



HOW TO MASTER THE SUPERNATURAL

M Night Shyamalan tells *FHM* about beating his critics, Rubik's Cubes and the scariest story he hopes he never has to tell

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IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE NAME M NIGHT SHYAMALAN, CALL UPON THE SPIRIT WORLD – THE GHOSTS HAVE WHISPERED IT SINCE LONG BEFORE HE WAS BORN.

It was first heard this side of the afterlife by a village psychic in India, while reading

the palm of his father, Nelliatt C Shyamalan. "He looked at his hand and said, 'Your name will be known across the Seven Seas,'" says Night. "My dad's reaction was, 'My God, I'm going to commit a crime, that's the only way.'"

The doctor didn't commit a crime. Instead, he emigrated to the US with his wife, Jayalakshmi, their infant children Veena and Manoj, and set up a clinic in Philadelphia. But he never forgot the mystic's words.

"He would look at his name on the sign above his surgery and say, 'This must be the name!'" Night goes on. "But whenever local kids sprayed graffiti over it – as they did everywhere – he'd scrub it off and say, 'This cannot be it.'" He spent the next 20 years searching for a sign. But none came.

"He's watching, waiting for his name while, all the time, his son is messing about with his Super 8 film camera," Night chuckles. The camera was the key. And, in 1999, it finally came true... with a twist.

"I remember my father getting out of the limo at my first premiere, and there, on the billboard above the red carpet, were the words, 'A film by M Night Shyamalan,'" Night says. "He turned to me with tears in his eyes and said, 'It happened... it finally happened.'"

That film was *The Sixth Sense*. It became one of the highest-grossing films of all time, received six Academy Award nominations, and left a generation of moviegoers unable to piss at night without thinking of Mischa Barton vomiting all over their bed. It instantly turned Night into a 'name-on-the-poster' filmmaker. His father's name was finally known across the seven seas.

The film's success couldn't have been a more appropriate beginning for the 29-year-old film director, who would not only become Hollywood's master of the supernatural, but also its king of the twist.

If you haven't seen *The Sixth Sense*, you probably know the surprise (mostly when you realise Bruce Willis once had hair). With his next three movies, Night made the 'shock ending' his calling card.

He followed *The Sixth Sense*, a spine-tingling ghost story about a boy who 'sees dead people', with superhero suspense-drama *Unbreakable*, alien-invasion mystery *Signs* and psychological thriller *The Village*. To date, his films have raked in more than £1.3billion at the box office. He is one of the highest-paid writers in Hollywood and one of the most prolific directors of his generation.

"My wife would say I've lived a charmed life," he smiles. "Basically, it's always been easy, she would say." And what about Night? "I would say I wouldn't have it any other way," he replies, rather cryptically. "I just want to be true to myself. That's not to say I haven't personally felt..." he pauses for a moment. "Moments of great darkness. Our industry's good at giving you those."

We're with Night in a generic London hotel room. His mop of black hair is framed by light from the open window behind him. The trees outside whisper something about the Hollywood Illuminati enslaving us all. Possibly. Or they just rustled in the breeze. It's so difficult to tell. Anyway, Night's started talking about Rubik's Cubes. "All I wanted to be when I grew up was a Rubik's Cube champion," he says. "I could do it in 45 seconds, without looking at it." Trouble is, freelance Rubik's Cubing isn't the most lucrative of jobs. So he became a filmmaker instead.

Manoj Nelliatt Shyamalan was born on 6 August 1970 in Mahé, India before his family relocated to an affluent suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the age of nine, he stole his dad's 8mm camera from a cupboard and began spoofing the films *ET*, *James Bond* and *A Nightmare On Elm Street*. By the time he graduated from high school, he had made 45 short films and

once told his guidance counsellor, "Making movies is not only my hobby, not only my primary interest, not only my extracurricular life; it is my future."

There, he also shortened Manoj to M and turned Nelliatt to Night. Calling himself Night was a bit like calling a tall guy Tiny: there is nothing of the night about him. He is sunny and smiley. But at work, he plays the devil with light and dark.

