope that the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson would be jealous of.

M. Knight Shyamalan began making films at age 10 in his hometown of Philadelphia. At 16, he had completed his 45th short film. At 17, he stood before his parents, both doctors, surrounded by pictures of the 12 other doctors in the family, and informed them that although he had graduated cum laude and received academic scholarships to several prestigious medical programs he had instead decided to attend the New York University Tisch School of the Arts to study filmmaking.

During his final year at NYU he wrote an emotional screenplay made up of personal moments, entitled Praying with Anger, about a young exchange student from the U.S. who goes back to India and finds himself a stranger in his own homeland. In 1992, with the funding to make his first low-budget feature, Shyamalan shot the story on location in India and served as the film's writer, director, producer and star. The film was selected to be screened by the New York Foundation of the Arts prestigious First Look Series, and in July 1993 was named Debut Film of the Year by the American Film Institute of Los Angeles.

The astronomical success of his chilling psychological thriller "The Sixth Sense" resulted in Shyamalan being one of the most sought-after young filmmakers in Hollywood. In addition to its six Academy Award nominations, "The Sixth Sense" was awarded three Peoples Choice Awards for Favorite Motion Picture, Favorite Dramatic Motion Picture and Best Actor for the film's star, Bruce Willis. Shyamalan re-teamed with Willis for "Unbreakable," which also starred Samuel L. Jackson. Following that film, Shyamalan wrote and directed the supernatural thriller "Signs," starring Mel Gibson and Joaquin Phoenix. Shyamalan's last feature, "The Village," also starred Phoenix and "LADY IN THE WATER's" Bryce Dallas Howard, as well as an ensemble cast including Adrien Brody, William Hurt and Sigourney Weaver. THE LADY IN THE WATER is Shyamalan's most emotionally powerful film since "The Sixth Sense."

Shyamalan formed his own production company, Blinding Edge Pictures, based in a suburb outside of Philadelphia where he also resides with his wife and two daughters. FEARS recently had the chance to talk with this extraordinary filmmaker about a film that reminds us that in the most unlikely of places, with the most unexpected heroes, that even if we've stopped believing in magic, the potential for magic in our lives still exists.

**FEARS:** This was originally a fairy tale for your kids and it evolved into something a little scary, and a little darker. What was the evolution in your mind in terms of how far you wanted to take it as far as being scary?

**M. Knight Shyamalan:** Well, when it was back at Disney (laughter), there was a sense of "they were so stringent about what has the Disney label on it, so at that point, I didn't know, and to the point that it hurt the piece, because I wasn't allowing it to be visceral, because I was so worried about those kinds of things, and when that didn't happen over there, it really freed me up to do it so I went, "okay." Now, when I was shooting the movie, I was going, "I'm starting to lose some kids," it was getting scarier and scarier and scarier - stop. So for me it stops at around 8 years old would be the limit and it probably will be too much for 7 year olds.

FEARS: How important was storytelling to you as a kid and do you read bedtime stories to your children?

M. Night Shyamalan: I wasn't told stories like that when I was a kid, but I read a lot and wrote a lot as a kid. I always thought it was very magical. I guess the storytellers were the filmmakers at that time, like Lucas and Spielberg, telling those amazing stories when I was 7 to 12. I mean, I had the storytellers, the best storytellers in the world, maybe of my generation, my lifetime, they were telling me stories right when I was ready to hear stories. "Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away" "Yes!"

I do read bedtime stories to my kids, but not as much as I should, because they ask every day. And you're just like, "No, leave me alone!" and you get to that point like we were at dinner in France, it was our last day in France and they're like, "Tell me a story" and I'm like "No, we're just going to sit here and smell the lavender, that's what we're going to do." And they're like rolling their eyes.

FEARS: Where did this story come from? Does it come from the subconscious trope of movies in your head, from reading Joseph Campbell or your South-Asian background?

M. Night Shyamalan: I think a lot of it's all of the above. I'm trying to think about... there's always some hook that gets me, like the idea of what if someone was living under your pool, why would they be there and then why would they be there spawns a whole story that comes from that, some meaning from it.

FEARS: Why the Bob Dylan fascination, why are there so many Bob Dylan songs in the movie?

