

Johnny Handsome ★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

If you plan to check out *Johnny Handsome*, I'd suggest that you leave after an hour. You'll enjoy the movie more that way. The first half of *Johnny Handsome* carefully sets up an intriguing situation; then, the second half squanders it away on a clichéd finale.

The movie offers a character study of John Sedley, a two-bit criminal who was born with a horribly deformed face. His gruesome appearance has ruined his life. Then, he has state-of-the-art reconstructive surgery, and lo and behold, he emerges from the bandages looking just like Mickey Rourke. Sedley's new and improved appearance (if you consider looking like Rourke an improvement) gives him the opportunity to start his life anew. For the first time ever, he has a chance to be normal. The catch is that Sedley's one friend in the world, Mikey, has been murdered, and Sedley is torn between becoming a law-abiding citizen and seeking bloody revenge on the murderers. Will he go straight or will he blow it and return to his criminal ways?

Well, Sedley blows it, but he's not the only

one—so do director Walter Hill and screenwriter Ken Friedman. They establish Sedley's inner psychology so well in the first half that you expect them to follow through with it in the second half. But no: they turn their effective little character study into a simple-minded revenge thriller. Sedley becomes almost impossible to root for because it's established so quickly that he'll never reform. To make matters worse, his vendetta against Mikey's killers is repulsively violent and gory.

The movie is so frustrating because of what's not on the screen, because of the missed dramatic opportunities. What *is* on the screen isn't half-bad. Hill's specialty is action, and as a thriller, the movie has more than enough energy and style. Rourke's specialty is disturbing movies (like *Angel Heart*) that leave you with a headache. In all seriousness, Rourke does an admirable job of conveying Sedley's emotional turmoil and confusion. Ellen Barkin stands out as one of Mikey's killers, but only because her role is so different from the uptight D.A. she played in *The Big Easy*.