

Arts & Entertainment



POPCORN™
Signs:

Gets Its Signals Crossed

One Popcorn, Poor • Two Popcorns, Fair • Three Popcorns, Good • Four Popcorns, Excellent

By MICHAEL S. GOLDBERGER
2 1/2 POPCORN

Can you believe Mel Gibson as timid and vacillating? I can't. Especially since *Braveheart* (1995). Anything less than a full-blast action hero seems unconvincing, underutilized, sort of like a Ferrari doing 55 on the Autobahn.

His feigned discomfort in *What Women Want* (2000) was, well, uncomfortable. If you want understanding and extra-sensitivity, why not go with an actor who's more like a Toyota Camry? Charles Grodin comes to mind.

Of course if you disagree then you're halfway to accepting *Signs*. M. Night Shyamalan's most recent scare tactic, as your next moviegoing entertainment. The other half to enjoying this sci-fi allegory about a minister in New Hope, Pa., who throws in his collar when his wife dies in a car accident, is a three-partner.

First, you have to possess a modicum of belief in predestination. Second, you should be open-minded when it comes to aliens from outer space — as in they might visit one day. Thirdly, and this is the really tough part, you ultimately must believe that all of these plot elements can credibly combine to teach us a big fat lesson about faith, fate and the improbability of coincidence.

Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*) approaches this cinematic trick via an emotional texture reminiscent of horror film moralist Stephen King with an occasional detour through *Blair Witch Project* (1999) territory. That is, in addition to the spiritual undertones, he shoots for an all natural, back-to-basics, organic scariens. Special effects are relegated to a supporting role.

When things first start going bump in the night, Father Graham Hess, portrayed by Gibson, peers up the cellar steps at what he thinks is a passing shadow. We hold our breath while a doorknob is turned from the other side. Long pauses are supplied. Our own imaginations conjure unthinkable demons far worse than any the filmmaker could produce. Gosh knows what gurgles off screen.

Previously, crop signs were discovered in the cornfields. Are they a hoax, or directions? The former reverend's family huddles in fear, even before receiving any real proof of an invasion, further fomenting the nervous energy that escalates their terror. All the while, Shyamalan weaves the various possibilities of awfulness in and out of the story, skillfully allowing the tension to build with each new divulgence.

Establishing this debate between real and imagined danger is a notable achievement. Regardless of whether the peril is legitimate or not, we are certainly placed at seat's edge. Yet like the rest of the director's exhibit of well-executed movie moments, there is no credible melding between this and the various other elements of the film.

To this cataclysmic backdrop, Gibson's Graham Hess has the estimable task of comforting a family still in the throes of their own personal tragedy. He has to do it with his faith destroyed, shattered by the loss of his dear wife played by Patricia Kalember.

Intermittent flashbacks throughout the overlong proceedings relate the sad specifics of Mrs. Hess' death. Take heed. It's morbid, but there are clues that'll make sense at the big wrap-up, especially if you're the sort of hairpin who believes there's a good reason for every occurrence.

You know the routine. Grandma's house number was 313 when you were little. And now 13 years later when you take your math SATs, you realize that the only reason her number was 313 is because the answer to question No. 31 (191 x 4Y+7-Y+78X=) is 313.

Actually, that's kind of unfair when you think about it. Poor Grandma could have been so much more comfortable in 315. Less stairs to climb, a verandah overlooking the courtyard, and the rent was even less. But no, she had to live in ratty 313, above the garbage cans, just so someday you could get question No. 31 right and go to Brown instead of Rutgers.

Oy, the sacrifices. The example may be extreme. But then Shyamalan is hardly shy when it comes to tying together various and disparate events. Admittedly, even if you don't believe that there's a reason for everything that happens, there is nevertheless something comforting about seeing overwhelming chaos reduced to a means rather than an end.

We like the idea of a grand plan. That something, somewhere, cares about us, even if it sends hideous monsters to remind us of that fact. The implication of a divine hand is always heartening.

Understandably, you couldn't convince Gibson's ex-holy man that there's any rhyme or reason to the scary things that have begun to occur around his Bucks County farm. While the ensuing events are cer-

tainly trying for Mr. Hess and family, they prove good for Gibson the actor. Because once push comes to shove and the docile character's adrenaline is ordered to flow, believability is once again his.

