

LIVE 

CROWD CONTROL

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

IS THE HIGH-CONCEPT

KING OF HOLLYWOOD,

AND SERIAL-KILLER

THRILLER **TRAP** LOOKS

SET TO ENSNARE AUDIENCES

ONCE MORE. WE SPEAK

TO HIM AND HIS LEAD,

JOSH HARTNETT, ABOUT

GOING IN FOR THE KILL

WORDS JOHN NUGENT

LOCAL : 19:08:46

CAMERA 3



“WHAT IF THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS HAPPENED AT A TAYLOR SWIFT CONCERT?”

THAT’S THE ONE-LINE, HIGH-CONCEPT, elevator pitch that writer-director M. Night Shyamalan has been using to describe *Trap*, his 16th feature film. It’s a brilliantly neat and typically efficient job for a filmmaker who has become the king of high concepts. This is the

man, lest we forget, who brought you *The Sixth Sense* (what if a child could see dead people?), *Unbreakable* (what if superheroes were real?) and — of course! — *Old* (what if there were a beach that could make you old?). *Trap* is his latest “’90s movie throwback”, as he puts it. “I miss the high-concept movies!” he says. “*Trap* is meant to be *that*.”

Like all good high concepts, its premise can be neatly established in a single teaser trailer. The gist, according to the two minutes and 41 seconds of footage released to the world thus far, is this: handsome dad Cooper (Josh Hartnett) and his tween daughter Riley (Ariel Donoghue) are attending a stadium concert by pop sensation Lady Raven (Saleka, Shyamalan’s eldest daughter) — when it emerges that the entire concert is a trap set by law enforcement to capture a notorious serial killer known only as “The Butcher”. The classic Shyamalan twist? Cooper appears to be that very killer, watching a livestream video of a victim on his phone during the gig.

Released in April, the trailer instantly electrified the internet. Over 22 million



Clockwise from main: Singer Lady Raven (Saleka); Dad Cooper (Josh Hartnett) and daughter Riley (Ariel Donoghue) at Lady Raven’s show; Writer-director M. Night Shyamalan with daughter Saleka on set; Cooper becomes concerned.

people watched it, inspiring fan theories from the plausible (there may be more than one killer!) to the kooky (it’s a stealth *Sixth Sense* sequel!) to the downright bonkers (Cooper’s daughter is a vampire!) — alongside a debate about whether it gave the big twist away too soon.

“The response [to the trailer] was so amazing,” Shyamalan says now, clearly thrilled. But ask him whether the big twist really has been spoiled, and he’ll simply smile enigmatically, before launching into a puckish giggle. “Who can say?” he laughs. “But I did know that that was how I was going to sell it when we were shooting.” Shyamalan has become adept at clever marketing, ever since being disappointed with *Unbreakable*’s ad campaign (which sold the film as a psychological thriller, rather than a comic-book movie, as he had preferred). Everything in this trailer was extremely deliberate. “The story already starts months before you come into the movie theatre. As a storyteller, I have to be a part of that. I was *very* careful.”

With Shyamalan asserting that most of what we see in the trailer is from the early part of the

film, a fair few surprises are still to come. Hollywood’s modern-day master of suspense has laid another delicious summer-movie trap for us.

And it all started with a US Marshal in a chicken suit.

On 15 December 1985, one of the oddest competitions ever held came to its peculiar head. That day, around a hundred people excitedly arrived at the Convention Center in Washington D.C. to collect NFL tickets they believed they had won for a big football game. They were promised a slap-up brunch, free transportation to the game, and a further chance to win an all-expenses-paid trip to the Super Bowl.

The classic, Shyamalan-esque twist? Every one of those competition ‘winners’ was arrested on the spot.

‘Operation Flagship’, as it was called, was one of the most elaborate sting operations in US law-enforcement history. Thousands of fake invites had been sent out to the last known addresses of wanted fugitives. Over 150 US Marshals and police officers had disguised themselves as ushers, cleaners and cheerleaders. One US Marshal even dressed as a chicken mascot, a gun concealed under the feathers. Then, when the word, “Surprise!” was shouted, officers in tactical gear stormed the room, making the arrests. It was a bizarre, extravagant, darkly comedic chapter of American history — and one that captivated Shyamalan when he first heard about it.

“It was hilarious,” he chuckles now at the memory. “The cops were literally cheerleaders and mascots. These guys were dancing as they came in. And they were all caught. It was so twisted and funny.” The story sloshed about in the back of Shyamalan’s mind for a while, staying lodged in his memory as his mile-a-minute brain hunted for original script ideas. He had the skeleton of a meaty story there, a twisty psychological thriller with a wild hook to it and a “playful, mischievous



edge”. It was the start of something. But it needed more.

