

A Roundtable Discussion with M. Night Shyamalan.
By LastAirbenderFans.com

How did you come to the Franchise?

Actually, I just told this story this morning at the Nickelodeon convention, and I said this on stage. There was a period of time where I was really interested in doing a real long-form story for the movies. I've been waiting and talking to a lot of people. I had a lot of conversations about Harry Potter, every single one of them, and The Chronicles of Narnia was offered to me from the estate. All of these different franchises, and I would really kinda think about them seriously. Much to my kids regret, I would eventually say at the breakfast table "I'm not doing it," and they would just get upset. "Why? I can't believe you're not doing it. You're crazy!" My wife would just stop listening to the conversations because she thought I was never going to do something that I didn't create. "Why do you even have these conversations? You're just wasting all of our time and energy." So that went on and on; that was like the running joke forever. I was saying this morning that my dad would always ride me about it cause then the movie would open and make so much money. "(Comical Indian accent) Why didn't you do it?" (The room laughs) and I'm like "Dad... enough already. I'm happy - everything's good." "But you woulda made so much money!" "It's all good, it's all good. There will be something someday." My oldest daughter is really philosophical and she's like, "well you're saying no for a reason. There's something down the line that's meant for you." So while this is all going on, my youngest child is watching a show on Nickelodeon, and she's totally into it – *totally* into it. And in classic parenting style, I did not pay any attention to what she is watching. One day my mom came over to baby-sit – I remember this moment specifically cause it was in the house we lived in before. She was baby-sitting, we were going out to dinner, and she starting watching this show that she (the daughter) is obsessed with, with her. My mom calls me from the family room and is like; this has Hindu philosophies in it! (In another comical Indian voice)" and I'm all like; "great mom... thanks. We'll be back, we'll be back." We take off and there's this movement going on in the house and I'm not really paying attention to it still. And then there's the request for a Katara costume for Halloween, and I'm like "Who's Katara? What is this?" I remember in my office we were looking it up; I type in 'Katara' and see it's a cartoon, and then still paying no attention to it in the big scheme of things.

Meanwhile, there's the plotline of me having conversations about these other franchises and it not working out while this other little thing is happening – ya know, if this is how I would structure it. Then we went out to go get some books, and this store they were selling dvd's and books. The first season of this show was there, and my daughter was like; "can we get it? Can we get it?!" and I'm like "Okay, we'll get it, we'll get it." We didn't have anything to do that afternoon, it was a Sunday – so we all went down in the theater. At the time we only had the four of us, but now we have another child. So the four of us went down into the movie theater and watched the first episode, and we were like; "this is cool, this is cool. Alright we'll watch another one..." and we put another one on... and another one, and another one. And literally the whole day went by. It went from daylight to darkness while we were in there, and we go "my god, we gotta feed these

children! We gotta eat!”

When I was thinking about it, I was thinking it was so weird because it has everything that I love. I study martial arts; I’ve been studying Kempo for a decade. Obviously I study spirituality of all kinds. I was in a Hindu family, but I am hugely Buddhist in influence. So everything was there. I have to go visit monasteries in France, the whole thing, I’m totally into it! There’s that, and then martial arts movie background. Everything about it was just so interesting to me. I’ve never done a CGI movie because my storytelling is so much about humanity. I love the dinner table scene, but everybody else get scared of the dinner table scene in a movie cause the movie will stop – I love it! Like *Signs*, it’s all built around the dinner table scene: their last supper together. I love it. If it’s in a room, I got it. It’s the end of the world? We’ll just see it on the TV. The whole technical part of it got in the way of how I can think really cleanly and clearly, and tell my voice. Well, in this, when we were watching I thought it was really cool because what they’re doing with the elements is related to their emotions and philosophy. And as you can tell from the movies I’ve made recently, I’m very into nature vs. man kind of questions. So the idea of the struggle with the balance between nature, and the connective-ness to nature was really cool.

So, we leave the theater and go up to get some food. Everybody’s over in the kitchen and I open the fridge up and just stop and I was like: “This would make a great movie!” and the whole house erupted. I was serious. My wife, who basically if I said I retire today would be the happiest in the world, was like “you *have* to make this! This is it! This is the movie you’ve been waiting to make. This is you, this is so you.” “Calm down, take it easy!” Everybody was just like hyped. The kids were so worried was going to say no. But I was like “I’m gonna find out who owns this and find out what’s going on.” And my wife was like “you gotta call right now!” “It’s Sunday night! I’m sure it can wait til tomorrow morning.” So I slept on it and brought it to the office. I said how this is really cool, and I think I could see me in this. So I called up Paramount and chairman Brad Grey and asked him to come to New York. I was very cryptic about the whole thing. “What is it about? You wanna make a movie?!” “Yeah, let’s just talk.” So he came and I said “Look, you have on the Nickelodeon station this show that I think is *Star Wars*. I would love to make this movie for you.” He went and checked it out, and we had another meeting in L.A. and he was like: “go make it!”

