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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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Vincent Lindon and Emmanuelle Devos in *La Moustache*

FRENCH LEAVE OF HIS SENSES

La Moustache

review by George Sax

By the ten-or-twelve minute mark in Emmanuel Carrère's film you may feel you're experiencing another riff borrowed from the old Twilight Zone formula. In fact, for more than half of its less-than-hour-and-a-half length, it could pass for a sleek but serious-minded French rendering of one of those bizarro-world fantasy outings.

Then, it makes a sharp turn, taking leave of both its Parisian setting and its storyline, and becomes a movie animal of a rather different stripe. It deliberately leaves its protagonist, Marc, and probably a lot of the audience, in the lurch.

Marc (Vincent Lindon) is an apparently successful architect, married to an attractive wife who's employed in the professional/administrator class in some fashion or another—it's never revealed just how, which is the least of the movie's mysteries.

As the film begins, Marc and Agnès (Emmanuelle Devos) are preparing for a party in honor of their goddaughter's birthday. As he sits in his bath, Marc has an unexpected thought and shares it with his spouse: What would she think if he got rid of his mustache? She doesn't seem to take the matter seriously, and, on an impulse, he does just that, and awaits her reaction.

But there is none. None at all. Nor do either the man and woman they visit that evening register any recognition of a difference in his appearance. Not even their little girl seems to notice.

Marc assumes that everyone's engaged in a conspiratorial joke at his expense, but when he confronts his wife on the way home, she responds with confusion, then irritation, and denies any such thing. Even worse, she denies he ever had a mustache.

And the next morning, the people at his boutique design firm seem to be operating on the same unconscious assumption. And the proprietor of the little café across the street doesn't seem to notice anything new.

This is quickly becoming maddening—in the more consequential meaning of that word. Marc has prior photographic evidence of his changed appearance, although, curiously, he doesn't show it to anyone but a complete stranger.

Distressed, unable to go to his office, or do much else, and wondering whether it's he or Emmanuelle who's losing a grip on life, he agrees to consult a psychiatrist with her. Before that can happen, Carrère briefly infuses his film with an evocation of Patrick Hamilton's ancient menacing melodrama, *Gaslight*, in which a husband tries to dispose of an inconvenient spouse by convincing her and everyone else that she's mad. In one suspenseful, adeptly constructed sequence, Carrère seems to be signaling a similar resolution, but it's only a very temporary digression. The film returns even more seriously to puzzlemaking and then Marc abruptly flees to Hong Kong. This destination may have some obscure metaphorical import for Carrère, but it mainly seems to offer striking skyline and water vistas as backdrops to Marc's obsessively indecisive all-day and overnight ferry rides back and forth across the harbor before he finally musters the mental wherewithal to disembark. (This watery setting seems rather obviously to link up with the shots of dark waters that accompany the opening credits. There's some real wet signification here.)

There are likely to be two general kinds of reaction to *La Moustache* (which Carrère adapted from his own twenty-year-old novel): Engagement with the film's existential puzzles and tantalizing inconsistencies, or annoyance at what will seem to some to be hollow portents and whimsical mystification. I'm afraid I have to make common cause with the second group.

La Moustache comes off as a cross between Kafka and Sartre, with a bit (excuse me, I mean morceau) of Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, but it only coheres in a superficial stylistic way—and then just barely.

Carrère may well have been trying to suggest something about the insubstantiality of identity, the fragility of reality and consciousness, but the film is too arbitrarily self-contradictory and glib to make much of an enigmatically thoughtful impact. It does benefit from Lindon and Devos' fluidly subtle performances, and Carrère's adept scene setting. But, in the end, it plays out as a frivolous exercise loosely held together by callow Left-Bank attitudinizing.

av



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Jeff Anderson and Brian O'Halloran in *Clerks II*

TOIL AND TROUBLE

Clerks II

review by M. Faust

For a sequel to one of the keystone "indie" films of the 1990s, *Clerks II* arrives in theaters this weekend with a surprising lack of promotion from the stodgy old Hollywood studio that is distributing it. Maybe they assume that no promotion is needed, that fans of *Clerks* will line right up for it without prompting.

They're not entirely wrong there. If you're a fan of the original, you'll love the sequel, even if you've been disappointed by much of Kevin Smith's output in the intervening decade. After pouring his soul and years of his life into the bland *Jersey Girl*, Smith has refound his voice as a spokesman for underpaid, uneducated suburban white boys with no other way of asserting their identities than making fun of everyone who wanders into their path. In the words of the original film's tagline, "Just because they serve you doesn't mean that they like you."

Ten years after the day that seemed like it would forever change the life of Dante Hicks (Brian O'Halloran), we see that his life hasn't changed very much at all. He and best friend Randal Graves (Jeff Anderson) aren't working at the Quick Stop anymore, but only because the place burned down. Instead, they now earn their minimum wage paychecks as employees of Mooby's, a fast-food joint where you can follow up your specialty Cow Tipper burger with a Cow Pie dessert.

Randal doesn't seem too bothered by the prospect of turning 33 and still living at home. Mooby's offers him lots of customers to snicker at behind their backs—or to their faces, if he's in a particularly surly mood—and a free Internet connection which he uses to conduct flame wars with bloggers.

The more introspective of the two, Dante has found a way out. He is engaged to Emma (played by Smith's wife Jennifer Schwabach), a former high school heartbreaker whose parents will provide them with a house and employment operating a car wash in Florida. His constant justifications of his plan on what is supposed to be his last day in New Jersey make it clear that he's not at all sold on the idea. And the moment we see how he looks at the Mooby manager, we know where his heart

really lies. She's played by Rosario Dawson, who is almost too exotically beautiful to be in such a working-class movie, and one can only presume that the Smith-Schwabach marriage must be strong indeed for her to tolerate being cast in her husband's movie as the obviously lesser choice. (Or maybe uxoriousness misleads Smith to regard the competition as a draw; that would certainly explain the plot's essential lack of tension.)

But if the plot is thin on surprises, the dialogue isn't. Facing the impossibility of shocking audiences the way he did with the first *Clerks* and the need to satisfy fans expecting more seems to have brought out the best in Smith as a writer, who concocted a barrage of bawdy sexual discussions and pop-culture arguments that are hilarious but never too over the top (the closest he comes is a record number of uses of the phrase "ass to mouth"). The actor who most benefits from this is Anderson, whose Randal character would be unbearably obnoxious without the care Smith took in crafting his endless profanity. And he provides him with a suitable foil in Elias (Trevor Fehrman), a wide-eyed young Christian co-worker who drives Randal berserk by insisting on the superiority of *The Lord of the Rings* to *Star Wars*.

The original *Clerks* was enjoyable because as much as its characters moaned about their miserable lives, we recognized that they were young enough to be outgrow this slacker phase (and if you can't slack off when you're young, when can you?). This sequel is inherently more serious because Dante and Randal's options are slipping away: you can't toil at a minimum wage job forever without starting to have some severe doubts about yourself. A slight problem with both films is that, though uneducated, the characters are too smart to have no other options, and while we can accept youngsters getting stuck in this rut, guys in their 30s have some explaining to do about it. As such, the fairy tale ending is a bit depressing—a fact that Smith may recognize, given the *Soul Asylum* song he ends on, "Misery". You just know that Smith is already thinking about what *Clerks III* will be like ten years from now. On the basis of this, I look forward to it.

av



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