This is supplemented by decent but typically precocious portrayals by Rory Culkin as Graham's son Morgan and Abigail Breslin as his sweet but troubled little daughter.

But the film's only standout performance comes from Joaquin Phoenix as Merrill, Graham's younger brother. A former minor league ballplayer, Merrill came to keep his sibling company following the car accident. An interesting counterpoint to his learned brother, in many ways the jock is a dolt. Yet he is a likable fellow, has a native intelligence, and exudes a form of sympathy different yet complimentary to his older brother's. The combination of traits is complicated.

Thus it is to Phoenix's thespic credit and the film's advantage that he breathes credible life into the persona.

Still, it would take more than one exceptional portrayal to compensate for the strained connections proffered in Shyamalan's movie. And it certainly isn't helped by the fact that fans of his *Sixth Sense* will always be on the lookout for an ending to equal the one in that 1999 thriller.

It is a testament to the director that while Americans will think nothing of telling you that your spouse is cheating on you or that you really should do something about your ill-fitting toupee, not one human being in this country gave away the ending to that film.

Signs doesn't come close to earning such reverence. But what's the sense of trying to decide whether or not to put it on your moviegoing list? Don't worry. If you're destined to see it, you will.

Signs, rated PG-13, is a Touchstone Pictures release directed by M. Night Shyamalan and stars Mel Gibson, Joaquin Phoenix and Abigail Breslin. Running time: 106 minutes.



DOWNTOWN MUSIC...Westfield residents had a blast last week when Grammy Award-winning Mallet Man came to downtown Westfield. Pictured, above, Jason Taylor, band member, far left, forms a festive line with music revelers.

Jen's Trends: Falling Into Fashion

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These two basic tops can be found at almost any store and remember that they are investment pieces; they will never go out of style.

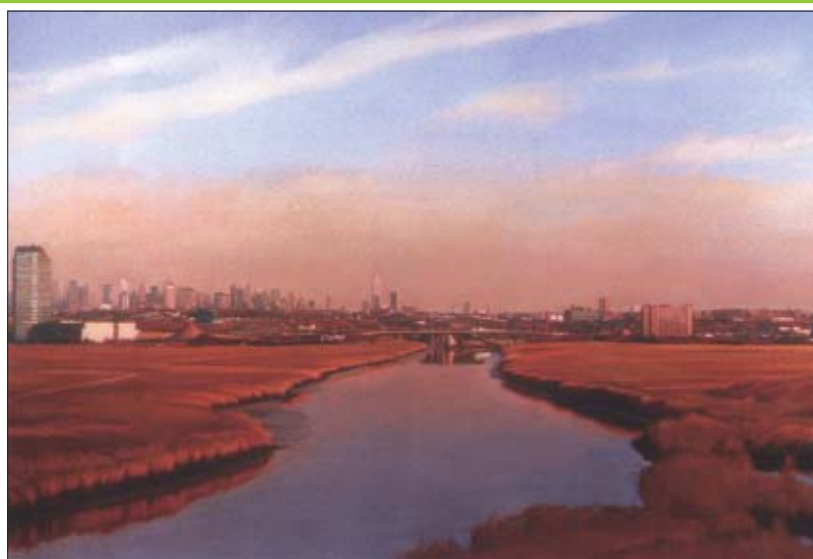
THE DENIM JACKET: Need I say more? Everyone needs a denim jacket. Look for a fitted jacket that falls to your waist. Make sure that the jacket isn't too tight because you want to be able to layer underneath the jacket. Look for shades of medium or dark denim; these basic washes will match with most of your fall wardrobe. A vintage whisked denim jacket with distinct tailoring will work as well.

The great thing about a denim jacket is that you don't have to spend a lot. Look for great jackets at your local thrift store or if you don't have the time to search for a vintage jacket, head to your local *Gap* or *Target* for an affordable find.

ANYTHING CORDUROY: Some things never change. You had corduroys when you were five and oddly enough, you still need them today. In any fall season, corduroy is always key.

My suggestion is to invest in a corduroy skirt or corduroy pants that are cut like jeans. These items will look great with that denim jacket and white shirt that you're going to buy. If corduroy is your thing, you might want to invest in a corduroy jacket that is cut like a denim jacket.

The key with corduroy is to make sure it reflects denim. Also, you might



CITYSCAPE...Westfield resident Gary Godbee offers his view of New York City from the Meadowlands in this oil painting, pictured above, which is currently included in "Urban Crossings," an exhibition at the Somerset Art Association Gallery in Bedminster.

