

ARTS

Light shines on *Darkman* director

by T.J. Gillespie

It always gives me a great feeling of accomplishment to unravel the great mysteries of life. Things like, why does bread always land butter side down when you drop it? Or, why is my closet space so small? And, of course, Who is Darkman?

The ones about the bread and the closet I'm still workin' on, but I did manage to get an understanding of the last one, as I discovered who Darkman was direct from the source: director Sam Raimi.

Educated at Michigan State University, Raimi's best known efforts to date are the films *The Evil Dead* and *The Evil Dead II: Dead by Dawn*; *Darkman* marks Raimi's first venture into mainstream filmmaking.

The *Dead* pictures were intended to be shocking and off-beat, but Raimi didn't sacrifice his particular talent for tongue-in-cheek humour while making *Darkman*. As I spoke with him, he indicated that he had "fears to overcome while making this picture," just like the Darkman character.

"I had a lot more leeway making *Darkman*, but (we) didn't set out to make a blockbuster; I just wanted to try to make a picture that everyone would enjoy watching."

In fact, it struck me as funny when Raimi showed such a genuine concern over money. In a business where box-office receipts can make or break a director's career, it was truly inspiring to discover that Raimi didn't forego the techniques that had served him so well in the past for the sake of the almighty dollar. Then again, according to Raimi, he didn't have much choice.

"This was my first studio film, and it's much harder to put something together when you are spending someone else's money," he said.

"There were times when I didn't like the way a scene was going and while I was making changes, I had just spent a small fortune. The next time (it would happen) before I actually made changes, I would think about it first; but, by the time I lifted my head, turned around, and walked back to the camera, I had just spent another \$200. Finally, I just decided that I'd have to keep going and try to make the best film I could."

Raimi said that he "got lucky" when he was in school, and that good profs made a big difference. He decided early on that his interest would be film, and in his school years, he found himself already on the road to becoming a director.

He has refined his skills since the *Dead* films, which shows in the sleek look of *Darkman*. When I asked Raimi what the difference was between *Darkman* and other films like *Batman* and *Dick Tracy*, to which it has been compared, he said simply: "the character is completely different."

"The character of Darkman is driven by self-hatred. (He is) a rare case where the breakdown of his world works from the outside in. As his skin dissolves, so also does his spirit."

Great attention was paid to detail during the making of this picture. I asked Raimi why. He explained that he "wanted to create a comic book look to it, and the only way to do that on



Sam Raimi, director of *Darkman*.

film is to make spectacular scenes with something different to watch in every corner."

"I didn't want people to be scared to laugh," he said. "Because of the way *Darkman* was marketed, people wouldn't even really know what it was about until they saw it. When they do, I want them to laugh at the funny parts and not feel bad about chuckling during what they might think is supposed to be a serious thriller."

Raimi experimented with many different changes in the screenplay before the final draft came

out. Nonetheless, it didn't hinder the way he put it together. The level of suspense is always at an energetic level, and the ability to work with a character that undergoes changes right before your eyes gives *Darkman* a true "comic book look and feel."

For people who like comics, like Raimi, a Marvel adaptation of *Darkman* is available in a limited series of three issues. I would recommend the movie instead, though, and Raimi agreed with me.

"I don't like it," he said. "It looks like someone didn't really like

what they were doing when they drew it. It's missing a lot of smooth flow (and the illustrations) look too mechanical, like whoever did it wasn't enjoying themselves. I'd like to hope that people will go and see the movie, and watch a comic book come to life right in front of them; that's what I tried to do."

Raimi certainly lucked out when he managed to snag Liam Neeson for the title role. Neeson is best remembered for his role in *Suspect*, which has earned him acclaim. After seeing *Suspect*, I could never imagine anyone else

in that role; the same applies to *Darkman*.

"Liam has an incredible screen presence, and he is a very big man. He has the ability to show a lot of emotion just through things like his facial expressions or even just by standing there."

