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Coming out in 2-D, RealD 3D and digital 3-D, M. Night Shyamalan's THE LAST AIRBENDER hits theaters July 1. In our second set interview (click here to read the Nicola Peltz-Noah Ringer chat), THE DAILY SHOW's Aasif Mandvi spoke about playing Admiral Zhao, the hot-tempered Fire Nation Commander in pursuit of the Avatar (Ringer). He is Zuko's (SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE's Dev Patel) principal rival.

You might know the face, but not the name. Mandvi's list of film and television credits includes the Sandra Bullock-Ryan Reynolds romantic comedy THE PROPOSAL, Ricky Gervais' GHOST TOWN and SPIDER-MAN 2. He also had recurring roles on the TV series JERICHO and ER. And, of course, he continues his stint as a correspondent for Comedy Central's THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART.

STARLOG: How did you land your LAST AIRBENDER role?

MANDVI: Um, well, I just auditioned for Night. It was a very pedestrian process," he admits. "I auditioned, he cast me, and now here we are. People think of me as a comedian, but I'm glad to get away from it for a while to do some more serious stuff. I enjoy throwing away the comedy identity for a few hours, which I've done before in the past, especially in plays and theater.

STARLOG: What's the premise of the film?

MANDVI: The movie is about these four worlds that exist in this mythological universe—the fire nation, the water tribe, earth kingdom, water—and how the fire nation has declared war on the other nations. Meanwhile, the Avatar, a Buddha-like figure, has disappeared for a hundred years, and he's the only person who can bring peace as he's the only one who can use the elements of every world. The story starts when he suddenly returns.

STARLOG: Describe your character.

MANDVI: For me, Zhao's point-of-view may be warped, you may disagree with him, but you can't play him as a villain. It's just like the real world: people are fairly intelligent, but they're all coming from their particular point-of-view or an ideology that they really believe in. It's the same thing with Zhao: His view of things is to protect the world, and he believes that he and the fire nation are the only people who can protect the world in that way. We don't turn Zhao into a mustache-twirling evil guy.

STARLOG: Did you have any villainous inspirations when coming up with your character?

MANDVI: You can't really focus on copying anyone, and I don't want to try to re-create another villain. You just do your best, use your motivation and point-of-view, and it comes out the way it's going to come out. Also, it's a PG movie, so at the end of the day it's not going to be Freddy Krueger.

STARLOG: What has been your biggest challenge so far?

MANDVI: The biggest challenge for me has been imagining myself in this world—living in this mythological environment and working with greenscreens. I've never worked with this much technology before. I've used greenscreens on THE DAILY SHOW, but it's different because you don't look at them. This is the first time I've actually interacted with things, like [pretending to look] at battles as they're happening. In that way, it's been a challenge, if awfully exciting. I don't know what this film is going to look like, and I'm really excited to see it."

STARLOG: Were you glad to get a reprieve from THE DAILY SHOW and have the chance to participate in a tentpole summer picture?

MANDVI: I'm so glad to get away from the Daily Show [laughs]. No, it's great, the show allowed me to go off and do this film, but when I have off time I go back and hang out with those people. I get to return and sort of step back into that role and those fluorescent-lit offices that we have. John's been amazing in terms of supporting my ability to go off and do other projects.

STARLOG: What are those other projects?

MANDVI: I just shot a movie last summer [this interview took place in summer 2009] that is [now called TODAY'S SPECIAL], and it was inspired by an off-Broadway show I did in London called SAKINA'S RESTAURANT. So hopefully we'll be getting it out soon. It's a sweet film, a romantic comedy about Indian food, so hopefully it'll generate a lot of good business for Indian restaurants. After this it's back to my day job at THE DAILY SHOW. But I'm always writing stuff—I'm writing a feature, and working on some more material. No other movie stuff really—oh wait, THE PROPOSAL is coming out this weekend, which I'm in, so go see that! But you won't!

[Laughs]

{jcomments on}