

NINETEEN YEARS  
ON FROM  
*UNBREAKABLE*,  
AND THREE  
YEARS ON FROM  
*SPLIT*, M NIGHT  
SHYAMALAN  
RETURNS WITH A  
JOINT SEQUEL.  
SFX TALKS TO  
THE WRITER-  
DIRECTOR ABOUT  
FINISHING A  
TRILOGY TWO  
DECades IN THE  
MAKING...

WORDS STEVE O'BRIEN AND JORDAN FARLEY

H E A R T C



# F GLASS

**P**ICTURE IT: M NIGHT Shyamalan, the one-time Hollywood wunderkind, driving across LA sometime in the 2000s when he hits a set of lights. Waiting, he looks across to another car only to see Samuel L Jackson staring back at him. There's no hello, though, no warm "how are you?" smile, just:

"When are we making that sequel, motherfucker!?"

It's been a question many of us, not just one of its own dirty-mouthed stars, have been asking since *Unbreakable* hit the screens in November 2000. It seemed though that Hollywood was somewhat less keen. Arriving as it did after the box office quake of *The Sixth Sense* (which raked in a monstrously impressive \$672 million against a \$40 million budget), *Unbreakable*, while far from a bomb, had a whiff of failure about it. It did tepid business at the box office and critically was received with more of a shrug than a whoop. It's an arguable point that, had *Unbreakable* been made now, in the more superhero-friendly world of 2019, it might well have been embraced with more passion.

Shyamalan's movie was a starry-eyed love letter to the superhero inkies of his youth, yet there wasn't a hint of spandex, nor a flash of CGI in its gray, drizzly aesthetic. It was, at its essence, the Superman story, but told with the chilly, muted realism of a lofty arthouse drama. But coming as it did just four months after Bryan Singer's *X-Men*, and a full eight years before the Big Bang of the MCU, the studio seemed mystified how to sell this unfashionably still and sombre oddity.

"At the time," Shyamalan reveals, "Disney felt that we couldn't sell it as a comic book movie, because they said no-one would come to a comic book movie. They said, this is for weird people at conventions."

Zip forward 16 years and Shyamalan, the fresh prince of the twist end, pulled his trippiest one yet, when, at the end of his 12th movie *Split*, it was revealed, via a secret cameo from Bruce Willis, that the movie took place in the same universe as *Unbreakable*. Suddenly, that sequel that Samuel L Jackson wanted so much that it brought out the Jules Winnfield in him finally looked like a potential reality. →

"When we did that ending on *Split*," laughs Shyamalan, "the theatres went crazy. Half the theatre was screaming, and then the other half of 21-year-olds were going, 'Who's the old guy in the diner?'"

*Split*'s shock success (it grossed \$278.5 million against a modest \$9 million budget) finally allowed Shyamalan to ramp up his long-gestating sequel. But it must be noted here that *Glass* (titled after Samuel L Jackson's brittle-boned antagonist from the first movie) is both an *Unbreakable* and *Split* follow-on, uniting the first film's Bruce Willis and Samuel L Jackson with the second's James McAvoy and Anya Taylor-Joy in a movie that, just three years ago, looked like it might never happen.

"The whole premise of the movie is, what if Marvel was real?" Shyamalan tells us. "There's no flying, there's no lasers, there's nothing like that. But can a mum lift a car off a child? Is that possible? Or is that an urban myth? Let's give some evidence."

## GLASS HALF FULL

*Unbreakable* climaxed with a caption telling us that Elijah Price (AKA Mr Glass) was arrested and sent to an institution for the criminally insane. *Split* meanwhile ended with James McAvoy's Horde (the media's nickname for the multitude of personalities that exist within Kevin Wendell Crumb) on the lam after the kidnap of three teenage girls. Shyamalan, never one to risk losing the beauty of a hot reveal, is keeping characteristically schtum on the specifics of *Glass*'s plot, but trailers have shown Bruce Willis' David Dunn, plus Price and Crumb together in what appears to be a hospital.

"Basically the movie takes place in a contained kind of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* atmosphere," he teases, "where all of these things are talked about. What are we capable of? Are we just imagining the ability that a mum can lift a car off a child if she needed to? Is that possible? Is there physics behind it? If you get stressed, you can make your blood pressure go up – that's here. These are all facts – scientific facts."

Shyamalan insists this movie is very much framed around Elijah Price. If the first film was the origin story for David Dunn, and *Split* examined the superpowered beginnings of Crumb, this one, as its title suggests, hones in on the man otherwise known as Mr Glass and explores what the Horde's existence means for him and his comic book-shaped world view.

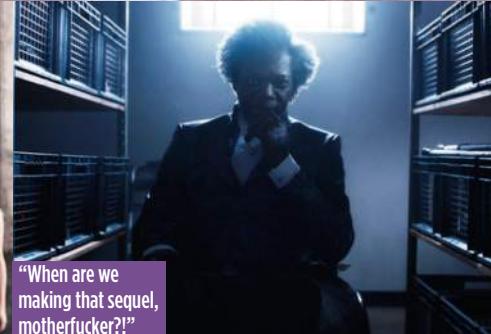
Shyamalan's intended title was *The Theory Of Elijah Price*. "I almost wanted it to feel different than the single-title versions of *Unbreakable* and *Split*," he tells us. "And then we just centred it on *Glass* for metaphoric reasons. I think when you see the movie, you'll feel that by the end. And even through the credits at the end, there's a sense of glass pieces and 'what does it all mean?'



