

"The Village" Proves Shyamalan Needs a New Formula: Also, "Catwoman"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 03 August 2004 18:00



THE VILLAGE

Nobody likes a know-it-all, so I have nothing to gain by admitting that I figured out The Big Twist in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* after about 15 minutes. But I'll venture that this popular writer-director has everything to lose by continuing to make his cinematic spook shows so repetitively, predictably "surprising." If you find yourself less than enthralled by

The Village

's narrative, you have far too much time to ruminate on how Shyamalan will attempt, yet again, to pull the rug out from under you; he's undermining his talent – and the man does have some – with his implied "Bet ya didn't see

that

coming!" finales. (It's becoming easy to respond with, "Oh

yeah

I did.")

The movie isn't the embarrassment that Shyamalan's 2002 *Signs* was – there's no "Swing away!" moment to cause audience members to collapse in a fit of giggles – and the pieces of the film's puzzle actually do fit together somewhat; by the end, you can intellectualize

The Village

into making some sense. Yet the more you think about the movie the less sense it makes (like Shyamalan's aliens being at the mercy of water yet attempting to take over a planet that's teeming with it). There are lovely undercurrents of sadness and longing at the heart of

The Village

, but Shyamalan doesn't appear that interested in human emotions such as these. Like a diabolical, middlebrow Rod Serling, M. Night Shyamalan only needs humans to populate the contraptions leading to his inevitable "gotcha!" finales. There are a lot of impressive elements in

The Village

– including a near-exquisite plot spin two-thirds of the way in – but Shyamalan needs a new bag of tricks pronto; listening to the disappointed grumblings of several patrons leaving the theatre, it seems that even his loyal fan base might be starting to tire of his act.

You might notice I've written nothing yet about the film's plot, and that's intentional. The one thing I've always credited this writer-director for is his refusal to give away (or let *others* give away) too much advanced information in either trailers or interviews, so I'll be similarly circumspect:

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takes place in a rustic Pennsylvanian hamlet, where a newly placed tombstone reveals the year to be 1897. Yet behind this peaceful, beatific town lies a terror in the woods, where mysterious figures – referred to as “Those We Do Not Name” – keep the locals from ever venturing beyond the village’s boundaries. Among those being held as veritable hostages in their environment are Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix), the strong-and-silent type; Ivy Walker (Bryce Dallas Howard), ethereal, feisty, and blind; Noah Percy (Adrien Brody), a character for whom the term “village idiot” was probably coined; and the town elders, who have seen much bloodshed in their time and refuse to risk more (and who are played, sharply, by such respected film and theatre veterans as William Hurt, Sigourney Weaver, Cherry Jones, Brendan Gleeson, Celia Weston, and Jayne Atkinson). The citizens have mostly accepted their lot, but when Lucius decides to venture beyond the town limits and head into the woods

Enough. Shyamalan ain’t telling, and neither will I.

As usual, the director has assembled a first-rate production team for his latest endeavor, and he had the great good fortune to acquire the services of Roger Deakins, perhaps the finest cinematographer alive. (Deakins’ shadowy compositions are thrilling to behold.) *The Village* is handsomely mounted, and the director’s gifts for apprehension and muted fear work in tandem with his gift for aural suggestion; very few Hollywood directors use sound so smartly.

Shyamalan’s dialogue is typically arch and stilted, but at least, this time, he has the benefit of an arch and stilted setting and timeframe, so it’s less distracting than usual. (Considering the dichotomy between Shyamalan’s skills as a director and his weaknesses as a writer, maybe it’s time for him to start helming

other
people’s scripts.)

And the cast fares about as well as could be expected under the circumstances. (Those circumstances, of course, being that the director doesn’t seem to *care* much about acting.) Phoenix, as he often can be, is almost achingly soulful; Howard, in her film debut, has an unusually delicate, effortlessly touching manner; and Adrien Brody loves performing so much that he takes what could have been an offensive stereotype and creates something nearly joyous out of it. None of the cast members falters, even when the material is retrograde, and just about every technical aspect of the work is adept; for long stretches, you could be fooled into thinking that

The
Village
was a
good
movie.

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Still, as his scare opuses since 1999's *The Sixth Sense* have proven, M. Night Shyamalan is nothing if not a creature of habit, and it's his staunch refusal to alter the blueprint of his winning (i.e.: financially successful) formula that makes his latest work such a predictably disappointing one. (You might wonder, in the film's all-Caucasian town, where the Indian-American Shyamalan will manage to sneak in his requisite, Hitchcock-for-Dummies cameo. Fear not. He finds a way.) I'm going to make the radical suggestion that Shyamalan should have had *The Village*

's Big Twist come at exactly the halfway point instead of during the final reel; that way, the director could have explored and clarified some of the very real, and thematically intriguing, issues the film raises. (Shyamalan always wants his endings to make you re-evaluate everything you saw and heard previously, but, as with *Signs*

, doing so here actually makes the movie seem worse than you might have originally thought.) What all this adds up to is a moderately effective chamber drama given impressive treatment, but the film is by no means a horror movie; Shyamalan's near-pathological insistence on treating it as one makes

The Village

feel like something much worse than a cheat: a fraud.



CATWOMAN

Let's be clear: *Catwoman* is a dog. But, surprisingly, it isn't *wholly* worthless. In fact, during the first 20 minutes or so, Halle Berry is truly entertaining, doing an able Sandra Bullock impression as the nebbishy girl (who, naturally, doesn't realize she's gorgeous) who's constantly running late and bumping into things; Berry proves herself a charming ditz. (These scenes make you wish that Berry was given more romantic comedies.) All fun flies out the window, though, once she dons her dominatrix outfit and begins exacting feline revenge; based on the video director Pitof's flord, "hot" staging and the lack of variety in Berry's recitation of her groaningly lame dialogue, you'd think Catwoman's only power was a superhuman ability to *pose*

. With Benjamin Bratt doing his patient-eunuch number, Sharon Stone looking like she wants to murder her agent (and, is it me, or is she becoming a dead ringer for

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Six Feet Under

's Joanna Cassidy?), and hopelessly crummy plotting and effects,

Catwoman

is a howl; it might not lead to a sequel, but it could easily cause a migraine.