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SMALL-FRY SPY STIRS BOND-LIKE COCKTAIL

AGENT CODY BANKS

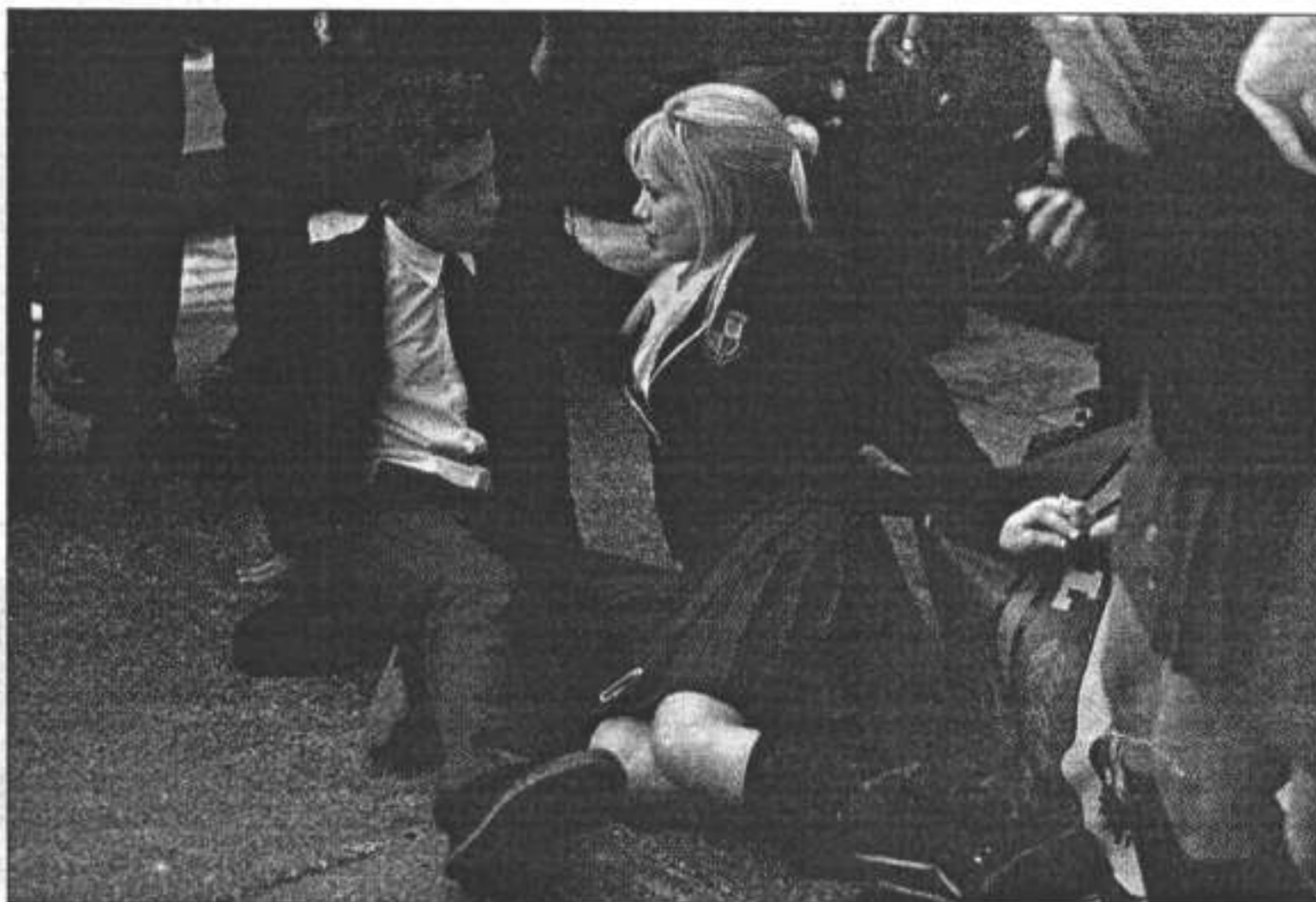
An MGM release of a Splendid Pictures, Maverick Films, Dylan Sellers production. Produced by David C. Glasser, Andreas Klein, Guy Oseary, Sellers, David Nicksay. Executive producers, Madonna, Jason Alexander, Jennifer Birchfield-Eick, Kerry David, Danny Gold, Michael Jackman, Mark Morgan, Bob Yari. Co-producer, Robert Meyer Burnett.

Directed by Harald Zwart. Screenplay, Ashley Edward Miller, Zack Stentz, Scott Alexander, Larry Karaszewski; story, Jeffrey Jurgensen. Camera (Deluxe color, Panavision widescreen), Denis Crossan; editor, Jim Miller; music, John Powell; music supervisor, Julianne Jordan; production designer, Rusty Smith; art director, Kelvin Humenny; set designers, Ivana Vasak, Geoff Wallace; set decorator, Lesley Beale; costume designer, Suzanne McCabe; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), Larry Sutton; supervising sound editors, Richard L. Anderson, Michael Chock; visual effects supervisor, Raymond McIntyre Jr.; visual effects and CG animation, Pixel Magic; associate producers, Veslemoey Ruud Zwart, Tom Gulbrtandsen; assistant director, Jim Brebner; second unit directors, Terry J. Leonard, Scott Ateah; second unit camera, Karl Hermann; stunt coordinator, Scott Ateah; martial arts choreographer, Bruce Fontaine; casting, John Papsidera; Canadian casting, Coreen Mayrs, Heike Brandstatter. Reviewed at the Avco Cinema, L.A., March 1, 2003. MPAA Rating: PG. Running time: 102 MIN.

