

# BEDTIME STORIES

THE WORK OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

FOURTH FLOOR • TATE MODERN, LONDON • 21ST JULY - 8TH AUGUST 2008

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MANOJ SHYAMALAN WAS born in Pondicherry, India, on 6th August 1970, the son of a physician (his father) and an obstetrician (his mother). By the time Manoj was born, his parents had already emigrated to the USA, but his mother Jaya spent the last months of her pregnancy with her parents in India, returning with him to Philadelphia when he was six weeks old. He was the only Hindu to attend his all-boys Catholic school (the Waldron Mercy Academy, chosen by his parents for its discipline), and went from there to an Episcopalian high school. From his earliest days, it seems Manoj's life was already characterised by a mixture of influences, a mixture of religions, a mixture of cultures.

IT WAS AT ten years old, upon seeing Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, that Manoj discovered his love for film-making. He had

been given a given a Super-8 camera and set to work, finishing his 45th short film at the age of 16. At 17, he confounded the expectations of his parents (and of the twelve other doctors in the family) by announcing his decision to attend the New York University Tisch School of the Arts to study film-making.

SHORTLY BEFORE LEAVING for university, he asked his parents why he didn't have a middle name. For a brief time he tried Nelliyanu (after his father Nelliyan), but with a growing interest in native American names, during his time at NYU he came across the name Night and liked it straight away. Taking on a new name, though, takes time and persistence: "Manoj had to go through the rituals of death. I had to earn the name Night."



“I was having a bit of a tough time  
trying to make it work:

Was I making an art movie?

Was I making a commercial movie?

I didn't really understand what I was making.

No-one went to see that movie.”

DURING HIS FINAL year at NYU, Night began writing *Praying with Anger*, a personal film about an American student from an Indian family returning to India. The script was completed in ten days, rushed in order to meet the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's requirements that it be submitted to them before approval to film was granted. Money was borrowed from family and friends, and supporting actors (Shyamalan was the lead) were hired by advertising in local Indian newspapers. Despite a certain amount of critical acclaim, and in 1993 being named Debut Film of the Year by the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, the film was shown in one cinema for one week, attended by "my family and a couple of others that went into the wrong theatre."

DESPITE *PRAYING WITH Anger's* lack of commercial success, Shyamalan's acumen as a writer was gaining wider recognition. In 1994 he sold an original screenplay, *Labor of Love*, to Twentieth Century Fox (although, surprisingly, the film has never yet been made) and in June 1995 he was contracted to write the screen adaptation of E. B. White's children's book *Stuart Little* for Columbia Pictures. Although certainly incongruous when compared to the rest of Shyamalan's work, *Stuart Little* does give a foretaste of the trademark moments of Shyamalan humour that creep into his future films.

IN 1997 CAME *Wide Awake*, this time sold to Bob & Harvey Weinstein's Miramax company. Often thought of as a prelude to *The Sixth Sense*, it was about a boy attending Catholic school and trying to find out about God,

and where we go when we die. The creative disagreements and the lack of control that Shyamalan experienced while making *Wide Awake* led him to vow never to work with Weinstein again. Almost inevitably, it seemed, the film was another commercial failure.

IT SEEMED UNLIKELY that Shyamalan would be given the chance to write and direct any more films. Wondering what he was doing wrong, he began to consider the film posters that adorned his home - *The Exorcist*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and so on. "I said, 'Let me just stop pretending I'm some art film maker, and trying to be something I'm not. Let me just make one of these movies.'" This issue, which Shyamalan would later characterise as a mismatch between his 'artistic need' and the viewing public's 'audience need', was to be a poignant one for the rest of his career.

## EARLY INFLUENCES: *display area 1*

Shyamalan describes the day in 1981 when he first became convinced of his own path into filmmaking. Aged ten years old, he went to see *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with a friend, but the cinema was so full that they had to sit separately, with young Manoj sat next to an elderly couple. After a few minutes, the man left the cinema and returned with a Coke and a popcorn for Manoj.

Three men - Steven Spielberg, Harrison Ford, and the old man next to him - influenced him profoundly that day, and ever since: despite the increase in other ways of seeing films, Shyamalan's driving force remains the person sitting in the cinema, seeing the film for the first time.

