# The Screen Savor: â€˜Chlorine Dreamsâ€™

*by Kimberly_Gadette*

Movie Review of "Lady in the Water"

Even with the creation of a beautifully-wrought film of contemporary fantasy, it seems as if M. Night Shyamalan can't win. Like a musician who's biggest hit keeps haunting him, Shyamalan's detractors keep mumbling, "well, it's no 'Sixth Sense.'" The flip side would be, "gee, it's just like 'Sixth Sense.'" Four films later, it's no wonder Shyamalan responds by writing an acerbic film critic into this latest venture.

â€˜LADY IN THE WATERâ€™ CNS PhotoRudimentary black and white hieroglyphics open "Lady in the Water," cuing the audience that the movie will be touching on myth. Not horror, not in-your-face suspense, but myth. As Alfred Hitchcock, Rod Serling and Stephen King have explored many vagaries of the outer/inner limits, why not Shyamalan? To assume that this auteur confines himself to only one note sells both the creator and his films short.

When an underwater nymph (Bryce Dallas Howard's "Story") appears from somewhere south of the deep end of a swimming pool, it's up to Paul Giamatti's schleppy, stuttering apartment superintendent Cleveland Heep to literally get to the bottom of it all. Bowing to the ancient Greek theatrical rules of unity of time, place and action, Shyamalan creates a universe of disparate characters, all apartment dwellers in a five-story building called The Cove, all ultimately committed to escorting Story safely back to her world via their pool.

The wonder of this film lies in the depiction of The Cove's tenants. Per production designer Martin Childs, "We decided to create a completely 'blank' building that would be given character by the characters inside it â€¦ a blank page upon which the story could be written." The audience is treated to meeting the likes of a deeply mistrustful Asian woman, a wasted band of hipsters trying to create the latest catchphrase, a child savant cereal-box reader, a teasing East Indian brother and sister team (M. Night Shyamalan and the sassy Sarita Choudhury), Tovah Feldshuh doing a delightful turn as the nattering Mrs. Bubchik, and a bodybuilder

dedicated to developing only his right arm (Freddy Rodriguez). As for Bob Balaban's know-it-all critic, his lines and delivery are laugh-out-loud funny. Note to the overly-touted Robert Altman: Take a cue from such marvelous variety and exploration of character.

But the true gem of this film is in the portrayal of Giamatti's Cleveland Heep. He is introduced as an unwilling hero, frightened yet determined to save one tenant's family from an extraordinarily large bug that is, to quote Woody Allen, "the size of a Buick." The humor, the aching sadness, the humility and the heart of this character drives this movie. Particularly in the quiet scenes with Story, Shymalan directs with such a subtle touch that in a fully-clothed shower scene, Giamatti portrays both the sexual and empathetic sides of his character without one conflicting note. From "Sideways" to "Cinderella Man" to this performance, it's a thrill to watch this actor evolving in such depth and complexity.

On the shallow end, the plot's a bit goofy, the obligatory supernatural creature is animated lawn clippings with eyes, and the prophetic nymph is more like a humorless version of the mermaid in "Splash" than the Angel Gabrielâ€¢but why rain on the parade in toto? Gorgeously shot, well-paced, evocative and moody, the biggest leap of faith was not that there was a VIP nymphet in the pool, but that a) no one showed any disbelief and b) all were willing to help save her.

With "Lady in the Water," Shyamalan presents us with a mythic gift of redemption and rebirth. Given the overwhelming amount of non-fictional sadness, death and destruction that screams from the headlines each and every day, sometimes a fictional fairytale fashioned for our times is the best escape of all.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: B

PRODUCTION CREDITS: "Lady in the Water" Directed by M. Night Shyamalan Written by M. Night Shyamalen Cast: Paul Giamatti, Bryce Dallas Howard, Jeffrey Wright, Bob Balaban, Sarita Choudhury, Freddy Rodriguez, Bill Irwin, Jared Harris, Mary Beth Hurt Rated: PG-13 Running Time: 98 minutes

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