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# film reviews



Bryce Dallas Howard in *Lady in the Water*

## EVERYONE INTO THE POOL!

### *Lady in the Water*

review by George Sax

The leadup to the release this week of M. Night Shyamalan's *Lady in the Water* seemed to make the writer-director the story, rather than his movie. This wasn't just the group spin of the Media Circus. Shyamalan cooperated with and encouraged this emphasis.

Beyond the customary hacking and flacking, there is a new book by Michael Bamberger, *The Man Who Heard Voices: How M. Night Shyamalan Risked His Career on a Fairy Tale*, about the supposedly dauntingly difficult path the director had to take to complete his movie. According to Bamberger, Shyamalan even had to endure being dissed by Disney suits who—insolent dogs!—had the temerity not to immediately get to his script when he delivered it to them on a Sunday morning. *Lady*, you may note, is being released by Warner Brothers, not Disney. (So there!) Bamberger's book is said by some churls to read more like transcription than journalism.

Shyamalan's movie makes such accounts of his ego-mongering even more plausible than they already were. *Lady* is a work that exudes self-importance. (And let's remember our context. We're talking about Hollywood, you understand.) It's a rather obvious attempt at achieving an epochal fantasy, a standard setter for this kind of thing, like *E.T.* (Shyamalan is said by some to feel Spielberg envy.)

His movie had its origins in a bedtime story Shyamalan supposedly told his daughters, which became a children's book. It's a fairy tale about a water nymph who lives in a cavern under an apartment house's outdoor swimming pool. I can't comment on this book, but the movie is a grossly inflated, tediously over-elaborated and ungainly curiosity.

I also don't think I can provide a competent summary of the movie's storyline, even relying on the studio's production notes, because it's so ridiculously convoluted, but I'll make a stab at it.

A nebbishy, stuttering super at a Philadelphia apartment building named Cleveland (Paul Giamatti) chances to meet that nymph (Bryce Dallas Howard) when she rescues him after he falls into the pool. But she can't return to her "Blue World"

for reasons having to do with the difficulties in catching a ride with a regularly scheduled Great Eatlon. There's also a ferociously horrible Scrunt, which resembles a red-eyed hound of Hell from a Stephen King tale, stalking Cleveland and the nymph. Not to mention the horrid Tartulics, although I don't know whose side they were on.

Story, the nymph, is actually a Narf. Her backstory is pieced together by Cleveland by reference to an ancient Asian children's folk tale that he pries out of the non-English speaking mother of one of the tenants. To get Story back home, Cleveland enlists the assistance of a variety of his building's eccentrics, grotesques and idiosyncratic adepts. The director has cast himself as one of these, a youngish Indian-American author of an unpublished work of popular but profoundly meaningful philosophy. It's a silly role, with ostentatiously noble overtones.

None of this makes much sense, even on its own terms, nor is it charmingly magical, which is what Shyamalan was shooting for. It's just hard to follow and unattractively arbitrary.

The whole effort to save Story amounts to an inaccessibly complex moment of the "Do you believe in Fairies?" variety from the stage version of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. By the way, if you want to come into contact with the proper literary uses of enchantment, read Barrie's novelization of his play.

Shyamalan doesn't have much of a gift for magical romance. He's too dogged and self-serious. And while he's certainly not without real filmmaking skills, *Lady* is a surprisingly awkward looking movie, ponderous and heavy-handed. Too often, scenes are ill-composed and edited, and the movie progresses rather uncertainly.

There is one anomalously good joke. A new tenant (Bob Balaban), a peevishly self-regarding movie critic, is named Farber, after the moderately leftist, hardboiled 1940s critic Manny Farber. Shyamalan provides a comeuppance for this guy. It's not enough to help his picture. It wouldn't be enough to dispose of the entire membership of the New York Society of Film Critics. **av**

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