We look in depth into Shyamalan's filmic influences - including *The Exorcist*, *The Godfather*, *The Birds*, *The Twilight Zone* and *Edward Scissorhands* - in display area 1: Early Influences.



“I make audience movies,  
at the end of the day.

Hopefully they’re  
really unusual ones.”









A key element of many of Shyamalan's films is the strength of the casting, both as individual stars and as ensembles that work perfectly in combination. "Directing is basically ninety per cent casting. You can know nothing about anything else, but if you do casting right, you're set." The leading actor is chosen first, and the rest of the casting decisions flow from each other; it's all about the right kinds of interaction between performers.

With the exception of *Wide Awake*, Shyamalan is also known for writing a small role for himself in each of his films. Appearing as a doctor in *The Sixth Sense* (above), he ended up drastically shortening the scene in the editing room because his own acting talents hadn't been up to scratch.

We take a closer look at Shyamalan's casting methods and choices in display area 2: Leading Men and Ladies.

AND SO, IN 1999, we were given *The Sixth Sense*. In his determination to break away from Weinstein and Miramax, Shyamalan, together with his agent Jeremy Zimmer, held a bidding contest for the script among the major Hollywood film studios. Disney was triumphant, beginning a relationship that would last through Shyamalan's following three films under Disney's brands. But despite the bidding, neither Disney nor Shyamalan expected *The Sixth Sense* to be a "big" movie. It was released on 6th August (Shyamalan's birthday) amid low expectations. Then, on the Saturday morning, *The Sixth Sense*'s star Bruce Willis telephoned Shyamalan and told him: "We're number one!"

THE FILM GROSSED \$8 million on its opening night, and the numbers didn't drop on Saturday night or, very unusually, on

Sunday night. The call came every weekend for the following six weeks - “You’re number one.” Even in its fifth week at number 1, *The Sixth Sense* grossed three and a half times the amount earned by number 2 film, *Runaway Bride*. Since *Titanic* in 1997, only two films have ever remained in the U.S. Number 1 slot in their fifth and sixth weeks: *The Sixth Sense* and *Signs*. To date, *The Sixth Sense* remains the most profitable film ever made under the Hollywood Pictures name, grossing over \$200 million at the North American box office.

BY THE TIME the success of *The Sixth Sense* became evident, and partly because of his low expectations for it, *Unbreakable* (2000) was already well on the way to being written. Again starring Bruce Willis, it was a foray into the comic book genre at a time when “nobody made comic book movies.” *Unbreakable* was

The famous twists at the ends of many Shyamalan films are one of the most famous elements of his work. Although they have only featured in three of his films to date (*The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* and *The Village*), they are seen as a key part of the “Shyamalan brand”.

In both *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*, the viewer discovers the truth at exactly the same time as the character; the revelation itself is a key narrative element.

In contrast, *The Village* gradually shows the audience that its initial premise was a lie, whereas *Lady In The Water* begins by explaining to us what the characters then gradually discover.

This tradition has attracted varying responses from audiences, some criticising it for being formulaic or predictable. Can the presence of unpredictability itself be described as predictable? We consider this further in display area 3: Twists in the Tale.



“I wanted to make feature-length *Twilight Zones*,  
where something happens at the last second  
and you realise you weren't watching  
what you thought you were watching.

Then when you go back  
and look at that movie a second time,  
everything should have that feeling that it was inevitable  
that the ending was going to be this way.”







unconventional in many ways - Shyamalan described the entire storyline as consisting of what would traditionally just be the first of three acts. But on the heels of *The Sixth Sense*, the film was made - and was another runaway success.

TURNING DOWN THE chance to direct the first *Harry Potter* film, Shyamalan moved on to *Signs* (2002), which he described as his quickest writing experience to date. Whereas *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* were long, tortuous, multiple-draft experiences, *Signs* “just came straight out, pretty much as you saw it on the screen.” Unlike his previous two films, *Signs* was a straightforward suspense picture that ended without what were by now thought of as his trademark twists. Although Shyamalan was less than happy about certain aspects of the way *Signs* turned out (the disappointing

computer-generated aliens, and the overly religious ending), *Signs* was another worldwide success, almost rivalling *The Sixth Sense*.