Can you talk a little bit about the bending and how it’s coming along?

It’s about two and half years of research and development on it. We would look at anything that’s ever been photographed, even on a motion picture camera, of where I thought the feeling felt good. For me, I’ve never seen fire that’s looked good – I just don’t buy it, it looks like it’s coming out of a blow-torch. It’s very tricky stuff. I have photographed fire, and it looks CGI. It’s just very difficult to photograph and make it look real. Whatever it is, the capabilities of film or video, it can’t capture that level of difference in light. It just looks fake to you; it looks like it’s *on* the picture. You go “wow this looks really cheesy and fake” and I go “no, that’s literally fire – there’s nothing else there.” So it’s a very tricky thing.

I thought out of all of the elements air would be the most difficult, but we came to the realization that air has no inherent qualities – it’s just whatever environment you’re in. If you’re in a snow environment, it starts moving snow. If you’re in a dirt environment, it starts moving dirt. You just have to keep it translucent enough so you know that it’s not another element, but the element of air. So there was a careful analysis of each element, and ILM would start to do tests for me and show me different things. Water I really felt like I wanted it to be like when I saw stuff from astronauts when they’d open up a Gatorade bottle and it stays connected, but it’s kind of moving. And they touch it and it starts moving again. That was the basis of water; I wanted the water to look like it was in zero-g. So they went under those kind of principles. ILM has a huge amount of experience with water in particular. I really like some of the stuff they did with the 3rd Pirates and the whirlwind of water as the boats are going down. They have a huge amount of experience. They were the first ones that started this stuff with The Perfect Storm. So it was a real long process, but super, super exciting. Each and every time it had to be a combination of what the character was doing and at anytime, nothing could look the same. It wasn’t like you could do waterbending twice and make it look the same. And that was the thing, I think, when the burden of what went to such a high level. They would come up with one way effectively, and I was like “Great, now come up with 80 more!” - because nobody does it the same way. That was the fun thing for me because I got to express character through CGI. Then I could really talk to the animators and say “Kataru isn’t skilled yet, so it should be very fragmentary with things falling off the edges.” I could talk in character like that. Or “This person is angry” and so on.

Then talking about physics, ya know, I just don’t believe moving from A to B can be that fast, and all of those wonderful conversations that we’ve had for two years now. My big fear was that whatever was in my head would look, at the end of the day, cheesy. That after I guided all of these amazing people for two years, we’d look at it and go (makes an ‘uh-oh’ face). Luckily that hasn’t been the case. I’ve been so excited about what we’ve seen. I love going to watch the new footage everyday. I think in the movie there is – if you count every little thing like: they have to put a background in the corner frame because there is a little bit of set you see – I think there are 400 CGI shots. Which, for a movie of this scale, is very very little. To give you an example of another film, Temple of Doom would have 2000. That’s also because I have very long shots. So with the Pakku shot, you just stay with the Pakku shot. And of course ILM just hates that because you’re just staring at the CGI for so long. “You should be cutting for distraction” – “Not on this one, you’re just going to have to make it look real good.”

If I had to guess, one of the most difficult parts for you to fit into the movie would be the comedy. Was that a challenge for you?

I think it’s the single thing that I am struggling with in the movie, partly because the show is so schizophrenic – in the best way. And it developed a tone as it went on in the series. The opening scene of the movie is the youngest episode of the entire 61 episodes – it’s so young. Mike and Bryan started out making the show and went for a particular tone thinking it’s Nickelodeon, and going a little bit against their instincts and going young.

And as the show went on, they just started being more and more themselves, and it got older, older and older – and it became cooler and edgier. But in the beginning he had lines like “You wanna go penguin sledding?!” and stuff like that. That was an appropriate line in 1, but would not be in episode 27. That, which is kind of it’s origins as it was finding itself, is the balancing act of the movie. I want it to honor that part of it. It would be like taking away why we are all here – cause my seven year old connected with it. I don’t want to take that away. I have a very dark and edgy sensibility, but I am trying to balance the two. But the humor is definitely the trickiest part of the piece.