M. Night Shyamalan: You know, this sense of revolution that he obviously didn't want to take on his own shoulders, that wasn't his intention, but for me, his music was a time of "We can change things, it's in our hands, community, group becoming together" all those feelings of traditional, let's do it the folk way. Also, his storytelling in his songs, this sense that he was a storyteller, that he told these stories that are very moving and metaphorical, so in every way, he was an inspiration when I was writing it. And I was literally writing it listening to Dylan songs, kind of what if you had a fictional group of people at a time of trouble in the world, and there was a lot of fighting going on around the world, and this community realized that they could make a difference, that they were part of a beginning of a change.

FEARS: You have a pivotal part in the film, which is surprising because your roles in your other films are so understated. Is that because you really had something to say through that character? Is that character going to change the world and do you believe that filmmaking, or writing, can change the world?

M. Night Shyamalan: Well, you know what it is? Let me answer the first part of the question. This is my seventh film. In the first movie that was "Praying With Anger", I was the lead in that, and that was a very tiny movie in India and then "Wide Awake" I wasn't in that at all, and then "Sixth Sense" and "Unbreakable" I had very small parts, because I was learning to make movies in the big studio system, and then "Signs" I had a big part. There was only like five characters in it, and I was the fifth character, and for me, it was an important part emotionally, and this was more like that for me. Those two movies had characters that I wrote that I was like, "I really need to say that emotionally, that means something to me." Now with regards to the character in "Lady," the idea of Harriet Beecher Stowe was that idea that really caught me, just caught me, and I said, "Wow, this idea that you write a book and somebody like Lincoln reads the book and other people in that time period read that book and you're creating change and then someone who can make a difference decides to do something about it" Harriet Beecher Stowe didn't know she was doing all that, she was just writing a book, but it actually opened minds and created points of view. It's the power of the writer is the wish that an angel would come in and say, "You think that that sucks right now? You should do it because down the line, the 80th person that's going to read it and is going to cause this to the left and this to the right and you'll be part of a chain that you can't possibly know, but it's very important that you keep acting, that you be proactive. That you believe you have a purpose." The link in the chain, that if any one of us doesn't do our little link in the chain, the eventuality doesn't happen, so if we're all just a group

of people who dont believe in ourselves, dont believe in our purpose, we cant build off each other.

In my life, I was in the JFK airport waiting to send my grandparents to India. The flight was delayed so I went into the bookstore. On the rack was Spike Lees book for his first movie, "Shes Gotta Have It." I was 11 or 12 at the time, and so I read the book and could not believe you could just go make a movie. I thought it was just some tribe of people that did that, which you couldnt possibly, have any connection with. So I decided to go make movies. I went to film school and did all of that. So time goes by and I make movies, make some money, put that money into a foundation. This foundation I started was due to this lady in this village in India who stood up to these gang people who were raping and pillaging that town. I wanted to help the group, save lives, and educate people. I sent money to that town and were going to do what we can over the next five years to save lives. So indirectly, Spike Lee saved lives! Literally! Is he aware that he is saving lives? No, but maybe now if he reads this. He is a link in a chain.

How do we know what part were going to play in the chain? Just positive energy, empowering positive energy moving forward will create an incredible network of things. Im sure that Spikes influences influenced millions of people and you have to believe in yourself like that. To be part of it, so that if an angel could tell you, so you wouldnt give up that.

How many people dont believe in that, that theyre part of that inevitable chain of things. My babysitter once just left a book by mistake that she was reading about how people are having a hard time making ends meet because their cost of living is so high and theyre not saving anything, so theyre always renting. Its called "Nickel and Dime" this book, so I went and I bought a bunch of low income houses and built them up and gave them to families in Philadelphia, because my babysitter was reading it, because her teacher had assigned it to her, because the teacher was moved by this lady. Look at that chain of events! Its all a part of it, all from writers, but all a chain of events. Its a beautiful thing. Its just an empowering thing to be able to hear, if you could, the beauty of the spiral of things that happen. If God could tell you when you die, this is what you did. It would be so cool.

FEARS: In going back to asking about your South-Asian influences, karma, etc., it all seems relevant right there in what you said.