AFTER *SIGNS*, TWENTIETH Century Fox offered Shyamalan the chance to work on a film of *Wuthering Heights*. Although he declined this, the period genre was planted in his mind, inspiring *The Village* in 2004. More off-beat and lower-key than his past blockbusters, *The Village* was partly a love story, partly a period piece, partly a tale about innocence, and featured no paranormal elements at all. Accompanying its cinema release was a two-hour hoax TV documentary, *The Buried Secret of M. Night Shyamalan*, produced with Shyamalan’s co-operation and shown on the Sci-Fi Channel in the US. It was designed as a guerilla marketing campaign for *The Village*, and claimed among other things





“In my life I’ve had two of those acting experiences where people do something phenomenal, where you just can’t believe what they’re doing.

One was Haley [Joel Osment] in *The Sixth Sense* and the other was Bryce [Dallas Howard] in *The Village*, where you just were seeing something transcendent.”



“You are holding the bad colour...”

Colour is an integral part of the storyline of *The Village*, and is explicitly mentioned throughout it: red is the colour that attracts and signifies the mysterious menace, while yellow keeps people safe.



But colour plays an important role in all of his films. In *The Sixth Sense*, a glowing red colour indicates anything that has been touched by the dead; *Unbreakable* sees comic book-style villains highlighted in rich colours against dark desaturated backgrounds.



Shyamalan also talks about his use of reflection to indicate the contrast between good and evil, light and dark, in display area 4: Colours and Lights.

that Shyamalan had been pronounced legally dead for thirty minutes during his childhood, and had begun seeing dead people. Ambitious and original, it set the stage for a triumphant unveiling of *The Village*. However, although it opened at number one in every country other than Japan, *The Village* was substantially less successful than its predecessors. The public, it seemed, just “didn’t get it” - or at least, not to the same extent as they had his previous three films. Famous for a certain kind of work, Shyamalan had begun to move towards newer, less proven, territory.

THIS TREND CONTINUED in 2006 with *Lady in the Water*, a film based on a bedtime story that Shyamalan had devised for his children (and later published as a picture book). A sumptuous but undeniably strange fantasy story, it departed much more radically than

*The Village* had from the public's expectations of an M. Night Shyamalan film. His aim was to create a fantastic world in the way that *Edward Scissorhands* and *The Princess Bride* had done - "a kind of off-beat fantasy that had its own language and everyone speaking in its own way." Perhaps partly influenced by *The Village's* lower ratings, Disney executives were at first unconvinced that the screenplay was ready to be made. Disney shares were lower than they had been for a long time, and the company needed a surefire success, preferably in the classic Shyamalan mould. Shyamalan, though, had been determined not to let the success of *The Sixth Sense* dictate the nature of the rest of his career. He parted company with Disney, and was given a \$75 million budget to make the film at Warner Bros. Pictures.

IT WAS A career-defining moment. Shyamalan felt that, if done correctly, *Lady in the Water* could be his greatest, most beautiful, most memorable film to date. An acclaimed ensemble cast, renowned cinematographer Christopher Doyle, Shyamalan's long-time composer James Newton Howard, and a completely purpose-built set (including an entire apartment block constructed in eleven weeks) came together. In the end, though, the film was either just too odd or too far from the unintentionally created "Shyamalan brand" - once more, it seemed the viewing public just didn't get it.

TRUE TO FORM, though, Shyamalan was already working on his next projects. During the editing of *Lady in the Water*, he took two days out to direct and star in an acclaimed American Express advertisement for



“I told the crew and the cast:

‘We’re making a B movie.

Let’s all just be aware of what we’re doing.

We’re paid to entertain, and we’re going to entertain.

We’re going to make the best B movie  
that anybody’s seen,

but it’s a B movie.’”

ON “THE HAPPENING” (2008)

American television. And it was during the promotional period of *Lady in the Water* that the genesis of his next picture began.

