

Director M. Night Shyamalan Too Talky, Murky in ‘The Last Airbender’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 1, 2010 - 7:10am

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The choices that M. Night Shyamalan makes in the progress of his filmography have become as perplexing as his early mysteries. “The Last Airbender,” featuring Dev Patel from “Slumdog Millionaire,” is an adaptation of a previous animated series, and although aimed at kids in the end seems tentative and...aimless.

In a fantasy world, where the lands are divided into nations based on the elements – air, water, earth and fire – a girl named Katara (Nicola Peltz) is practicing her magical control of water with her brother, Sokka (Jackson Rathbone). They come upon a strange orb, and in cracking it open discover a boy name Aang (Noah Ringer). He has been in a deep sleep, and it turns out he’s been in that state for over a century.

It is a time of war, perpetuated by the fire nation. They have developed war machines, ships and land vehicles that run on the nation’s ability to control fire. They can easily overtake the other parts of the world, the more placid earth and water nations. Aang is of great interest to the fire royalty including Prince Zuko (Dev Patel), Lord Ozai (Cliff Curtis), Uncle Iroh (Shaun Toub) and Commander Zhao (Aasif Mandvi). He is believed to be the Avatar, a reincarnated “airbender” that can control all four elements and bring peace to the warring nations. The Fire Nation want him stopped.



Run Away!: Noah Ringer as Aang Makes His Escape in ‘The Last Airbender’
Photo credit: Industrial Light & Magic for © 2010 Paramount Pictures Corporation

Aang is reluctant to take on his Avatar role, but as the nations confront each other, he finds that his destiny can do more good for the both his new reincarnated life and the lives of his fellow travelers.

This is a fairly complex story, and Shyamalan's adapted script doesn't make it any easier to follow, especially if kids are the presumed target audience. He included long expository dialogue, often handled by the lesser acting skills of the younger cast, about what the world was about and why they were in conflict. It becomes wearily incongruous next to the action sequences, as in "why don't you fight instead of talking us to death?" The Fire Nation could have used readings of this script in their torture chamber.

The casting was odd as well. Characters spoke the king's english, despite their various ethnicities, and the more caucasian kids (Ringer, Peltz and Rathbone), stuck out like suburban tweens among a more indigenous looking tribe. Ringer – who in essence is the featured performer in the film – had trouble with the mystical dialogue, and his martial arts posing looked more silly than serious, especially when his head tattoos lit up when he was really angry (shades of The Hulk).

Aasif Mandvi, as Commander Zhao of the Fire Nation, added some unintentional comic relief at the expense of his character. Mandvi is a correspondent on "The Daily Show," and has a deadpan delivery which was apparent through his acting in Airbender. There was a fairly serious war strategy discussion within the dialogue, and Mandvi paused just enough before saying the single word "Yes," which elicited a hearty guffaw from the audience. Back to you, Jon Stewart.

The film is listed as a 3-D film, but it's obvious that it wasn't intended to be that way. The stretch to make it 3-D left a murky and muddy quality to the look of the film and all the special effects suffer for it. One sequence of water manipulation was so like "The Ten Commandments" parting-of-the-Red-Sea that I half expected Charlton Heston to appear to let the air people go.



Princely Ties: Dev Patel as Prince Zuko in 'The Last Airbender'
Photo credit: Industrial Light & Magic for © 2010 Paramount Pictures Corporation

M. Night Shyamalan is jeopardizing his auteur status (that one-of-a-kind feel that only characterizes his films) with The Last Airbender. Any special effect hack could have project managed this film, given the lousy results in dialogue and acting. I was one of the few proponents of his last film "[The Happening](#)," [14] but there was none of the M. Knight "meaning behind the meaning" in Airbender, merely an action-adventure film that doesn't work.

Directors should have choice and dominion over every project that they take on, and let the buyer beware. The quality of this film predicts many buyers will be wary of this one, and in the realm of the box office return, I see dead career.

"The Last Airbender" opens everywhere July 1st. Featuring Noah Ringer, Dev Patel, Nicola Peltz, Jackson Rathbone, Aasif Mandvi, Cliff Curtis, Shaun Toub and Seychelle Gabriel, writtten and directed by M. Night Shyamalan. Rated "PG"



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