

Unusual powers

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [January 17, 2001](#) issue

*Unbreakable*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan

*Solomon and Gaenor*, directed by Paul Morrison

Director M. Night Shyamalan would be at home in the art house circuit, but he's produced two big-budget Hollywood films: *The Sixth Sense* and now *Unbreakable*. Both are unexpected departures from his first film, *Praying with Anger*, about an American-born Indian who is sent to India with a student-exchange program--a topic far removed from Shyamalan's current interest in the supernatural. The opening scenes in *Unbreakable* reveal Shyamalan's artfulness. In a simple unbroken shot, filmed between seats on a train, the viewer eavesdrops on a conversation. In another early scene, we see a blurry shot of a hospital patient as his white sheets slowly turn blood red. The patient dies, and his death leaves only one other survivor of a train wreck.

All that's given away in the trailers for *Unbreakable* is that David Dunn (Bruce Willis) is the final survivor of that train wreck and that he came out of the crash completely uninjured. What's intentionally not apparent from trailers is the kind of film this is: a fascinating subversion of the superhero genre. (An early hint is that like Peter Parker and Clark Kent, David's name is alliterated.) Shyamalan takes a topic that might be the focus of the first 20 minutes of a film about superheroes--the process of coming to understand the extent of their powers--and devotes the entire film to it.

Because of his deliberateness, Shyamalan is able to provide character development that films of this type usually lack. David's wife sees his survival of the crash as a sign, and they decide to give their marriage another chance. David's son is determined to prove his father's powers, which leads to a near-traumatic family situation.

Most interesting is David's relationship with Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson), who has had more bone fractures than years of life. With Elijah's help, David gradually comes to believe in his powers, and they form a tentative friendship growing out of mutual respect. Their relationship grows even as the audience realizes that their motives

don't coincide.

Because Willis also starred in *The Sixth Sense*, audiences and critics have expected *Unbreakable* to have a similarly shocking ending, one that changes the audience's perception of the rest of the film. But the surprise that ends *Unbreakable* is muted and foreshadowed. *Unbreakable*, fortunately, will not be viewed almost entirely through the tinted lenses of a bombshell finale.

The title *Solomon and Gaenor* aptly recalls *Romeo and Juliet*. In this version of the story, what keeps the lovers apart is religion: Solomon is a Jew; Gaenor is a Protestant. The two families' disapproval of a religiously mixed marriage is less the product of religious conviction, however, than of social conditioning in early 20th-century Wales. Solomon and Gaenor never discuss theology. The families simply know that Jews don't marry Christians and that Christians don't marry Jews.

Afraid of Gaenor's perception of Jews, Solomon introduces himself as Sam Livingstone and ditches his Jewish undergarments when he is with her. (One, uh, unalterable physical characteristic is noticed by Gaenor after lovemaking, but she doesn't make the correlation.) When Gaenor inevitably finds out the truth, she is more concerned about his lying than his religion. In any case, Solomon is a barely practicing Jew who is kept grounded in the faith only by his family.

Morrison transcends the banalities of young love by not persistently explaining the film to the audience. When Gaenor becomes pregnant, a lesser director would have had her tell the whole story to a friend or, worse yet, to a psychiatrist. Morrison conveys this information with two short scenes: Gaenor throws up, and a different suitor asks her if everything is fine. Similarly, the hatred Jews and Christians have for each other is not stated outright. We see it in the haughty way Solomon is treated by Christians.

The film stumbles in the final reels. Solomon becomes annoyingly plodding in his search for Gaenor, and the penultimate scene contains a cutesy ironic twist that undermines the realism of the previous two hours. But it's the realism and the director's engaging point of view that one recalls on the ride home.