*THE HAPPENING* (2008) again represented several new departures. It was made this time at Twentieth Century Fox, and was his first film to receive an R rating in the US (15 in the UK). Inspired in part by *The Birds* and in part by *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Happening* was a deliberate attempt at a classic B movie. Like *The Birds*, the film chronicles a seemingly natural and terrifying phenomenon that begins without any explanation, runs through the course of the film, and then stops just as mysteriously as it started. “A ninety-minute paranoia movie... from the moment you sit in the theatre, the popcorn should come towards your mouth, and never reach your mouth for ninety minutes.”

EARLY REVIEWS OF *The Happening* suggest that while Shyamalan succeeded in making a credible B movie with more than its fair share of tension, it has again not achieved the critical or commercial success he would have hoped for. It was characterised in *Empire* magazine as “a disappointingly slight offering from a filmmaker we know is capable of so much more.” A columnist in *The Guardian* defended the film, beginning her article with “Here’s the thing: *The Happening* is not that bad.” Hardly an encouraging indicator of the wider opinion.

SO, DID *THE Happening* fail completely? As with *Lady in the Water* and *The Village*, that depends upon the point of reference. It grossed \$64 million in the US and £4 million in the UK cinemas; paltry in comparison with *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* and *Signs*, but it would be inaccurate to describe this as failure.







Shyamalan has suggested that his later work might be seen differently if he hadn't had such spectacular success earlier on, and he is almost certainly right. The new Shyamalan, perhaps, is a different film-maker from the old one; by departing from tradition (and from Disney) for *Lady in the Water*, he created himself a new role as somebody who makes lower-impact, narrower-appeal films, but in a wider variety of genres and styles. Perhaps he has finally allowed the 'artistic need' to gain prominence over the 'audience need'. Either way, M. Night Shyamalan has certainly succeeded in one of his stated aims: we, the viewing public, will always have a hard time guessing what he might do next.

## M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN : an abbreviated chronology

1992: PRAYING WITH ANGER (film) - writer, director, producer, actor

1998: WIDE AWAKE (film) - writer, director

1999: STUART LITTLE (film) - screenplay

1999: THE SIXTH SENSE (film) - writer, director, actor

2000: UNBREAKABLE (film) - writer, director, producer, actor

2002: SIGNS (film) - writer, director, producer, actor

2004: THE VILLAGE (film) - writer, director, producer, actor

2006: LADY IN THE WATER (film) - writer, director, producer, actor

2006: LADY IN THE WATER: A BEDTIME STORY (children's book) - author

2006: MY LIFE: MY CARD (TV advertisement) - writer, director, actor

2008: THE HAPPENING (film) - writer, director, producer, actor

2010: THE LAST AIRBENDER (film) - screenplay, director, producer

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21st July - 8th August 2008

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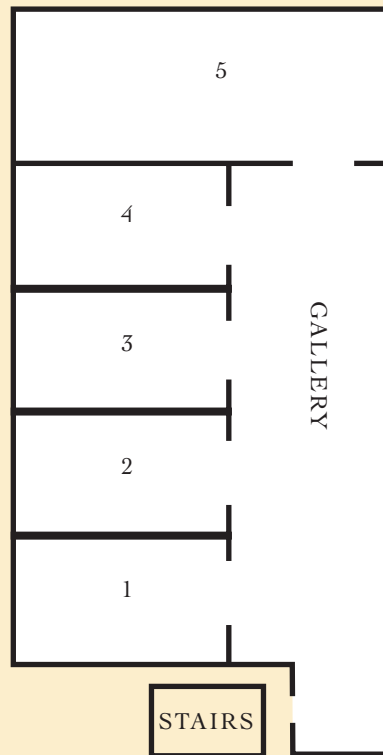
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EXHIBITIONS AREA

FOURTH FLOOR

GALLERY: Chronology, in words and pictures

DISPLAY AREA 1: Early Influences

DISPLAY AREA 2: Leading Men and Ladies

DISPLAY AREA 3: Twists in the Tale

DISPLAY AREA 4: Colours and Lights

AREA 5: *Lady in the Water: A Bedtime Story* - Sit and read a while