"*Darkman* turned out so well mostly because Liam understood the character. Liam the pers on helped to keep *Darkman* alive, and Liam as (Dr.) Peyton (Westlake) helped keep Darkman's emotions under control. He would go through about five hours of makeup every day, and when he looked into the mirror afterward, he would just say 'Okay, this is my face now.'"

Currently, there are no plans for a *Darkman II*, but who knows what the future will hold? "I'll have to wait and see," Raimi said. "If *Darkman* goes well, I may get the chance to make more studio films; and, if people like what I've done, then I might be able to pick the things I want to do."

As I left him, Raimi was about to go on a canoeing vacation. But, I did ask him what he was working at the present. Hang on to your heads folks, *The Evil Dead III* is in the works as we speak. It looks like the light that shines on every human except Darkman is beaming on director Sam Raimi.

Darkman is true epic adventure

by T.J. Gillespie

Darkman
directed by Sam Raimi
produced by Universal Pictures

Ever since I first saw *At the Movies* with Siskel and Ebert, I always hoped that one day, what I said as a movie critic would be listened to as gospel. Quotes from a prominent reviewer like "a pleasure to watch" and "this year's sleeper hit" can often mean increased receipts at the box office.

Though it doesn't need any help raking in the loot, we'll see if my quote does anything for this movie's success: "*Darkman* is an adventure that captures the true meaning of the word epic; it speeds along at a feverish pace

and leaves the audience clamouring for more."

It isn't necessarily that the story of *Darkman* is some bold new idea, but the film does poke fun at itself, which gives *Darkman* an edge. The result is that the audience reacts honestly to a very honestly made picture, and the emotional turmoil of our hero is reflected nicely in the emotional responses of the crowd.

Darkman was a much about summer release, but few people actually knew what it was going to deliver. The studio did a great job promoting this one, leaving the public wrapped up in a "Who is Darkman?" campaign.

This film is, in fact, the story of a scientist, Dr. Peyton Westlake,

who is in the midst of trying to perfect experimental procedures that will allow him to make long-lasting synthetic skin. His love interest, Julie Hastings, gets into some trouble when she stumbles across a memo about shady land dealings. Needless to say, the villains would like that memo back, and, in order to get their hands on it, they must liquidate Dr. Westlake.

Having been left for dead, the doctor survives and must use his synthetic skin not only to take revenge on his "killers," but also to win back his fiancée, played competently by Frances McDormand. The fun really starts when the newly created Darkman, face wrapped in bandages, must seek

out his enemies, because the skin that he has been working on lasts only a precious 99 minutes when exposed to light. The mayhem that follows Darkman throughout his search keeps the viewer glued to the screen right up to the final confrontation.

If you've heard that *Darkman* is better than *Dick Tracy* and *Batman*, believe it; the aforementioned simply gave the promise of being very visually exciting, whereas *Darkman* delivers. It is a feast for the eyes and senses. This comes from the influence of director Sam Raimi, who as a kid loved comic books, and who carried his hobby onto the screen. Raimi's quirky way of portraying his characters is the driving force in the film, and he never gets sidetracked from his goal. Don't you hate films that lead down a path for a big finish and then just cop out with some corny ending?

No worry about that here; Raimi sticks to his guns.

Good performances, including L.A. Law's, Larry Drake as villain Robert Durant, keep the action moving, and the incredible screen presence of Liam Neeson as Darkman provides the film with a character of unparalleled honesty. You truly feel the joy, pain and desperation that he feels.

Some may remember Neeson as the deaf, dumb defendant in *Suspect*. If you can remember how good he was there, imagine what he can do when actually has lines to speak. *Darkman* has enough truth and sincerity to keep it believable and yet enough schlotzy B Movie humour to keep it light.

So, now that you know who Darkman is, don't forget about him. And, the next time you see an ad for *Darkman* in a local newspaper, if they print my quote, tell me. Like Darkman, I like to know when I've made it big.



Liam Neeson haunts the night as Darkman