Even on Nickelodeon, and even on that show, the comedy is broad at times. And then you have episodes like The Blue Spirit episode, I think it’s 13 from the first season, which is all edgy. Straight up, I literally I picked episode 13 and put it in the movie. I just literally picked it up and put it in the movie. But from the first season and first episode, you’re just picking and choosing really delicately how to maintain it. I’ve actually written a second draft of the second movie, and it’s so much older. It’s so much edgier and older. That’s what they were naturally having to do because the kids are 12/14 at the beginning and they just keep on growing and getting more mature. It just naturally moves that way. Then you have all of these cool ladies fighting, the Kyoshi Warriors vs. Azula’s crew, in the second movie. It just gets darker and edgier in the greatest way - more Shakespearian, for me, as the season progress. So... I like goofy humor, so I have a higher tolerance than most (laughs).

I have the most important questions of this day... Is Momo in the movie, and will it be fun?

Why don’t I answer the second one? I hope so! There was a moment when I had my focus group - with my kids - at home when I was developing it, and I was asking Mike and Bryan; “So what does Momo do exactly? What does he represent?” and they were like “Well he’s just kinda fun. We would finish an episode and just sorta put him in somewhere.” When I was first developing the movie I needed to have a reason for everything. Maybe I was over-thinking it, but I asked the kids: “What would you think if Momo wasn’t in the movie?” - they literally attacked me. They were not speaking to me, so I was like “oh okay, alright alright. Relax... he’s gonna be in the movie.” So he’s in there. I love him! He seems so real. I would believe that he existed somewhere in the world, so it’s a fun thing to have. I think he’s just really fun and cool in the movie. I would love to kind of have a moment for him, somewhere in the 3 movies, where I give him a purpose. That’s my dream: give Momo a purpose.

You’ve filmed with huge stars like Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, Samuel L. Jackson. And now you have a young, but talented cast. Dev Patel is maybe the biggest name. Do you have any concerns at the box-office?

You know I don’t because the subject is the star. In a way, having the transparency of being able to look past the [actors], and see the story is the best version of this kind of movie. I had a conversation with Paramount where I was like: “let’s not show these kids at all until opening day so that everybody thinks that they’re the real characters.” And

they were like: “well, everybody knows Dev.” “Okay, well nobody see anyone else!” So in their minds they think they’re these characters. So no, that hadn’t worried me because you have opposite issues as well once you have stars in parts. It starts to just tip in way. You want to suspend disbelief in a movie like this and go “I lived in that world, and I’ve only lived in the world for two hours and I can’t wait to go back.”

A lot of people look at the trailer as say “well it looks like the entire first series, but it can’t possibly be because there wouldn’t be enough time for it.” A lot of people are curious because there are a lot of really fun, smaller moments like King Bumi and stuff like that. What had to go?

For the first outline I made for the movie, I brought Mike and Bryan to the house and asked them “Whaddya think?” and they were like “This is like 10 hours long, you have to cut something.” I was like “I can’t! I love everything.” Literally, the first outline was so long. I’ll give you an example. The bounty hunter with the Shirshu, I *love* that! But I just couldn’t fit her in. In an episodic series, that nature is: it’s episodic. A beginning, middle, and end in each episode, so it needs you to go right, left, right, left like that. But there is a through-line that is present in most episodes, like how he has to master all of the elements and that kind of thing. Katara and her brother are becoming a family and they’re protecting Aang. *And* they’re moving to the Northern Water Tribe. So there would be broad things that represent the story of the first season, but there’s a bunch of things had to get jettisoned for this movie. My hope is she’ll end up somewhere in one of these movies.

I moved some things around, like The Deserter (I love him!) - I moved him to the third movie when Aang’s going to learn fire. So those kinds of things. King Bumi’s not in the first movie, but my hope as we get to Earth, all of those Earth kind of related things will come in handy. It’s really is a distillation of just getting the story correct – and how much lay in? I have a line, which I hope stays after the three months, that is Grandma saying something about her friend Hama, which is like my favorite episode in the series – the Blood Bender episode from the 3rd season. I wanted to lay the groundwork for that. So as much as I can, do the balancing act. It’s always sad to lose something that was fun and exciting in the first season.

What do you think people will be surprised that you kept?

Let’s see...

(Jordan from UGO suggests the Cabbage Saleman).

Yea, ya know, I didn’t keep him.

(The room ‘awwwwws’ with slight disappointment.)

