

TOP PRODUCERS

While undergrads at Michigan State University, Sam Raimi and Robert Tapert made a Super-8 movie called *The Happy Valley Kid*. An hour long, it ran on campus every Friday and Saturday night for a year.

"The film was about a college student, a nerd who is driven mad," says Tapert. "His girlfriend dumps him, his roommate tortures him, his professor flunks him. His mind snaps right before finals. Finally he guns everybody down. It's the ultimate college fantasy.

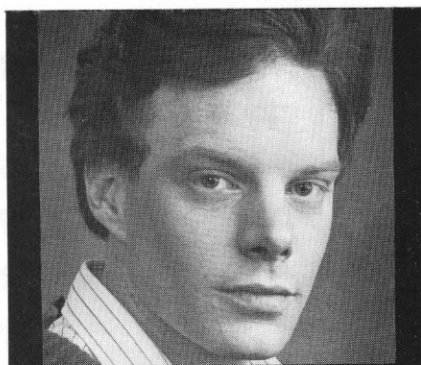
"We made a lot of money for students," says Tapert, who has produced all of director Raimi's films, including this summer's underappreciated *Darkman*.

Tapert doesn't recall college out of nostalgia. To him it's pure business. "I was studying economics, Sam humanities. We started running our and other students' films. It was a great learning ground—you sat with the audience and saw what they liked."

In a screening of one of their comedies, Raimi and Tapert were surprised at the visceral response accorded one suspenseful scene. "So we decided to drop out of college and make a horror film," Tapert says. The result was *The Evil Dead*, a low-budget horror flick full of ingenious visual tricks that gained Raimi instant critical status. They made the film independently, through private investors.



The pair then made *Crime Wave* for Embassy Pictures. "The ultimate case of studio interference—they took the film away from us in postproduction," Tapert says. They made



ROBERT
TAPERT
Producer, '*Darkman*'

Evil Dead II for Dino DiLaurentiis. "He left us alone—although he did call one time to ask if we could put a Chevy in the movie."

Through their company, Renaissance Pictures, they had been developing *Darkman* for another director, but Raimi fell in love with it. *Darkman* is what *Batman* should have been—a dark, Gothic comic book with a real story. Liam Neeson plays Peyton Westlake, a scientist obsessing over a formula for artificial skin. Blown up and left for dead by a crime gang, he seeks revenge and a reunion with his lover, Julie (Frances McDormand).

A loose mix of *Phantom of the Opera*, *Grand Guignol*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and 1980s comic book/graphic novels, *Darkman* resonates

Who Is Darkman?
Liam Neeson.

with Raimi's inventive visual touches, including his penchant for hyper-realistic dissolves. The most striking of them begins when Julie sees Westlake's lab—and him—blown to bits.

Underneath her feet, foreground, the sidewalk turns to sunlit, green grass; the background melts from urban L.A. to a verdant cemetery plot; and Julie, middle ground, suddenly wears widow's black. It's a disturbing narrative shortcut that Universal fought tooth-and-nail to delete. "That shot was in the first draft," Tapert says. "We fought from January 1989 until last August to keep that dissolve in."

The film is both brooding and frenetic, with Raimi's ghoulish wit charging Westlake's revenge attacks. The most outrageous stunt required two *Darkman* stand-ins, swinging on a rope by helicopter through downtown L.A. The scene required 40 prep days, 10 Sunday shoot days, 80 PAs, and 40 cops.

Raimi shoots painstakingly slow, designing and editing in his head: With effects, he used about 110 shooting days. The film earned \$35 million domestically, and, with ancillary markets, should be a "tremendous profit center" for Universal, Tapert says.

Although somewhat miffed at Universal's pushiness, Tapert acknowledges the studio's genius in the "Who Is Darkman?" marketing plan. So Tapert and Raimi are prepping *Evil Dead III* for Universal, a "medieval epic fantasy/comedy, with horses."

Returning to comedy doesn't surprise Tapert. Their collaboration feeds off their ability to pick projects carefully. They share a "really crummy office smack in the middle of Hollywood," developing scripts.

"I have to give Sam's pictures a much bigger look than they actually cost. We're stingy with suppliers; we often can't afford to rehire people we've given breaks to." But that cost-consciousness gives them freedom.

Tapert's advice to young filmmakers: "Make as many movies as you can in Super-8. We started out with the Coen brothers—making 30-minute trailers, dragging them around to investors. At the end of the day there's only one approach, and that's the Joel Silver approach," he says, quoting *Die Hard*'s producer. "And that's—'Screw you, slimeball, this is my movie!'" —**Bruce Stockler**