M. Night Shyamalan: Im definitely big in the Buddhist thing, Im all over that, and hearing about the story being told, when I was hearing it in my head, I was like, "Wow, its more of like an Asian philosophy." I dont know why I felt that, but it had more of an Asian philosophy and tradition. They believe in the storytelling, whether its the Hindu philosophy or whether it has a million stories, and we know theyre all metaphorical, but you believe them, not as literally that each of those Gods-Vishnu and all those-actually exist, but still, the reverence for them is extraordinary, so when Young-Soon and her mom are talking, Young-Soon learns, shes kind of acclimated, or wants to be an American in all the way, shes still trying on clothes, she dresses like Britney Spiers, you know, shes trying whereas me and my sister [in the movie] are acclimated Americans, we are in the system, you know what I mean? Shes not in the system, she just wants to be, but shes closer to her traditions than me and my sister are, so she makes that speech, so she says in the end, "You know, its time to prove these stories are real." Shes much more like her mom than she knows. Shes wearing Britney Spiers clothes, but shes just one step away from the old traditions.

FEARS: Can you talk about casting this film, especially Bryce and Paul? What did you see in Bryce that made you want to cast her a second time?

M. Night Shyamalan: You know, she has a regalness, an unusual otherworldly quality about her. She doesnt have normal 24-year-old actress affects. She doesnt think that way, its odd. Whether its how unusual her parents brought her up and the circumstances in which she was brought up. She has strong dogma. Her belief system is really like a monk, she believes in things, you know, like that, to the point where youre like, "Come on, just be a human being! Just chill out!" but shes like that and that would be perfect for Story that she doesnt have to pretend to be otherworldly. Theres a really kind of an ethereal FEARSuality inherently about her, thats great. And Pauls kind of everyman brilliance is just great against the two of them. They both give off such different vibes, even as human beings, they do.

FEARS: How was it working with Geoffrey Wright? Ive heard he can be difficult.

M. Night Shyamalan: Oh, man, I love it. Ive heard those stories, too, but he was a joy, an absolute joy for me. I really believe that actors in general, Ive had a lot of actors in my movies who have supposedly been difficult, you know, and when they know that someones driving the bus, then they dont have to take the wheel. When they truly believe that, they dont even think about taking the wheel. They dont want to. They want to ride the bus and go in the direction of the film. You know what I mean? Theyll check and ask, "Are you driving?" If they believe that 100% youll have the worlds greatest talent taking the ride with you. At the read-through for "Lady" which was really a magical moment, because my movies are a lot like plays, a lot of dialogue, and a lot of acting in rooms, and I hire only theatrical actors, especially on this one, only theatrical actors, and they did it like a play, and they were amazing. The table was in awe, because we had two Jedis at the table, we had Paul and Geoffrey, just in awe, like you were just, "Wow" watching the two, and then when we did scenes like the bathroom scene where theyre reading the crossword puzzle, the group was just in awe of these two guys who could basically do anything. Geoffrey just twitches a muscle and youre like, "Whoah!" Theyre limitless talents, those two.

FEARS: You have this great scene where the smarmy film critic gets it in a very unclimaxed way. Was that a thumb in the face to critics?

M. Night Shyamalan: I was in a very raw mood when I wrote the movie, and it came out very heightened and parody-like, and the movie had an eccentricity about it, like "Princess Bride" I loved that movie. Those characters in the film are commenting on the story, as the storys going on, that youre commenting on a structure of stories, how stories are told, are they important, do you believe in them? All the elements are talking about storytellers, storytelling and to have a character in there whos stopped learning in there. And hes a part of a world where everyone is realizing their potential of what theyre about, but hes stopped learning, and the moment that he realizes its too late, that he thinks hes this part of the story and hes safe, cause thats the only way stories are told because its a family film. This couldnt possibly happen. Theres always a moment where I want to change my favorite thing about "Lady" is that it changes and blossoms into a different... in showing what it is. And obviously Farbers death is one of those moments where it kind of just starts going on right on the edge of mania, and then starts unfolding in a way, where youre not sure whats going to happen. Thats a nice feeling to be in a movie where you can stop the movie and everyone has these blank faces in the audience. Thats a really cool moment.

FEARS: Did you have any critics in mind?

M. Night Shyamalan: I was thinking of putting a list... "Inspired by" (laughter) No, its just goofing around.

FEARS: Did Bob Balaban enjoy the idea of being able to play this character?

