

NOW PLAYING



Melinda Sue Gordon

Is it Batman? No, it's *Darkman*.
Heaven help us.

★ 1/2 *Darkman*

Litchfield, Oaks 6 East

There's something unsettling about a movie that makes the jump to comic book. That's what has happened with *Darkman*, an uninspired at-

tempt to create a new character akin to Batman. Perhaps Marvel Comics will have better luck fleshing out this person

Darkman has his origins in Peyton Westlake (Liam Neeson), a scientist who is struggling with a new invention called Plastic Skin. It has the potential to revolutionize care for burn victims and other patients, but Peyton can't get the substance to hold its shape for longer than 99 minutes.

Just as he nears a breakthrough, Peyton's girlfriend stumbles upon a memo linking a prominent businessman to bribery. Ruthless henchmen tear up his lab looking for the evidence. They also dip Peyton into a vat of acid and torch the building on

their way out.

Peyton arrives at a local hospital with burns on 90 percent of his body and a horribly misshapen face. His doctors have developed a new technique in which they disconnect the nerve endings that send pain signals to the brain. This has the added effect of sending an unchecked flow of adrenalin through Peyton's body, giving him enormous strength and a rush of violent mood swings.

He quickly escapes from the hospital, salvages some computer equipment and the remains of his research, and vows revenge. Using Plastic Skin to don temporary disguises, Peyton soon wreaks havoc with the lives of the men who attacked him.

Revenge seems a little too sweet for our hero, who takes sadistic pleasure in his deeds. When one poor schmuck begs for mercy and claims to have told everything he knows, Peyton purrs. "I know you have, Rick. But just for fun, let's pretend you haven't."

As Peyton, Neeson's performance borders on parody. Given the melodramatic, pop-up style of director Sam Raimi, that might not have been such a bad idea.

Raimi has filled *Darkman* with visual references to classic horror movies. The scene where Peyton perches between two gargoyles high atop a building echoes the poses of Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. And he's con-

stantly wrapped in a long overcoat that looks like a hand-me-down from the Caped Crusader.

Even the score by Danny Elfman gets into the act. It goads us to remember *The Phantom of the Opera* when the scientist "plays" the keys on his computer pad the same way the Phantom played the organ.

Perhaps that's the problem here. The punchy direction and arch dialogue have a little too much fun with the brooding, serious story at work here. And if Raimi can't take *Darkman* seriously, neither can we.

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

ratings based on four-star scale