

## The Laserman ★★★

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**Year of Release:** 1990

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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*The Laserman*: somehow the title of writer-director-producer Peter Wang's film conjures up images of superheroes, like UltraMan and Spiderman. You kind of expect an adventure flick about a crime fighter who can shoot laser beams from his fingertips. As it turns out, *The Laserman* is about crime and about laser beams, but there aren't any superheroes. Instead, Wang's film is populated by a group of refreshingly off-beat characters living in the ultimate cultural melting pot: New York City. *The Laserman* is a comic brew which celebrates ethnicity, eccentricity, and electricity.

The film tells the bizarre story of Arthur Weiss (Marc Hayashi), a Chinese-American laser scientist whose life becomes incredibly hectic after he accidentally kills his lab assistant in an experiment. He loses his job but finds work with a mysterious company which secretly plans to use laser technology to commit dastardly deeds. Arthur's professional life is cluttered with moral dilemmas. His personal life, on the other hand, is cluttered with colorful friends and quirky relatives. In fact, Arthur is by far the blandest character in the film, despite a charismatic performance by Hayashi (the San Francisco-based actor whose films include *Chan Is Missing* and *The Karate Kid II*). It's the auxiliary characters who give *The Laserman* its unique spark.

Arthur's not-so-typical Jewish mother, Ruth, for example, is convinced that a Chinese Soul is trapped in her Jewish body. She has dyed her red hair black, she takes herbal medicine daily, and she is perpetually cooking up strange delicacies, such as Matzo balls in soy sauce—the ultimate fusion of Jewish and Chinese cuisine. Veteran stage actress Joan Copeland takes the part and runs with it, almost stealing the movie in the process. She plays Ruth as a driven woman, determined to overcome her genetic heritage by immersing herself in Chinese culture.

Arthur's girlfriend Janet (Maryann Urbano) is a kooky free-spirit who would rather meditate than copulate; her ultimate goal is orgasm through Zen meditation. Arthur's best friend, Joey (Tony Leung), is a small time thief who hustles everything from microwave ovens to machine guns. Joey is married to Arthur's Jewish sister, but he is also having an affair with a Chinese immigrant who works in a whore house. Arthur's 11-year-old son, Jimmy, played by the amazingly adorable

David Chan, is—horror of horrors—bad at math! He finds it impossible to meet his father's lofty expectations.

The various people in Arthur's life come together to form a rich tapestry of humanity. Like Wang's earlier film, *A Great Wall* (about a San Francisco family visiting relatives in China), *The Laserman* revolves around cultural differences. Every character in the film is, in some way or another, trying to find his identity—struggling to negotiate a balance between his native culture and the American way.

The movie also offers a provocative look at technology. Wang appears in the movie as Lieutenant Lu, a detective who is fed up with machines, even though he relies on them to do his job. The film views technology with a wary eye, acknowledging its necessity while at the same time realizing its potential dangers. Wang raises the time-honored question of whether scientists should be held responsible for their inventions. Was Einstein responsible for the A-bomb? Is Arthur Weiss responsible for his lasers? The movie pits spirituality against technology, man against machine, and the result is a draw. According to the film, technology has its place, but we must employ it with great forethought and caution.

Ironically, by its very nature, *The Laserman* is a triumph of technology—the technology of filmmaking. Wang's direction is exquisite, especially during the tense finale in which the director frantically cross-cuts between the various subplots, perhaps in homage to D.W. Griffith. Cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, who has worked on all of Spike Lee's films, gives *The Laserman* a distinctive, artistic look. Mason Daring's score, which includes a send-up of Bach, is right on target.

*The Laserman* is an ambitious endeavor, which is to be applauded, but it's sometimes ambitious to a fault. Wang serves up so many slices of life in the film that it's hard to digest them all. For instance, one character (Arthur's sister) has negligible screen time, and consequently we just don't care about her marital problems. In weaving his web, Wang has included a few too many strands.

Overall, however, *The Laserman* is a charmingly eclectic concoction. On the surface, the film is a light and bouncy comedy-thriller, overflowing with whimsical humor and visual style. The heavier issues emerge only when you take a deeper

look at the film. You can ponder the moral questions or you can just sit back and enjoy the absurdity of life in China Town.

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