All of that kind of broad comedy stuff, the movie can only handle a certain amount for you to believe the stakes of the movie. So what I’ve even found, I had a certain amount of broad comedy in it and if the characters aren’t honoring the milieu of what the movies

supposed to be – it’s a time of war and we’ve been out of balance – it starts to fall apart a little bit. You can have humor but it has to be situation appropriate humor. Where in an episodic scene, you can really go broad and come right back and it’s not such a big deal. Those kinds of things have been the most challenging thing about the process. I think it’s primarily the first season’s thing because they were finding the balance as well. In the genetics of the movie, I am finding the balance as well. What is the balance between what is, lets call it ‘the edgier, Lord of the Rings’ part of it, and all of this stuff - i.e the cabbage guy. “Not my cabbages!” and all this stuff. The second season, for me, just laid right out. There’s much less struggle. Even the first draft of the screenplay laid right out. You go “I get it - this is the Shakespearian background and all this stuff.” I still have stuff that I shot that I am struggling to hold on to ‘til the last second, so we’ll see what ends up in the final movie.

As someone who has typically created your own stories, was it difficult to write this even though you were a big fan of the series? What was that like?

Liberating. The problem with being auteur-ish is you struggle so much to hold on to your vision. That’s a great thing and it’s a bad thing. You can’t see it from a perspective, and be able to judge it honestly. Maybe I wouldn’t be able to have a conversation about the tonality because I’m so “it has to be this way.” I love the show and I love almost everything in the series, so I know why I would put it in, but I have the perspective to say “okay, by pulling out one line here it becomes more meaningful.” So I think it’s been a good thing. I really enjoy working on the movie, which is the main thing. I think you’ll feel that. It’s not work to me, analyzing it and getting the balance right. That’s the other thing, the Miyazaki influence of the show. Do you guys know who Miyazaki is? He’s like my god. He’s Michael Jordan to me. I met him last year, and luckily for me he hasn’t seen any of my movies. We had a translator. He had his apron on, and he was still finishing Ponyo. He was still animating and came back down, and I was like “man this is the greatest.” Mike and Bryan were so influenced by Miyazaki and I’m so influenced by Miyazaki – it’s just an honor. Trying to reach that sort of tonality to an American audience. That water doesn’t just mean water, it has meaning and something behind it. It’s metaphorical. I think in different cultures it is easier to accept that.

When my movies go around the world, like in Spain, right away they’ll just take it and anywhere I want to go with spirituality and that stuff. The same with Japan. And then other countries and other places, it’s much more: “I’m not getting this.” United States and UK fall into a brother/sister category in that reaction. I know when I come up with an idea that’s more spiritually oriented that these are the territories I have to be more aware of. The Last Airbender is a spiritual movie. There’s no way around it. I mean, it’s badass – it’s really cool, but it’s so meaningful in so many ways. Making sure that comes through is something that really motivates me. So there’s a lot of things that really excite me and make me want to be like the guardian angel of the movie. I feel very protective of it. There’s a great connective tissue. The way I feel as a parent to my other movies, I feel that way as well with this movie.

Do you think the experience opens you up to directing other people scripts in the

future?

Yea, my family would not back me on this statement, but I am open to that. I am always writing. I'm writing a new movie now. I'm writing a thriller for me to do and I just have a bunch of ideas. What often happens is I'll get offered a movie, but I get offered a movie that needs a lot of work. They'll say come in and rewrite the whole thing and then go direct it. And I'm like, if I'm gonna do all that, I'll just do this one that's in my head. I'm waiting for like it happened with *Airbender*, and it'll happen again. I almost did *Life of Pi*, and that was more timing than anything. I really loved that book, and I thought I could really do a good job with it. So, I almost did that. If I had been offered *Jurassic Park*, I would've done that, but that went to that other guy (laughs). Nothing would please me more for someone to go: "Here's a source material; a book that you're going to connect with in way that's going to say 'don't do the next movie of yours.'" Basically that's what you're saying. "Don't do the movie you have in your head, spend the next two years on this movie." And that can definitely happen. I've fallen in love with so many books, and I've fallen in love with a TV show – unexpectedly. The more wishful thing is that they hand me a screenplay that is like "oh man, that's unbelievable" go make that. And I'll be like "Damn, I can go make this movie in like a few months? This is fantastic!"

You talked on the larger scale about how you're envisioning *The Last Airbender* with multiple movies and all of that. How far ahead are you in scripting and planning out this entire story. Is the affecting the filmmaking process having an approach with sequels in mind?