“I tend to write whatever is on my mind,” he says. “Our oldest daughter Saleka is a musician. We would go around on tour with her. We saw her play Radio City Music Hall. The world of music and concerts started to become a part of our lives. I was like: ‘*Huh*.’” Shyamalan is no stranger to inviting his family into his professional world: middle child Ishana directed episodes of her father’s TV horror *Servant*, ahead of her directorial debut *The Watched* this summer. And Saleka — who previously contributed a song to *Old*’s soundtrack — began discussing another collaboration with her dad.

“We started talking about *Purple Rain*,” Shyamalan recalls, referring to Prince’s iconic 1984 rock-opera film, in which the musician wrote the soundtrack specifically to appear within the world of his fictional drama. “It was such a singular thing, one that really hasn’t been duplicated: write an entire album for a movie and make it diegetic, so that the characters actually experience the music in the movie, not as a score. That’s what started this conversation, a couple of years ago, Saleka and I saying: ‘What if you wrote an album from beginning to end... and what if we set it at a concert?’ It could be very scary and Hitchcockian.”



Clockwise from left: Cooper sees something that troubles him; Dr Grant (Hayley Mills) is on the hunt; It's all smiles for dad and daughter — for now; Shyamalan gives direction to Hartnett.

So they had their high concept. The two Shyamalans wrote at the same time at their Philadelphia home, Night writing the script, Saleka writing the songs, each bouncing off each other. “It was just a joyous writing experience,” he recalls. “It just tumbled out, giddy. I’d come down to the studio, and I’d hear a song and say, ‘That’s it! That’s what I want!’ Then she’d write another song and I’d say, ‘No, I don’t hear her, whoever this artist is.’ Over time, we would start to find her voice that way.”

An audacious, Hitchcockian, *Purple Rain*-riffing serial-killer thriller required an entire *Eras Tour*-esque pop concert. They did it for real, at Canada’s FirstOntario Centre, with thousands of extras acting as a real crowd. “I directed an entire concert!” smiles Shyamalan. “And it wasn’t just a thing in the background. It’s equally important. There is no pretend concert going on. I love the idea of cinema as windows within windows. One of the reasons to come see the movie at the movie theatre is because there’s literally a real concert that you can see nowhere except in that movie.”

The ingredients were coming together. They had their bespoke soundtrack. They had their claustrophobic setting, a Shyamalan staple (“I love a single location,” he says). They had their wild premise. Now they needed one key extra element, something ever-present in original ‘90s blockbusters: a star. “We had a generation of actors that were just *stars*,” says Shyamalan. “Josh Hartnett might be one of the rarest people because he is *that* kind of superstar.” He beams at the thought of his leading man. “Honestly, I can tell you that no-one could have done the part better. *No-one*. Out of seven billion people.”

On 26 July 2004, Josh Hartnett and M. Night Shyamalan met for the first time. Hartnett knows exactly when it happened, because it was at the New York premiere of Shyamalan’s thriller *The Village*. “I had friends who were in the film,” recalls Hartnett now. Fast forward two decades, and a framed photo of that very meeting on the red carpet, snapped by paparazzi, was presented to Hartnett by Shyamalan as a *Trap* wrap gift. “It’s literally him and me just shaking hands as we first meet. It’s kind of amazing.”

Both Hartnett and Shyamalan marvel at the somewhat parallel trajectory their careers have taken in the intervening years. Don’t call it a comeback, but in a Shyamalan-esque twist, the two men have reconnected at an extremely fruitful time in their professional lives. Shyamalan is years into a creative renaissance (a Shyamalaissance?), enjoying new levels of artistic freedom; Hartnett, a one-time teen heartthrob, opted to swap Beverly Hills for the Surrey Hills (to live there with his wife, British actor Tamsin Egerton) and became more choosy with roles, before earning major plaudits for his recent role as a nuclear physicist in last year’s Oscar-winner *Oppenheimer* (a Hartnettaiissance?).

“It is an interesting time for both of us,” acknowledges Hartnett. “Night was able to create this autonomous world in that he’s very much in control of the films he creates, which is incredibly rare in our industry. And I’m having a lucky time right now. You know, this business is 80 per cent luck. I’m just working with great people.” Shyamalan thinks Hartnett is being too modest. “He did it the right way,” he says of his actor. “He built a life away from Hollywood. And because of



that, I think he is coming from such strength and confidence that he’s able to take huge risks.”