"The unknown is what makes things scary," he tells us. "The why, how, what... that story is more frightening than 'blood-dripping-down-the-wall' horror. I like the unknown presence that causes fear and takes you back to a childlike state. Plus, it's much cheaper to film."

Childhood is a recurring theme in Night's films: it's the kid who sees dead people (*The Sixth Sense*), or talks to aliens (*Signs*), or bends airflows (*The Last Airbender*) or is a talking humanoid mouse (*Stuart Little*, which Night wrote but didn't direct).

"It's funny," he says. "When I write, it's always children. There is something pure about the moment a child loses their innocence. When they become aware of

their surroundings, but are still uncorrupted by the complexities of adult life."

What about Night's own childhood? He has many times thanked his upbringing for his success – even now, he regularly calls his mum, a retired gynaecologist, for life advice (she only lives 20 minutes down the road from his home in Philadelphia).

"My parents are really funny, really classic immigrant Indians," he laughs. "They came to the US when it really wasn't that popular to be an Indian doctor. They taught me that when you dream with enough clarity, and work hard, things manifest."

"This will give you a sense of what they're like," he laughs. "Once I said, 'President Clinton wants me to come to dinner.' My mum was like [puts on an Indian accent], 'This is great! Maybe something good will happen!' I said, 'No, mum, that is the good thing. The President wants to have dinner!'"

He laughs heartily: "In their mind, immigrants are always trying to achieve; like, 'Maybe the President will give you part of the east coast!'"

Did he? "No," says Night. "He just said he liked my movies."

The shaft of light behind Night's head has moved with the sun. Now it's cutting through the room like at the end of *Ghost* (not one of Night's films) where Demi Moore can see Patrick Swayze for the first time before he spirits into the afterlife. But unlike Swayze, we're not letting Night out of our sight; we want to know more about that darkness.

"Hollywood gives you a feeling of not knowing your own value," he says. "It does it to all of us. Take Robin Williams – I was so saddened by his passing, partly because I never told him what he meant to me. I'm sure in his skewed version of things he thought he was of no value. But the industry does that to you. It tells you your worth, whether that's zero or a billion."

This is a sensitive subject to broach with Night, for he knows as well as any director how it feels to be pounded by the press. While the box offices have banked him millions, the critics have not always been so kind. His 2010 outing, *The Last Airbender*, for example, made more than £250million in cinemas but was deemed so bad that it won five Razzies – trophies given to movies

judged the year's biggest stinkers.

The *Wall Street Journal* dismissed his 2008 film, *The Happening*, as a "woeful clunker." The *Telegraph* branded *The Last Airbender* as "a man-mountain of dung." The *Guardian* called *After Earth*, starring Will Smith and his son, Jaden, "a triple-whammy of abysmal acting, directing and story." That must've haunted him.

"All [the critics] can touch is your ego, and that shouldn't be there anyway," says Night. "Crush it and then what's left is something pure; the pure artist," he ponders. "That's how you should be, on a good day – the most comfortable version of yourself."

We speculate that nobody can take that kind of beating without feeling bruised. He backtracks. "Yeah, only sometimes I feel that way," he concedes. "Other times I feel like, 'Ah, this is so unfair, this is ridiculous. They're treating *Alvin And The Chipmunks: The Squeakquel* the same way as my movies and there's no way [that's a better film]. I shouldn't let it affect me as much as it does, but I'm human. It's such a public thing."

What stops him dusting down his old Rubik's Cube? "I was on a show recently >>



NIGHT PLAYS THE DEVIL WITH LIGHT AND DARK... AND SPOONS



with Steven Moffat, the creator of *Sherlock*," he says. "He was asked if he made shows for the audience, and replied, 'No, I don't even know what to buy you for a present; I would totally screw it up.' He was so right – we don't know what people want, the only thing you can do is make something pleasing for you."