I think sequel is a misnomer for this, and I kept telling the studio that. "Is there anyway we can talk about this in 'not sequel' terms?" Because it's not like "we like these characters, so let's go on another adventure." It isn't like that. This is a story that has a beginning, middle, and end – and I'm telling you the beginning. *Lord of the Rings* did that so beautifully. But, you know when they just made up another story just because. You can tell that. This isn't that. Of course George Lucas did that as well. He had the whole story, and now I'm gonna tell you the next one, and the next one. It's one of three parts. Hopefully they'll like the first part enough that I will be able to make the other two parts. But sequel has, in as sense, a revisiting in a way that isn't that. I completely got into this to do a long form movie. The first thing we did when I met Mike and Bryan, and I came on – they hadn't finished season three. The first conversation was in my hotel room. "Dudes, I gotta know this. This is critical! This has to end. This has to end. If it doesn't end, I'm not on board. But if you don't want to end it – it's all good." They were like "no, we saw it as three seasons for each element that he has to learn." And I said "great." At that time they hadn't even decided where things were going to end, even like who Katara was going to end up with. All of that stuff hadn't been figured out yet. We had such amazing conversations in that room, but we all agreed, shook hands and said "It's over. We're gonna finish the tale." I said that I could definitely get behind that. The last thing that as the contract was closing with Paramount, I just said "3. Right? 3." That way I can put a lot of integrity into it and know how to press the accelerator on a storyline or not. And as I am developing it, if I go "okay, this is not fitting into the movie," I know how to handle it. Like already I pulled out a couple of things from the

first movie that I thought were going to be in the first movie. Now it's going to affect the draft of the second movie. I need to redo the introductory scene of a character because I pulled her from this one – that kind of thing. It's really important for me to have that. For me, the second season was like spot. I just got that season; I felt it. Of the 20 episodes, so many spoke to me. And the storyline was really clear and very exciting. The whole trauma of the way it ends – the darkness of that. – I love it! Love it, love it, love it. The third movie (and I can't even think about it right now without getting really upset) I have to really go through and analyze it really carefully. That was, again, very schizophrenic for me. I've got to find it, and I suspect when I look at those 21 episodes, I will see that there are the eight episodes that have the through line right there. And then there are all kinds of things, like remember The Beach episode? (he directs at me) that have really nice colors, and we'll see what we can do... I don't even know if I answered your question.

Have you scripted through? Do you have a rough draft for them?

I have an idea of what I want to do with three. The only thing I would do differently (and I don't even know if I should say – it's so many years away!) but I was toying with it: I want to know what happened to Zuko's mom. That would be something that I might include. Something you can only come see in my movies. When it finished, I called Mike and was like “Are you crazy!?! Tell me what happened to his mom!” (everyone laughs)

You're definitely the one that's going to direct all three of these films? You're not going to farm them out?

I mean, they could fire me! (laughs)

Yes. If it's successful on the 4th of July weekend, and there is enough feeling and momentum with the audience wanting to see the other two, the idea for me is to go direct my thriller in between while we prep for movie two. It just takes so long to prep these movies with the design process and the location scouting. You know how when you watch the Raiders series (which is my favorite movie of all time) it went from being very location oriented to more on-stage as the movies progress? I want to do the reverse. I want to get more location oriented and more reality based as the three movies go. That requires a lot of location scouting. “Can we shoot in Morocco? Can we shoot over here? How can we get a road there? If I want to build this there, how can we get there?” That takes forever to figure out. And then of course the R&D process for with ILM again. Now we're way ahead, obviously, then we were when we were starting from scratch on the first movie. That should be really exciting. I have a great team together now, so that's also really set.

But you wouldn't be concerned with the cast members getting older? Would you ever consider sitting back and being producer and farming out to a directing team ala Star Wars?

I suppose it's possible. You can never say no, but right now I'd say “no way!”

Another thing is, my dream is for the last movie, Noah is ripped! He looks badass, you know? He's growing up on film for three years and you're like "oh my god" by the end. He was like a Texas champion already, and I have him training in the off-season. I call him and ask "Are you training dude? Are you training?!" He's learning all kinds of martial arts. We want him to be for real – for real.

So.. Sky Bison Aerodynamics. In animation, you can kinda get away with a big fluffy tail powering a giant beast with three young adults on top. In live-action film, even with geniuses like at ILM, you kinda have to work out a situation. How is this gonna work cause we haven't seen any of Appa yet. Obviously this is the big reveal, so can you give us a little insight into this?

