



'Night, Night

The short, tragic career of M. Night Shyamalan

THE HAPPENING: Written and Directed by M. Night Shyamalan. Cinematography, Tak Fujimoto. Music, James Newton Howard. Starring Mark Wahlberg, Zooey Deschanel and John Leguizamo. Twentieth Century Fox, 2008. R. 91 minutes. ★☆☆☆☆

Artistically, M. Night Shyamalan is dead. Adrift since the waning moments of *Signs* (2002), M. Night Shyamalan hit bottom with *The Lady in the Water* (2006), a dreary, confused bedtime story about a mermaid, twitchy and pearlescent, who emerges from a swimming pool. At the time, *Water* was the greatest catastrophe of a once-incandescent career. *The Happening*, while not as muddled as its predecessor, arguably is the greater failure, since it convincingly ends any meaningful discussion as to whether, apart from the trick-laden *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan is worthy of serious attention.

For a few precious minutes, *The Happening* exerts itself hauntingly. In New York, high atop a construction site, men hurl themselves to the ground. In Philadelphia, a chain of suicides begins, the same gun used again and again. Nearby, a disaster more intimate unfolds: the dissipation of the relationship between Elliot (Mark Wahlberg) and Alma (Zooey Deschanel). This dependable crisis-within-a-crisis structure — a situation at least as old, but surely older, than Henry James' *The Painted Veil* — steadies *The Happening*, if only briefly. Along with their friend Julian (John Leguizamo) and his daughter Jess (Ashlyn Sanchez), Elliot and Alma board a train for the countryside. The film rattles forward, paranoid and defiant, capitalizing on everything we don't yet know. Then the train stops for good in Filbert, Pennsylvania. And so does *The Happening*.

As the train passengers set out chaotically for the safe zone of western Pennsylvania, the film contracts with stunning haste. You

can almost hear the grind of the film's gears in downshift, resulting in fewer characters, fewer developments and — unless I misread the audience — fewer interested moviegoers. As in *Signs*, *The Happening* relies on media reports for exposition, reports that, as in real life, mislead as much as clarify. This time, Shyamalan adds cell phones to TV and radio stations, resulting in several poorly staged scenes of people standing around, useless and dumb. But the real offense of *The Happening* is Shyamalan's premise for the attacks, a concept almost as ridiculous as the heavy-handed way in which Elliot grasps it. At one point, Elliot barks that to survive, they need to "stay ahead of the wind." Is that all? While you're at it, try getting blood from a turnip, honey from a rock or a silk purse from a sow's ear. You get the idea. Billed as a paranoid thriller, *The Happening* is the worst kind of fantasy, one with neither foot in anything close to reality.

All of which is a shame, when you consider the talented actors who keep rallying to Shyamalan's cheerful little flicks. Wahlberg plays the sad clown admirably, a morally upright, naïvely positive leader who's almost an exact reprise of his Eddie Adams from *Boogie Nights*. Zooey Deschanel brings her offbeat charm to *The Happening*, but her confession to Elliot — her infidelity is telegraphed from the start — sounds like she's complaining of an itchy throat. Elliot's reaction is to remain steady, even during a scene of gratuitous violence against children, which should have parents picketing this film in the streets. In fact, the only person who gets under Elliot's skin is an irascible, insular country woman, the Nurse Ratched of rural Pennsylvania. Eventually, Elliot slumps a little. "We need to get out of this nightmare," he says. You said it, not me.

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