It certainly feels like a risk, to turn the one-time Sexiest Vegetarian In The World (at least according to a 2003 PETA poll — bad luck, Orlando Bloom) into an apparent cold-blooded serial killer. Shyamalan calls Hartnett the “secret weapon” of the film, and it is nothing if not weaponised casting. Nobody is willing to divulge the true nature of Cooper, keen to preserve the surprise, but he is, according to Hartnett, “wild”.

“I’m naturally drawn to characters who have layers,” Hartnett explains. “And Cooper has *many* layers. He’s unlike any other character that I’ve seen portrayed as of late in film, if ever. If you come to a character that’s been focus-grouped to death, you have very, very few choices that you can make. And this is a full-throated acting *experience*.”

You can see those full-throated acting choices throughout Hartnett’s career, an interest in darker material that seems to stretch all the way back to his debut in *Halloween H20*, through to *Penny Dreadful* and his recent appearance in *Black Mirror*’s moody astronaut-thriller episode ‘Beyond The Sea’. “I’m definitely intrigued by psychologies that are unlike my own,” he says. “My research will bring me to an understanding of these people that are way outside of my normal day-to-day understanding.” (At the very least, as the dad of young daughters, Hartnett could relate to the character as a patient parent. “How often can you hear ‘Shake It Off?’” he chuckles, with a slight weary resignation. “I can tell you. It’s about a billion times.”)

Getting under Cooper’s mysterious skin was not easy. “He was a tricky character to get right,” Hartnett concedes. In the push and pull, the director and the leading man did not always creatively agree. “There were some things that



I pushed him to do that I think he was a bit uncomfortable with and then came around to the idea,” Hartnett says. “There were some things that he pushed me to do that were a little bit uncomfortable with me at the beginning and then I came around to.” But it was respectful and energising for them both: “I’ve rarely had such a friendly and open dynamic with a director.”

That they were able to have that was largely thanks to the unique Shyamalan working environment. “If you ask a question, it doesn’t have to run up any chain of command,” Hartnett says. “It doesn’t have to appease some cross-section of the population. It’s purely about what he finds most creatively intriguing. That is so freeing, because then you have the power to make bolder choices.” And whether you vibe with those choices or not, you could never accuse Shyamalan of not being bold.

On 11 September 2015, film historians now agree, the Shyamalaissance officially began: that was the release date of his found-footage horror *The Visit*. In the years before that, the filmmaker’s name had become synonymous with a run of creative and commercial disappointments, the classic Shyamalan-esque twist seemingly no longer holding enough muster. But *The Visit* was a hit, earning \$98.4 million against a budget of \$5 million — a budget he raised entirely independently, by remortgaging his house. Shyamalan kept complete creative control throughout the process. It’s a self-funded model he’s maintained ever since.

“These movies are just honestly not done through a studio system,” he says. “They are released by the studio system. But it’s very much an indie environment [in which they are made].” In a Hollywood dominated by adaptations,

sequels, and brands, Shyamalan hopes his model could be more widely replicated. “I really do believe in the original movie. I want the industry to move towards more original storytelling. I think audiences would really like it. Look, I know there’s safety in IP. But it’s really important that we come to the movies and see something we’ve never seen before. I’ll keep fighting for that.”

If there’s an IP in *Trap*, it’s Shyamalan himself: the rare director who is as famous as his stars. The trailer for the film proudly sells it as “A NEW EXPERIENCE IN THE WORLD OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN”, a logline which acknowledges the power of his name — and one that some even interpreted is an expansion of a shared universe, as *Split* did with its Bruce Willis post-credits sting. Is this the beginning of the MNSCU?

He laughs. “Well, to be still doing this after 30 years is so exciting. They are original movies, but they are also from the same author. This is part of a longer conversation that pre-existed this and will continue after this. It’s so rare, to have this relationship with the audience.” He looks almost emotional now: “You know, I’ve had number-one movies in four separate decades now. Which is absolutely *insane*, what I just said to you.”

This is a filmmaker who has maintained an astonishing creative energy and drive, producing on average one film every two years since *The Visit* — the same prolific, restless mind that as a teenager made 45 amateur films by the age of 17. After a fair amount of lows, Shyamalan seems energised, on a high. He is taking nothing for granted. “If *Trap* was my last movie, I’d be so happy about that,” he says earnestly. “It’s already beyond anybody’s wildest dreams.” The classic Shyamalan twist here, though? He has a lot more in the tank to come. 🍷

TRAP IS IN CINEMAS FROM 9 AUGUST