

ENTERTAINMENT



“Signs” Robs Unhappy Critic of Hard-Earned Six Dollars And Two Hours of His Life

By SEAN SMITH

Newsweek was right: M. Night Shyamalan may be the next Spielberg. But that's not necessarily a good thing. In true Spielbergian (I'm copywriting that phrase) fashion, Shyamalan's "Signs" is simplistic, moralistic and sure to please the bulk of the brain-dead audiences that seem to fill the megaplexes during the summer.

The movie begins when Mel Gibson's character, Graham Hess, a widowed ex-clergyman/farmer who has lost his faith because God unfairly took his wife (heavy stuff here), is startled awake by screams before dawn. He discovers amongst the cornstalks in his fields his children and a humungous crop circle.

It's in these first few scenes the movie's only redeeming quality shines. Tak Fujimoto's atmospheric cinematography establishes itself as the premier star of this film, better than the actors, better than the director and definitely better than the screenplay.

He lets scenes build unrushed, he sets the visual mood perfectly and he favors a low-angle shot (a la Orson Wells) that draws our attention to the weirdness of each of his scenes.

Unfortunately, all this is wasted on a largely boring script and uninspired acting.

What has been billed as a tension-filled thriller falls flat mainly because there is no tension in the film that isn't forced. Shyamalan's shameless use of horror film cliché — dead pets, things jumping at us from off camera and ooh awww scary things that go bump in the night — reeks of amateurism and cinematic plagiarism.

If a film is genuinely scary, I shouldn't have to be led around by the filmmaker who makes it a point to let me know when I'm supposed to be scared, when I'm supposed to laugh and when I should cry.

Despite a multi million-dollar cast, the acting in this film is ultimately unimaginative. Gibson (and I hate to admit this, having hated him since the highly overrated "Braveheart") makes Hess strange, quizzical, emotionally distant and somewhat entertaining during the beginning of the film.

But either Shyamalan or Gibson himself reel in the character toward the middle of the film and, as a result, the audience is left with a highly mannered, stilted and boring performance that's dragged down by tiresome and inane dialogue.

During the quiet before the invasion, Gibson, through Shyamalan's script, gives one of the most ridiculous speeches where he divides people into two types — those who have faith in divine order and are therefore comforted, and those who believe they are alone in the universe and are therefore afraid. What a load of pseudo-religious crap, delivered worse than Bela Legosi's monologue in Ed Wood's "Glen or Glenda." I'm not sure I remember Gibson crying in a movie before, but he sure does make up for it in this one. In fact, Gibson's character is so

unbelievably nice; it's surprising he doesn't cry for the aliens who he has to vanquish.

Joaquin Phoenix plays Mel Gibson's brother Merrill, a slightly dense and robotic dolt who has failed as a minor league baseball player and has no direction in life.

He's there to help his despondent brother with his kids and his farm. Yeah, this is exactly the competent type of guy you want watching your kids.

I'm not sure exactly where Shyamalan was going with this character, but then again I don't understand why this film was made. Despite that, Phoenix does add some needed and believable comic relief to the film.

The kids are basically ok, but the script uses them too often as comic relief or as tools of emotional manipulation. But what's up with Rory Culkin? Couldn't Shyamalan find another child actor without delving into the depths of the Culkin family?

When film historians look back at the past 15 years of film, they're going to conclude that every child actor was a Culkin.

This time young Rory, the latest insidious Culkin clone (whose cinematic career is destined to end when he hits puberty), delivers a cloyingly sweet performance that only Macaulay would have been proud of. I kept waiting for him to slap the side of his face with his hands and run screaming from the aliens.

The director himself, who in homage or perhaps a blatant rip-off of Hitchcock, has a rather lengthy cameo in the film.

Here he plays the troubled veterinarian who killed Gibson's wife and traps one of the aliens in his pantry.

Given this performance, he'd be well advised in future films to do as Hitchcock did and remain silent.

Outside of the acting, Shyamalan delivers a finale that's more likely to have his viewers giggling than gasping. The last 10 minutes are so misguided and stupid, it's hard to believe Touchstone Pictures actually financed this film. They must have test marketed the ending during a meeting of the 700 Club.

Come on, I waded through nearly an hour and a half of unbearable dialogue, pointless story points (Why exactly did we need to go to Shyamalan's character's house? Oh yeah so the director/writer and producer could add "actor" under his name in the credits), and ripped-off Hitchcock moments to get to the trite, moralistic payoff: God exists and we're all a part of his little plan, nothing happens that doesn't have a purpose.