The thing is with Momo and every other creature – the Komodo Rhino's and that stuff – it's literally a fusion of two creatures and the physicality is very plausible and dynamic. The way I make movies and the way I was talking to ILM is very specific. You have to believe the physicality and the weight on the Komodo – that it can claw on the ice and go up the wall. And this one... you know, my kids sleep with a plush Appa. Literally, I was just like we're going to have to take the leap of faith on this one. ILM and I were like, he's an Airbender – we're going to have to go with he's an Airbender.

It was funny cause Mike and Bryan when they were asked to come up with a show, the first drawing they had was someone in the clouds with a staff and some bisons in the air. That was the very first image. Like there was a shepherd and his flock was in the air. "I guess he's kinda related to air" and they started working that way. "Maybe there's a water" and that kind of thing. That image though, the Appa image, is the literally beginning of this entire thing. So when we were making the movie, I was like "we're just gonna go with that. I'm not gonna change it into something that could actually physically fly with wings and all that stuff." Not while the kids are sleeping with a plush Appa.

You know what the funny thing is? He's my favorite in the movie. He's my favorite. I literally can't wait to see him again every time he comes on screen. And there's this one scene where he shows up behind the villagers that are getting attacked and he roars! So you know, it works. Sometimes you just accept the material and you take that leap of faith.

Are you planning on including the 'lost Appa' storyline in the second film?

He's a huge character in the second movie. There was a version of the draft without it. I remember I was in my house and I was like "lemme try it without so much of this being trying to get Appa back," and when I tried that I was like "I don't like this movie. Put him back! This is about trying to get Appa back." He gets distracted from his training because he needs to go get Appa, and it's so compelling because you love him so much. In the second season and the second movie, it's so much about his character. Having this incredible friend and brother that gets taken away from you, and you're like "I don't care about this quest anymore or about training, I need to get him back." So he's huge in the

second movie.

Beyond the references to the Hindu fire god Agni, and the reincarnation of the Avatar; what other Hindu and Buddhist references are there in the film?

Obviously the whole Dalai Lama thing with the choosing of the objects, and all of that stuff – which I love. You know, how they pick the Dalai Lama because he picked the same objects picked from the previous Dalai Lama, so he's the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. The word Avatar itself is Sanskrit, which is really interesting now because of James Cameron's movie has a whole different implication. There's two different definitions of that words. The Avatar (with the American A) is almost like the cyber version of yourself. And that's the new thing. But the Avatar (in the Sanskrit way) means the embodiment of God in flesh – which is more akin to what Noah plays in the movie. Just that whole idea, and the idea of the elements. When you get married they have the ceremony with the fire and what the fire represents, and then the purity of the water, so the use of elements is huge in the Hindu religion. They put your hands together and pour water on them, and the priest is talking to you about what each of those elements mean. It's a big part of our culture.

With the large choreographed fighting scenes and the graphics, those are kind of new to you and are expected challenges. Were there any unexpected challenges? Anything that you thought would be easy that was difficult?

We talked about it a little bit earlier (*at the breakfast*). Not being able to see the movie for so long is a huge challenge – a huge challenge for me. I'm practically an animator in my head. I storyboard, say for a thriller of mine, so that I can walk you through the whole movie. Like a book, I could walk you through it, and then you're just going to put Bruce Willis in it. I redo it, and redo it, and spend months on it. The Coen brothers work like that, and there's a couple other people that work like that. But generally that's not the way people work. I'm used to aiming for a target, seeing it and getting it – great.

So on the day, if this was the scene, I could tell you if we got it and I'd say; "Ya know, Amy's shirt is popping too much. All of that silver, we gotta take that out. This color is way too much, we gotta take that out there. I don't like that that's blank right there. This is not working for me, you need to get me something from set. Let's switch you positions over here cause your blue's popping." You know? That I can tell you. But not when we're doing a movie like this, literally all I have is *you* maybe, and I have to use all of those skills at a later point. I can talk to everybody, all of the crew members, about what I am hoping is there. But you can't even use the thing that I am good at because it's not there yet. But *now* it's there. Now I'm looking at it and going "the red in the starburst thing is too bright, pull it out," and they go "great, great great!"