Cody Banks	Frankie Muniz
Natalie Connors	Hilary Duff
Ronica Miles	Angie Harmon
CIA Director	Keith David
Mrs. Banks	Cynthia Stevenson
Molay	Arnold Vosloo
Mr. Banks	Daniel Roebuck
Brinkman	Ian McShane
Earl	Darrell Hammond
Dr. Connors	Martin Donovan



FUNHOUSE RIDE: Muniz flies in to save the day as a pint-sized spy in MGM's "Cody Banks."



MEETING CUTE: Frankie Muniz is a spy whose job is to help damsel-in-distress Hilary Duff and her scientist dad in "Agent Cody Banks."

By SCOTT FOUNDAS

Agent Cody Banks" is a pint-sized James Bond-style adventure that might have been co-produced by the CIA and the extreme-sporting-goods industry. Yet as crass as it is, product placement-heavy pic wants to engage youthful imaginations rather than just pacify them, and is a lot more enjoyable — for adults as well as kids — than most of what passes as youth-aimed entertainment nowadays. Moreover, as a spy pic, it has more pizzazz than the last few Bond adventures, "The Sum of All Fears" or "The Recruit" (to which it bears a particular resemblance). Modestly budgeted item, which boasts a credits-busting 14 producers, could reap a tidy profit and perhaps even lead to a franchise for hit-starved MGM.

Connect-the-dots plot has nefarious villain (amusingly played by Ian McShane in a mini-reprise of his "Sexy Beast" character) exploiting the talents of unsuspecting, well-meaning scientist-type (Tate Donovan) to further an agenda of world domination. In the last Bond pic, the villain housed his operation in a giant ice palace; here ice itself is the weapon of choice — ice cubes, to be exact, containing frozen micro-organisms capable of destroying any substance with which they come into contact.

Once the scientist learns his project will be used to sinister intent, he tries to back out (though you have to wonder what non-sinister application he could have imagined for these ferocious little creatures). Only the threat of harm to his teenage daughter Natalie (Hilary

Duff) keeps him working.

Enter the CIA and the diminutive agent of pic's title. Engagingly played by "Malcolm in the Middle" star Frankie Muniz, Cody is a hip-to-be-square Seattle high-schooler recruited by the CIA while attending a summer camp that was actually a "junior agent" training facility in disguise. He's a stereotypical nerdily cool computer-whiz who's got all the right moves (pic opens with a spirited sequence in which Cody speeds through downtown traffic on his skateboard to rescue a baby trapped in a runaway car), except when it comes to girls. Of course, his first CIA mission is to ingratiate himself with Natalie as a way of getting to her father. And before it's all over, Cody will actually

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fall for Natalie, risk blowing his cover and reveal his true identity to her at a particularly inopportune moment.

Screenplay (credited to Ashley Edward Miller, Zack Stentz, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, from a story by Jeffrey Jurgensen) is quick and clever enough to realize how deadening these spy antics can be, and doesn't dwell on them. Marking a return for Alexander and Karaszewski to family-film writing, the movie has some of the anarchic snap of the "Problem Child" pics that launched their careers. At its best, "Agent Cody Banks" is ripe with a sense of adolescent boys' heroism fantasies — it's like a brasher, less elegant "Spider-Man" — and because some boys never outgrow such fantasies, pic will carry a certain appeal for adults. The movie also has a throwback, male-chauvinist sensibility, like the James Coburn "Flint" films, and there's something oddly refreshing about the way pic keeps Natalie firmly in damsel-in-distress territory, while allowing Cody to woo her with his martial-arts prowess and other derring-do. This is the anti-"Charlie's Angels." Despite its many riffs on Bond, et al., "Agent Cody Banks" never becomes a full-on parody in the "Austin Powers" sense; nor does it reach the level of Richard Franklin's superb 1984 "Cloak & Dagger," about a kid embroiled in a real espionage drama.

While charming, "Lizzy McGuire" star Duff is sidelined with little to do much of the time. The adult actors (who include the wonderful Arnold Vosloo as McShane's chief henchman, Keith David as the larger-than-life CIA director, and the very sexy Angie Harmon as Cody's CIA "handler") play things more straight than campy, and the movie's young Norwegian director, Harald Zwart ("One Night at McCool's"), stages the action as though he were making a high-end thriller.

The movie is bigger on stunts and action (with the help of veteran second unit director Terry Leonard, whose work includes the Jack Ryan movies) than digital effects, and, most important — and unlike the increasingly flabby Bond pics — it moves right along with editing by Jim Miller). Other tech contributions are proficient if undistinguished. Not unexpectedly, Vancouver stands in for Seattle in pic's location shooting.