



At the movies

# 'Manhattan Project' another whiz kid break-in flick

Writer turned director Marshall Brickman, the Oscar-winning co-scenarist of Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" and collaborator on Allen's "Sleeper" and "Manhattan," is still trying to make something memorable of his own.

After a promising debut with "Simon" and a less than successful follow-up with "Lovesick," Brickman has decided to do something "serious." The result is the lackluster "The Manhattan Project," a dull, preachy story of a high school kid who puts together his own nuclear device to prove a point.

Christopher Collet is boy genius Paul

Stephens, a typical non-conformist whiz kid seen before in countless films. With the help of girl Friday Jenny Alderman (Cynthia Nixon), Paul decides to blow the whistle on a recently-built plutonium plant disguised as a research laboratory. It just so happens plant scientist John Mathewson (John Lithgow) is hot for Paul's separated mother, so Paul secretes John's entry ID and breaks into the high-security government building to steal the secret plutonium.

Common sense aside, the break-in is well-plotted and Paul's solutions to the security devices are quite ingenious. Even better, Brickman makes it believable that it is indeed possible for a

high school kid to create a primitive nuclear device.

To make a long story short, the government finds out a bottle of plutonium has been stolen and John immediately guesses Paul's hand in the theft.

After a couple of years of trendy nuclear stories and whiz kid adventures, "The Manhattan Project" feels more like a clumsy hybrid derivation than a serious analysis of the nuclear situation. Ethics and morality are words bandied about but never explored, and crux issues of military secrecy, exposure and martial law are used as far as the plot deems necessary then quickly are swept under the rug.

To top it off, the film is just plain dull. Paul isn't a very interesting character and John Lithgow can't give his character any real personality. Brickman's usual deft comic touch has been replaced by the ponderous plotting of a man attempting to make a "serious statement."

None is forthcoming. Brickman has made little better than a big budget TV movie in "The Manhattan Project," a poorly conceived, under developed "angle" on the nuclear question that has neither the intelligence nor the excitement of such precursors as "Wargames" and "Real Genius."

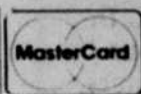
By Sean Axmaker

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