Now I am back again, but that's like... how long ago did I stop shooting? That's a long time to wait to do what you do. I didn't anticipate that. I didn't anticipate how frustrating that was going to be. And then you're so far down the line, and it's so costly. For example, if we were shooting this (the meeting) live-action, you can tell – as the actors and the crew – if I don't think we have it. I'll be tense. "Well, what do you want?" "Hold

on guys, this isn't right. It's just not right. Just give me five minutes and I'll figure it out. Okay, we're taking this apart. We're taking all of you guys out and putting you out in the hallway. It's gonna be a walk and talk while you're getting on the elevator." I don't have that option to do that. By the time I realize I would have done it differently, so much money and time has been spent. There's just no way to tell ILM to start from scratch. I doesn't work like that. So that's a super, super challenging thing. I guess I've learned a new skill of being able to imagine even more in my head and hold to it as long as I can.

So the thriller you keep mentioning, it's not Unbreakable 2 is it?

No it's not, unfortunately. I want to do that one too. My favorite part of being an artist is feeling something at a moment, and I can just write it down and talk about what I feel at that moment. Maybe a year later it will seem invalid, and that's why there's such an urge to get it out. I don't feel the way I felt during Signs, but I can't have that conversation again. That's the fun part about being an author, you just keep telling your stories. I hope to make Unbreakable 2.

Bruce Willis just said he's still up for it.

Yeah (laughs).

One of the biggest questions we get on a regular basis whenever we write about this movie is about casting. I'm not sure if you're aware, but there are some fans that have had casting issues with Sokka and Katara, and the Fire Nation. I was wondering if you could finally address those questions and those fans that are concerned about the casting?

Well here's the thing. The great thing about Anime is that it's ambiguous. The features of the character are an intentional mix of all features. It's indented to be ambiguous – that's completely it's point. And so when we watch Katara, my oldest daughter is literally like a photo-double of Katara in the cartoon. So that means that Katara is Indian, correct? No, that's just in our house. And her friends that watch it, they see themselves in it, and that's what's so beautiful about Anime. When we were casting, I didn't care who walked through my door. Whoever's the best for the parts, I'm going to figure out like through a chess game. Ideally we separate the nations ethnically – ideally. But I don't know how or what it's going to be. It was so fluid, the casting.

For example, if you found a great brother, but it didn't go with my favorite Katara, then I couldn't use him. Theoretical things like that would happen. There was an Aang that I really loved, but he was like 5 foot 10. There's all kinds of issues that come to the table. I kept having a board of all the people that I was considering. There was at one time a – I think their background was Chinese – a Sokka and Katara. One of them was a better actor than the other, and I was gathering my pros and cons. "Let's say that was that, what would the Fire Nation be?" And you just do that. Being without agenda and letting it come to the table. Noah's like a photo double for the cartoon; I mean he's literally spot-on. To me, the best part is, I didn't really know their backgrounds. Noah, for me, has a

slightly mixed quality look to him - so I cast Airbenders as all mixed race. So when you see the monks and that stuff, they're all mixed. And it kind of goes with the nomadic culture that over the years all different nationalities came to the table. The Fire Nation was the most complicated. I kept switching who was playing Zuko. It was such a complicated and drawn out thing about practical matters. The first person I was considering for Zuko was Ecuadorian. So I started thinking that way. And then when that person couldn't do it, the second person who came in was much more Caucasian. I was like, "well then we have to switch the others. Alright, now how are we doing this?" What is the Earth Kingdom was always the issue because the second movie is so dominated by that group, and will represent most of the movie, but it has a small, small part in the first movie. That was important. It just sort of came into being and started to distill.

Dev came into the picture really early on – he had auditioned for me in London. He's kind of like a sweet guy, but he did such a great reading. I always go for the actor. When I was doing *The Sixth Sense*, you literally read the script of *The Sixth Sense* and [Cole's] dark haired, black eyed. I always pictured the kid from *Searching for Bobby Fisher* as the lead of *The Sixth Sense*. "We are *not* casting hiring any blonde L.A. kids, okay? Don't even bring them in!" And Haley came in... "You got the part!" How can you not have him play the part? So that's always been my lean. I have hopes of what I want them to be. My hope was that this movie would be incredibly diverse. When we look back on the three movies, without peer, they were the most diverse movies of all time. And that is the case when you watch the movie. It's not like an agenda like when you see a picture of a kid's school with kids on the swings and there's one from each background – it's not like that. It's a real thing. This nation has this ethnicity and when we go deep into that culture, we'll see more and more of that. Again, Dev ended up being my choice for Zuko. I looked for an uncle that could be in that realms. For a moment there I thought of Ben Kingsly. Shuan Toub, who I loved in *Iron Man*, took us into kind of a Mediterranean, Arab and Indian world. I can go as far as that. That would be the breadth of the Fire Nation – that kind of look.