Please Mr. Shyamalan, leave philosophy to competent philosophers and the preaching in church.

Maybe Shyamalan's next venture into simplistic pop-religion will be financed by the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

The only signs you should be looking for this week are the ones pointing away from the theater.

Oh, one more thing: if any aliens who die when exposed to water are reading this, don't. No really, do not invade a planet that is largely made up of the stuff.

MOVIE REVIEW: He Said/He Said

New Mel Gibson Movie is All About God, People and Values — Critics Outraged!

By PETE BROOKS



In the "Summer Movie Blockbuster" genre, agoraphobes usually don't get to be heroes. Yet it seems M. Night Shyamalan (writer/director of "The Sixth Sense,") got the fascinating idea to do an alien-invasion movie from the perspective of ... inside some guy's house.

What's more unlikely still is how well he has pulled it off in the new Mel Gibson starrer, "Signs."

(I hope I'm not giving anything away by revealing that this film deals with alien critter things — that fact is ubiquitous in the movie's press materials and advertising campaign.)

There is a formula already developing in M. Night Shyamalan movies: A slightly eerie young child who is psychically gifted will guide a stoic, taciturn male adult to a science fiction-oriented "gotcha" ending.

Besides the ending being less O. Henry than "Oh well," "Signs" hews closely to the nascent Shyamalan playbook.

In this case, a stoic, taciturn Mel Gibson plays recent widower Graham Hess, a former minister who is not just questioning his faith, but has discarded it altogether.

This time out, Shyamalan's sci-fi "hook" isn't ghosts, or superheroes, or even aliens, really. It's... God?

I think so.

"Signs" is less a thinking person's "Independence Day" than it is a science fiction "The Song of Bernadette."

Even though Shyamalan hits you over the head with his message, though, somehow it doesn't feel like an assault.

Perhaps because his script is so understated, and his actors so likeable.

Joaquin (formerly "Leaf") Phoenix plays Gibson's brother Merrill, a guy who's none too bright, but has sixpack abs and a heart of gold. They live on a big corn farm in the middle of nowhere with Gibson's two kids.

The two child actors, Rory Culkin and Abigail Breslin, are extraordinary, as all Shyamalan's young talent seems to be.

They have to be good, because even though Shyamalan casts himself in cameo roles in all his films (and with this one, seems to be promoting himself to co-star), it's obvious he most closely identifies with his child characters.

A clean space on the wall where a cross has been removed, and a recent-looking photo of Gibson and his movie family intact help establish visually that the family has lost its leading lady recently, proba-

bly about the same time Father Hess lost his faith.

As the movie begins, mysterious crop circles show up unexpectedly in Hess's cornfield one night, freaking out his kids and dimwit brother pretty badly.

Via the TV news, we learn that the crop circles are popping up all over the globe.

Strange, hovering lights are appearing in the night skies over cities worldwide, and local pets are going nuts in their backyards.

Obviously, the little green men can't be far behind.

Overall, the premise is a bit lazy — an offhand line of dialogue actually notes the similarity to Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" (among many others) — but the execution is engaging and engrossing enough to make it well worth seeing again.

The word "Hitchcockian" has been thrown around a lot regarding this film, and I can see why.

Like the master, Shyamalan makes much creative and effective use of light and darkness, camera angles and music. (The music under the opening credits is a blatant "homage" to Bernard Herrmann's justifiably legendary "Psycho" score.)

Shyamalan plays his story out deliberately, slowly building tension, and makes his boogeymen even creepier by keeping them in the shadows as long as he can.

It's slow-going by summer action-movie standards, but then, so is a cougar attack.

If "Signs" is guilty of anything, it's that it perhaps has more respect for its audience than a summer movie audience has for itself.

Previously, all of Shyamalan's movies have involved a secret plot twist at the last moment, something to send the audience out of the theater murmuring excitedly to one another.

This time that element is played down somewhat — nothing happens in the final reel to make you question everything you've just seen. On the other hand, all of his movies give you the heebie-jeebies in the last 10 minutes, and this one is no exception.

Because in the end, this movie is not about its bug-eyed monsters, it's about its human beings.

In "Signs," Shyamalan performs that archaic moviemaking feat of making you care about the characters, so when bad things loom for them, you actually feel emotionally invested — that's where the tingles come from.