So fuck the audience? "No. I guess the best answer for me is that if I can reflect myself as a human being in my making of movies, then I'll be happy. I have strong convictions creatively that I can't bend for anybody. On the other hand, I do care about people; it's important for me that you're OK and that we're connecting." Isn't it tiring having to constantly fight against Hollywood's cigar-wielding ringmasters with dollar signs for pupils?

"I feel sad when I see a movie from a filmmaker that I respect and I can tell they towed the line," Night tells us. "But that's what this business does: it just hurts us."

His words conjure up images of Hollywood as an evil organ grinder bent on beating his troupe of depressed movie monkeys into snapping their clapperboards in time with his tune. "The supernatural thriller was the dance I first danced with everybody," he says. "So they want that date over and over; or, at least, the system wants me to dance that dance – I don't know if the audience wants me to always do that."

Indeed, *The Sixth Sense*'s ending proved so sensational that, not only did it earn the movie those Oscar nods, but spawned countless copycat thrillers, each trying to out-do the last (with diminishing returns).

Unbreakable, *Signs* and *The Village* also had 'gotcha' endings, earning him a reputation as the Twist King. He became so good at it that the only possible plot twist his audience wouldn't see coming was no plot twist at all. So that's exactly what he did.

"Coming off *The Village*, I had a sense of, 'Do I really want to make another movie with a twist, back to back?'" he says. "No. I'll go do something different."

So, in 2006, he made *Lady In The Water*, a modern-day fairy tale about a man who finds a water nymph in his swimming pool. It bombed, making only \$72million from a \$70million budget.

"It was one of my favourite experiences, and my least successful movie," he says. "But the handful of people that saw it, it [became] religion. It was religion to me, too."

A weaker director might have considered hanging up his clapperboard in the face of



ON THE SET OF *THE VILLAGE* IN 2004



such a beating. Not Night. He issued a bespoke form of payback on his critics: the hack in the movie gets eaten by a monster.

"If you don't put one foot into an area that scares you, you're not doing it correctly," he says. "There's no way around that. You're an artist, you have to make yourself vulnerable. If you don't, you're not an artist."

Still, when Hollywood's helter skelter does all get too much, Night has the medicine: 182 chest-beating minutes of pure, bellowing Mel Gibson.

"I pop in *Braveheart*," he says. "That's my go-to 'I feel like beating somebody up' film. It's a male fantasy to have something so fierce inside you that you can take on a country. For me, [the movie] is the line that I strive for – like the kind of giant commercial movie that studios think of, but that has

“HOLLYWOOD GIVES YOU THE FEELING OF NOT KNOWING YOUR OWN VALUE”

depth and is so effortlessly itself. It just so happens to be a total cheeseburger as well."

In fact, Gibson starred in Night's movie, *Signs*. They're mates. "It was lovely when I worked with him," says Night, with a smile. So he's not like what we see in the media? "He was an incredibly sweet guy, a hard worker; we couldn't have been any closer," Night says. "He was like a big brother to me."

We decide it's best not to pull on that thread too hard. Anyway, our time together is almost up. The trees have stopped whispering and the clouds have moved over the sun, casting a spooky shadow across the room. But Night is still as bright as ever.

"My advice to anyone getting into the business is: don't try to be me, you'll lose. Don't try to be someone else. Be yourself. Always yourself. If you can be exactly that, you have a strength that's so specific, it's incredibly powerful." That's where lies Night's core heroism – in his ability to stay true to his principles in spite of criticism.

There's one question left to ask. He's made a career of giving us the heebie jeebies for the best part of 14 years, playing musical chairs with our most basic existential fears. But what frightens M Night Shyamalan?

"I just want to tell my stories, that's all," he says with a smile. "My only fear is that I won't be able to tell them to anybody, that they won't be able to hear me or that they won't get it. That's the scariest story I know."