Landscape Summer Showcase Will Include Westfielder Gary Godbee

WESTFIELD — Gary Godbee of Westfield is one of 10 artists participating in "Urban Crossings," the second string of the Somerset Art Association's (SAA) landscape summer showcase.

Godbee has crafted a group of "cityscape" paintings that reflect his relationships, emotions and responses to various cities.

Currently a member of the SAA faculty, Godbee's work has been exhibited extensively throughout the tri-state area in galleries and corporate settings.

Godbee also shares his love of art with his students, having held numerous teaching positions at the Montclair Art Museum, Academy of Realist Art, duCret School of the Arts and the Arts Student's League.

Other exhibiting artists include Valerie Larko and Jessica Lendard of Summit, Joseph Sundwall of Bridgewater, Michael McGinley of Flemington, Reeve Schley of Whitehouse, Lee Hughes of Oldwick, Al Alexander of Milford, John Reilly of Califon and Hale Allen of Philadelphia, Pa.

The show, which will debut this evening, August 15, from 6 to 8 p.m.

with an Opening Cocktail Reception, will continue through Sunday, September 15. Gallery hours are Monday through Thursday, 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays, 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

The SAA gallery is located at 2020 Burnt Mills Road in Bedminster. For more information, please call (908) 234-2345.



Get Outta The House

By CAROL F. DAVIS

Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

The Summer Arts Festival series at Echo Lake Park will present a free performance of the *Party Dolls* on Wednesday, August 21, at 7:30 p.m. The female trio will sing hits spanning three decades — the 60s, 70s and 80s — along with their backup band. Enjoy favorites from songs like "My Boyfriend's Back" and "Chapel of Love" to their own rendition of the B-52's hit, "Love Shack." Refreshments will be sold, or you can bring your own picnic. In the event of rain, head to Cranford High School.

The *Big Barn Bash* at the New Jersey Museum of Agriculture will be held on August 17. Here you will have an opportunity to learn everything you always wanted to know about the wonderful barns in our state as well as join in the square dance, and enjoy a barbeque and party. The Museum is located on 103 College Farm Road in North Brunswick off U.S. Route No. 1 at the entrance to Cook College — Rutgers University. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$3 for students and seniors, \$2 for children, and free for under 4 years of age and for Museum members. For information, call (732) 249-2077, or visit their website at www.agriculturemuseum.org.

Also on Saturday, August 17, the *VooDUDES* will provide a lil' bit of New Orleans in New Jersey at the Red Mill Museum Village, 56 Main Street in Clinton. Dancing to the mix of country, rock, Creole and Cajun, and the fusion sounds of Zydeco is encouraged. Gates open at 5:30 p.m. for picnics, and the music begins at 7:30 p.m. Call (908) 735-4101. They will also be appearing at the Metuchen Blues Series, 15 Center Street, on Thursday, August 15, at 8 p.m. Call (732) 632-8502. Performances are free. Check them out at www.thevoodudes.com.

Our area's local Smitherreen, Pat DiNizio, is preparing to hit the road for his second *Living Room Tour* beginning September 2. The lead singer will be performing Smitherreens favorites, with solo acoustic sets on a small scale in private homes and other more intimate settings. In case you are not familiar with the Smitherreens, they have been around since 1980, and have made the *Billboard* Top 40 with pop hits like "A Girl Like You." Don't worry, fans. This doesn't mean the group has stopped touring.



TEA TOTTLERS...Westfield resident Mildred Picone, right, met up with Eleanor Rosenberg of West Caldwell at Tea on the Terrace on July 26. Held at Reeves-Reed Arboretum, the program will be offered today, August 8, and Thursday, August 22, from 1 to 3 p.m. To enjoy a spot of tea and the Arboretum's delightful scenery, please call (908) 273-8787.

Melodies From Bach to Jazz To be Presented at SP Library

SCOTCHPLAINS — The Scotch Plains Library on Bartle Avenue will present its annual, free August "More Mozart" concert on Thursday, August 22, at 7:30 p.m. in the downstairs auditorium. Light refreshments will be served.

This year's concert will highlight "Music for Jazz Quartet and Strings," a jazz composition of Bob Ackerman, local composer and performer. He will perform as a flute or saxophone soloist in this four-movement work.