Sam and Bruce sloooowly try to edge away from James.



Gotta respect a guy in a poncho.



"When are we making that sequel, motherfucker?"

"It's his philosophy, which covers all of these movies," he continues. "He's been put away in this institution. Now that there's the emergence of Kevin Wendell Crumb, and they all end up together in this institution – how does that affect this man and his belief system?"

In fact, the first drafts of *Unbreakable* actually included Crumb before Shyamalan decided to jettison the character. Price wasn't the nefarious bomb-crazed mastermind he ended up as, but was drawn as more of a "benevolent Xavier-type" figure, according to the director. It was only when he pulled Crumb out of the film that Shyamalan found himself asking, "Who's the villain of this? What if his confidant was actually the bad guy?"

It took 16 years, of course, for Kevin Crumb to flicker into existence. In that time, Shyamalan had never let on about *Unbreakable*'s great lost character, so when *Split* was announced, nobody had any clue that this story of a kidnapper with 23 personalities, had anything to do with that other film. Not even the studio making it.

In fact, before Bruce Willis came in to film his cameo for *Split*, no one, bar a few of the director's trusted intimates, knew anything about it. The scene wasn't even in the script Shyamalan had presented to Universal, and the first the suits knew about it was when Shyamalan screened the film for them.

"They lost their minds," Shyamalan smiles. "They're like, 'We made a sequel to another studio's movie!'"

Shyamalan reassured them he'd already met with Disney and squared it. He'd come to a "gentleman's agreement" with President of Production Sean Bailey, whose only stipulation, it appears, was that Disney would be involved with any sequel.

The result of this canny bit of studio bed-jumping is that both companies are involved in *Glass*, with Universal handling domestic distribution and Disney dealing with it overseas. That's a genuine first.

"I mean, it's crazy to think that they did this," says a still amazed Shyamalan, "and that they both said yes, and that they said it without really many issues of any kind. It's just the right people over here, the right people over there, the right time for us all."

"I think they just wanted to see the movie," he says. "When I was writing *Glass*, I wasn't sure that this was going to work. I was scared, and I was writing it because I was like, 'This is the one time I'm writing something that I need the actors to say yes, and I need the studio to say yes!'"

When *Unbreakable* was released, comic book movies were an uncommon thing. Now, of course, they litter the movie landscape. Shyamalan says he likes some of the current glut of superhero films (particularly the first



"They called me Mr Glass..."

## "I COMPLETELY GEEKED OUT!"

Anya Taylor-Joy is Casey



**When did you first find out that *Split* was a sequel to *Unbreakable*, and when did you know that Night had a part for you in *Glass*?**

It was the same night. We had just gone to do a test screening, and Night just sort of let me in on it. And I just had the same reaction

that everyone else did in the movie, which is that I screamed and jumped around. I said, "No way! That's mad!" I just got so excited and completely geeked out, and then just said, "Oh, you have to let me come to set. You have to let me see this!" He was super-cool, and said, "What makes you think you're not coming along for the ride?"

**When did you first see *Unbreakable*?**

Probably a bit too young. I didn't quite understand what was going on. I think I must have been... the first time ever, maybe 10 or something like that? But then in preparation for going into *Split*, I had a big summer marathon and watched everything again. So I was pretty well-versed by the time I got there.

**What was it like meeting Bruce and Sam for the first time?**

So cool. I'm such a hugger, because I just hug everything that moves. But I just bolted to Samuel, intent on giving him a hug. I was like, "I love you so much! You are so cool!" He was just like, "Okay, little tiny thing. Cool."



That is one stylish supervillain suit.

*Iron Man*), but doesn't appear to be chasing those audiences. Even by the dawn of the century's standards, *Unbreakable* had the unhurried gait of a film made three decades previously. Shyamalan estimates there were only 400 shots in the entire movie (a typical SF film from around the same time would probably add up to around 1,700 shots), and says that *Glass* is likely to come in at around 675, so it's clear that the current spate of wham-bam cut-cut-cut-cut comic book movies haven't informed his approach to *Glass*.

"I have a high tolerance for pace," he says unapologetically. "Almost no movie is slow to me."

Time will tell whether *Glass* will play mainly to the already converted or will be able to seduce a fresh generation of superhero buffs, raised on the sugar rush spectacle of the MCU. As great as they are though, they're committee-made films. *Glass*, meanwhile, promises a more personal, auteur take on the genre. Love it or loathe it, this movie has been brewing for nearly two decades in just one head.

"I'm never going to compete against Marvel in the money and the special effects and all that stuff," Shyamalan reasons. "But in the *Jiro Dreams Of Sushi* category of the ingredients and how much care went into making the rice? I can beat them on that." ☀

*Glass* is in cinemas from 18 January.