Given how well his career is going, that would make for an unexpected twist. **FHM**

Night's new series, *Wayward Pines*, premieres 14 May on Fox

NOW MAKE A SUSPENSE THRILLER LIKE M NIGHT SHYAMALAN

The master of spine-chilling cinema ending uses some of the greatest tropes in film. Nick de Semlyen, reviews editor at *Empire* magazine, picks six of his favourites

TROPE SURPRISE TWIST



FILM: *The Sixth Sense, Unbreakable, The Village.*

WHY IT WORKS: The spoiler warning may as well have been invented for M Night Shyamalan films: many of them boast outrageous rug-pull endings that leave viewers dizzy and desperate to watch what they've just seen again. Fun fact: *The Sixth Sense*'s revelation was less of a surprise in China, where the film was released with the over-informative title, *He's A Ghost*.

YOU WILL NEED: An innocent child with a gift, Bruce Willis, and dead people.

ALSO SEEN IN: *Fight Club, Shutter Island, The Usual Suspects.*

TROPE CREEPY SETTING



FILM: *Signs, The Village, Lady In The Water, The Happening.*

WHY IT WORKS: Don't set your thriller in a sunny meadow. Unless it's one infested by killer bees. Or, as in Shyamalan's *The Happening*, evil wind. Taking its cue from apocalyptic classics of yesteryear, the film amps up our anxiety with images of eerily deserted city streets and farmhouses. See also: *The Village* (a fairy-tale forest full of menace) and *Lady In The Water* (a Philadelphia apartment complex in need of both a handyman and an exorcist).

YOU WILL NEED: Shadows, spooky music, a disturbing paucity of people.

AS SEEN IN: *28 Days Later.*

TROPE TROUBLED HERO



FILM: *The Sixth Sense, Unbreakable, Signs, Lady In The Water.*

WHY IT WORKS: The stakes of a suspense movie are higher when the hero is a fuck-up. Will they manage to shrug off their demons and solve the mystery? Will anyone believe them if they do? Many of Shyamalan's lead characters are loners, like security guard David Dunn (Bruce Willis) in *Unbreakable*, a man who is blighted by marital problems, unemployment and a really boring name. **YOU WILL NEED:** An actor who can look depressed, and a tragic back story.

ALSO SEEN IN: *Vertigo, The Woman In Black, The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo.*

TROPE COLOUR SYMBOLISM



FILM: *The Sixth Sense, Unbreakable, Signs, The Village, The Happening.*

WHY IT WORKS: Like Stanley Kubrick before him, Shyamalan is a master at using bright colours to manipulate our emotions. In *The Village*, yellow means good; red means very, very bad. In *Unbreakable*, the hero and villain are delineated by the colours green and purple. If you look down and see the colour brown, you may have become too frightened by the film and should make your way to the nearest bathroom.

YOU WILL NEED: Paintbrush, paint. **AS SEEN IN:** *The Shining, Suspiria, Sleepy Hollow.*

TROPE WISE CHILD



FILM: *The Sixth Sense, Signs, The Last Airbender, After Earth.*

WHY IT WORKS: In scary movies, the kids are usually the first to identify the threat. "There's a monster outside my room. Can I have a glass of water?" asks Bo, played by five-year-old future star Abigail Breslin, in crop-circles chiller *Signs*. As with Cole in *The Sixth Sense*, the grown-ups don't know whether the danger is real, or just in the kid's head. Either way, it's a sure-fire shortcut to the heebie jeebies.

YOU WILL NEED: A precocious child actor (pushy mother optional).

AS SEEN IN: *Pan's Labyrinth, Aliens.*

TROPE M NIGHT SHYAMALAN



FILM: Most of them.

WHY IT WORKS: M Night Shyamalan loves to show up in his own films, often casting himself as someone heroic or there to deliver a key bit of information. So there's an element of suspense in waiting to see exactly how he'll shoehorn himself into the plot. He's a doctor in *The Sixth Sense*, a neighbour whose knowledge saves the day in *Signs* and a writer with the power to change the world in *Lady In The Water*. Perks of the job, eh?

YOU WILL NEED: A director who might just be a frustrated actor.

AS SEEN IN: Any Hitchcock film.