Stan Jackson, recently retired director of Glen Ridge High School's prize-winning bands, will conduct the "Music for Jazz Quartet and Strings."

The program will include Ackerman as soloist in the Bach flute suite and a group performance of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

Ackerman, who is known as "The Mouthpiece Doctor," is a local expert on vintage horns. He has recorded for the Blackhawk, Daagnim, CBS, Silkhart and Progressive Winds labels.

The recipient of both National Education Association and Ford Foundation grants, Ackerman is both a composer and performing artist on the

tenor and alto saxophone, soprano and alto flute and clarinet. His work crosses the boundaries from classical to jazz. His wife, singer Pam Purvis, will perform jazz vocals.



Bob Ackerman



Pam Purvis

Pianist Fred Fisher of Scotch Plains, former music director at Wardlaw-Hartridge School in Plainfield and director of "The Glad Rags," will also perform.

Double bassist Jay Sweet, local bass teacher and performer, and graduate of Berkeley Music School and Rutgers Master of Music program is also featured, along with violist Robert Paoli, Wardlaw-Hartridge teacher, award-winning composer of organ music and managing member of the Summit Strings, a local professional quartet.

Celloist Leo Wang of Fanwood, local cello teacher and former member of the internationally known Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra, is also scheduled to play.

Violinists are Vivian Lopez of Rahway, Lubove Schnable of Fanwood, director of this ensemble and teacher of violin and viola, and Schnable's daughter, Lu Ann Schnable.

Springsteen Rises to Top at Meadowlands

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mid-80s that he was so clearly trying to dampen.

Thus, my initial reaction after last week's two-and-a-half hour show was that it was the loosest, most fun, best-performed Bruce concert I'd seen since those uber-superstar days of nearly 20 years ago.

He bantered with the crowd, told a few quick stories, laughed in amazement at us for knowing all the words to songs that were released just a week earlier, ripped a slew of screaming guitar solos and seemed to mean it when he kicked off the night by saying that, "It's always great to open in the Garden State."

The song selection was split between tunes from the new album and fan favorites from way back. His 22-song set last week included all but a handful of songs from "The Rising," with the remainder mostly coming from Springsteen's "Born to Run," "Darkness on the Edge of Town" and "Born in the USA" albums.

It was a great mix of new and old, slow and thoughtful interspersed with rocking good fun party numbers like "Glory Days," "Mary's Place" and "Waiting On A Sunny Day," the latter two of which evoked memories of some Springsteen-penned tunes that were recorded and released by the great Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes back in the 70s.

Even on the eve of his 53rd birthday, Springsteen continues to be the greatest rock and roll performer ever, backed by a band that is unquestionably the best in the business. Thirty years, thousands of shows, 10s of thousands of songs played before millions around the world have yet to dampen Springsteen and the band's energy and intensity.

No rock musician in the five decades since the genre's "invention" has remained relevant for as long as he has and no one engenders the kind of fan loyalty and enthusiasm.

And a note to the Internet chat room carpers, whiners, complain-

ers, naysayers and johnny-come-latelys barking that he didn't play this song or that song or that the show was too short: if you're looking for a greatest hits show, the Rolling Stones, Chicago, the Who and Jethro Tull are all out on the road this summer.

The tour continued on to Washington, D.C. last weekend (a show that was even better than the August 7 opener) and then New York City on Monday night. The band will be barnstorming the country for the next few months, including a stop in Philadelphia in early October, before heading overseas. Then they'll be back in the U.S. next summer for more extended stands in major cities, including, I'd hope and expect, a long stand in the Garden State.

Cynthia Sayer

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these pianos."

Woody's European tour was filmed for an award-winning documentary called *WildMan Blues*. Sayer became friends with the filmmaker, Barbara Kopel, who will act as executive producer for Cynthia's next project, a documentary about the banjo.

"A certain aspect of America is illustrated through the banjo," Sayer said. "And it's responsible for the creation of so many genres — blue grass, ragtime, jazz. It's this cool, eccentric world that no one knows about."

She is certainly appreciative of a wonderful career that she hopes will continue for a long time to come.

Sayer said, "I've been in all these amazing countries, and had amazing adventures, and met wonderful people. And I actually earn a living doing something I love. I'm just completely lucky to do this."

Coming Next Week:

- Reiko Hasegawa, shutterbug
- WYACT's Dames at Sea
- The Last Pen & Ink



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