M. Night Shyamalan: He loved it! We met and I said, "Im going to say to you what I never said to another actor is I want you to start three-dimensional and become two-dimensional, so it becomes more of a parody by the time it happens, so youre going to deconstruct as you go" and he was like, "Im totally into that." I wish he kept his answering machine message, because I gave him the script, and I didnt tell him what the part was. I just said "Youre the part of Farber" and he called and left me this message, it was so funny, I wish I kept it, "Oh, to die like that! Ohhhhh!"

FEARS: Do you read what critics say about your films?

M. Night Shyamalan: You know, I get a general vibe that if you get caught up in too much of this, you lose your mind, because its all a momentary perception thing that happens, and its so clouded, these movies are so clouded by the other movies or being a part of the group, or the expectations, that it can be damaging to you as an artist when youre just crippled like that, so I get a general sense. What you think may be the critical response to my movies is very different than the reality. Like say, for example, what is my best-reviewed movie? "Signs" is my best-reviewed movie, next is "Unbreakable," and then next is "Sixth Sense" and then next is "The Village" and thats the order of the reviews. And also, "Signs" is my most popcorn movie so the least aspiring to a higher thing. Its that aspiring to something higher that always gets everyone going "Oh, yeah, motherf\*cker?" That gets everybody all riled up, so its an interesting life that its had. Also the perceived realities are very different as you move on. If everything was re-reviewed now, it probably would be a different group of reviews that would come out.

FEARS: When youre directing and doing post-production, as a writer, do you still have time to write and work on the next projects you want to do, or do you wait until one movie is done before even thinking about your next one?

M. Night Shyamalan: Yeah, no, I wrote this one, this was simultaneous with "The Village," most of it was. I have a full notebook of ideas, you know, about everyone realizing their parts and theres this weird story and they all might be characters in it, and one character that doesnt believe hes a character in it, and I was like either this guy has to be a lawyer or a critic, hes one of those.. (laughs)

FEARS: But do you have time to write while youre making movies or not really?

M. Night Shyamalan: I have notebooks of ideas. Its dangerous, because you may burn a great idea cause if you do it too early. Like all during "Lady", I had this great notebook of ideas that this movie that I was certain was going to be my next movie, and as soon as I finished "Lady" I was like, "Dammit!" I dated that one too long. I didnt commit, and now its like okay, I feel like Ive been there already. I got another idea that has so much power, and its new and its fresh. Its very dangerous to explore, its a dance between holding off the next idea as much as you can, you know?

FEARS: How are you involved in the marketing of your movies these days?

M. Night Shyamalan: Yeah, I definitely do. Theres a certain integrity to them that I wouldnt want them to cross, so Im involved with that, and I give them ideas that "you can try this angle or that angle and this is where I was coming from" but this time I just gave them my thoughts and took off to France.

FEARS: Would you consider directing a movie by someone else and has Warner Bros. hit you up to direct a Harry Potter movie yet?

M. Night Shyamalan: You know, that dance has gone on a long time, that Harry Potter dance. The problem is that it is a living-breathing thing now, all by itself. When it comes over to my camp, it needs to be kind of handed over, adoption papers and everything. And thats a tricky, tricky move.

FEARS: Have you ever met with JK Rowling?

M. Night Shyamalan: No, I havent met with J.K., but the first one was offered to me, and that just conflicted with Unbreakable, which was unfortunate. I would definitely, but I think probably before that I would adapt a book. Ive gotten close a few times to adapting books. "Life of Pi" was one of them.

FEARS: Do your daughters see you like someone more than Dad?

M. Night Shyamalan: Now more and more, which is unfortunate, because they've been blissfully innocent and hopefully, they can stay that way. Now they're nine and six. You know, they walk down to school and the big girls in high school are like "Hey" —

FEARS: Is there anything you can tell us about your next project?

M. Night Shyamalan: Well, the one I think I'm going to do is going to have a big star in it, (laughter) different than Paul.

FEARS: Are you going to be in it as well?

M. Night Shyamalan: You never know, you never know, it wouldn't be any bigger part than this. In fact, I feel a little bit more comfortable if it was like 15-20% less, so that the balance is just right for the directing, you know, cause it's difficult to do both. Very difficult to do both because you want to just walk on the set and be totally that guy. And we'll see what happens but if they're going "are these curtains good?" You're like, "Hold on a sec. No, they're terrible!" That's a tricky balance, but the theatrical, we spend a lot of time rehearsing, I think it was like two weeks, so that made it like a troupe of actors, which was really great for us.