For me, Nicola had a lot of Russian qualities and European qualities, so that's where I was going to go there. Just like that, whoever we ended up with, I said that's their nationality. Suki was Jessica, who is a mix of Pilipino and stuff. So the Earth Kingdom is going to be all Asain. Toph now will have to be Asian. Like that. I looked at the board and I said "this works for me." And there's a section of that's African-American cause it's such a big land I felt you could have some diversity in there as you travel through the different cities. So, more so than the show, it will have a much more diverse ethnic background. It's not an agenda for me, but it's something I'm super proud of; that when my kids look at, or any kids look at it, they'll see themselves in the movie.

A lot of the fans adore the soundtrack that The Track Team created for the series. Are you planning on including any of their iconic themes for James Newton Howard's score?

I definitely thought about it, I love the music from the show. James is like my brother, we make movies together and all of that stuff. He and Hans Zimmer did the music for

Batman and The Dark Knight. How we do it is, I show James the script (this is very unusual from other composer/director relationships, he'll write the themes of the movie prior to the movie being shot) and he does that based on me just yapping away at him, and telling him what I am imagining. The reason I do it that way is because, rather than being diluted, we're all coming from the same pool of inspiration. I'll tell him what I think Zuko means, and what the elements means. What learning water means to me, you know? That kind of thing. You'll just see him nod and nod. Then he'll go away and write a suite of music. He wrote a suite of music and it's inspired by the show: the drums, the percussion, and things like that. Specifically the answer is no, it won't have the exact themes of the show. It was something we talked about. But James came up with what I think is his best score of his life. If that's not the best score of the year, I don't know what is. He killed it! I mean he killed it. You heard some of his music in the first teaser that I did. When you see the movie, the music is just unbelievable.

The subject matter is so rich, anyway you want to go, but driven by the emotion. The action is driven by emotion, which is such a great thing for me. We did a little bit of that in Unbreakable, but we had a real great opportunity to do that here. One of the great balancing tricks of the movie was, how much Asian influence to put into the patina of the movie. Do you have pagodas? Do you have this sort of thing? The consensus with the production designer and myself, and consequently with James, was it's a flavoring. It's not Asian. We're not in Asia, but it's influenced by it. What medieval stuff is to Lord of the Rings, Asia is to us. It's influencing it, but it's not necessarily: that's a kimono or that kind of thing. The same thing goes with the music. We toyed with the idea of it being very Crouching Tiger, but we ended up going with it's influenced but it has it's own world. So I'm really excited for you to hear the score.

What about the lettering? The Waterbending scroll is in Chinese lettering. What will it be in the movie?

That's a really good question. We ended up making up our very own language influenced by Chinese calligraphy. When the characters do their moves at the beginning, there are letters that represent the element behind them. So we have a vocabulary.

Is it a functional language?

It is. It's all interpretive. They'll take the symbol for water and the symbol for table, and together they mean something else. It might mean someone who is wishy-washy because they don't come from a hard place. We were making it up – what these symbols mean together. When we were analyzing the ones that they used (in the show), it was the exact conversation: it's influenced, but it isn't it.

Can we look for your cameo? Your usual cameo?

Well... (laughs) You know what my kids wanted me to play? My kids wanted me to play the guy who doesn't take a bath – you know, he's too paranoid to do it? (laughs). You're not going to see me in the first one, but you might see me in the later ones.

You mentioned this just a little bit, but will you delve much into the history of the Avatar world. And while you answer that question, in the trailer there's a Firebender and an Earthbending I didn't recognize fighting – is that a historical part?

No, that's actually the freeing of the Earth town that's imprisoned. In the show they did it on a boat, or a barge. I had visited South Africa as I was writing the movie. I visited Nelson Mandela's prison in the rock-quarry and I was just so moved by it. The describe all of the guards standing on the perimeter and Mandela was almost blinded by the light off the limestone. So that was kind of the inspiration, a rock-quarry prison. Aang comes in and makes a speech and says: "what are you doing here?" and everybody rises – it's *really* cool.

What's the other movie in 2010 coming out this year that you can't wait to see? That isn't yours.

Ohh... gosh, let's see. I haven't got see anything.

She (points to the Paramount publicist) really wants you to say Iron Man 2.

(Everyone laughs)

No joke, I was excited to see Iron Man 2. By the way, our final trailer will be on Iron Man 2.