

DONNIE DARKO

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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Everyone wondered what the kids of the Eighties would grow up to achieve. Steeped in too much pop culture, tempted by excess, assured they'd never attain the incomes or accomplishments of their parents' generation, our Reagan-era youth woke up from the long night of the soul hopped up on Prozac, drenched in self-help effluvium and armed with a pervasive cynicism that would seep into the next decade and beyond.

It's almost perfect that Drew Barrymore would go on to defy her roots as an alcoholic child star and grow up to produce a movie as sensitive and epochal as "Donnie Darko," which is not merely the salvation of the moribund teen pic genre but a square-peg adolescent classic to rank up there with "Rushmore" and "Say Anything."

A Sundance surprise in a year that craves fresh young voices more than ever, Richard Kelly's "Donnie Darko" is that almost unheard of example of an indie-minded production -- with garish special effects, no less -- that isn't spoiled by the Hollywood forces that helped birth it. It won't be easy to market, but this furiously inventive debut eases into the new Sundance with remarkable aplomb, decimating nearly everything in its path.

Set in 1988, during George Bush's transition to power (Dukakis jokes fly by in abundance), "Donnie Darko" unravels in a crisp upper-middle-class Virginia suburb where everything looks great on the surface but threatens to dislodge and crumble at any second. The Darko brood, a Spielbergian family of five prone to profanity-laced bickering at the dinner table, revels in the ordinary until its middle son Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal, in a star-making performance), under medication for his anti-social behavior, takes to wandering in fugue states during the night, waking up on golf courses and city streets with no memory of his actions.

When the fuselage of a jet crashes into the Darko home, nearly killing Donnie in his bedroom, the befuddled teen starts to question the logic of the universe, not to mention his own collapsing sanity. Haunted by visions of a sinister rabbit creature that has warned him that the world will end in exactly twenty eight days, Donnie becomes an unwitting evil hand in a spree of vandalistic acts that renders him a discipline case at the local prep school, where Donnie's so ahead of the curve that

the school principal refers to his test scores as "intimidating." His shrink (Katharine Ross) simply prescribes more medication. As Donnie grows more aware of his plight -- he begins investigating wormholes as a means of correcting fate's cruel hand -- the movie transmogrifies into a loud, effects-laden monster that succeeds against all odds in holding onto its rich humanism.

"Donnie Darko" pays homage to the Spielberg productions of the Eighties that blinded us with science (it references "Back to the Future" more than once) but it's also rooted in the Lynchian mindfuck of "Blue Velvet," that other Eighties epochal landmark that ripped the scalp off of smalltown American values, reminding us that when we looked inward it was anything but placid and ordinary.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Donnie's imaginary friend -- a leering rabbit creature with huge teeth played by James Duval -- is called Frank, because for every freewheeling Marty McFly stargazer in the Eighties, there was Frank Booth hovering in the subconscious to lure us toward the sinister. What "Donnie Darko" does so well, aside from capturing an era more astutely than any movie in ages, is to examine that pivotal moment when America's young was torn between innocence and corruption, between choosing life or giving in to Frank Booth. It's so obvious the path we chose, something "Donnie Darko" considers with a soulful grace that verges on the sublime.

With a few exceptions (its cardboard villains, mostly, an unavoidable factor in teenpics) the movie never treats its teenaged characters like cream cheese sculptures masquerading as human beings, as in the Sarah Michelle Gellar and Freddie Prinze, Jr. teen angst canon that has soured the teen pic pantheon in recent years. Like Lloyd Dobler in "Say Anything" or Max Fischer in "Rushmore," Donnie Darko is one of those uncategorizable square pegs whose eccentricities render his heroics all the more compelling.

Even more refreshing are the movie's adult characters, specifically Donnie's parents (Mary McDonnell and Holmes Osborne) and Drew Barrymore and Noah Wyle as a pair of authority-questioning high school teachers torn between bucking the system and holding on to their jobs -- managing to be noble without reaching the saccharine levels of someone like Paul Dooley in "Sixteen Candles." On the flip side of that coin are the movie's hilarious adult villains, including Patrick Swayze, in a priceless casting coup, as the host of a motivational program called Cunning Visions who's secretly running a kiddie porn dungeon in the basement of his tacky Edwardian-style mansion. A testament to Richard Kelly's scathing wit, let's not forget the Reagan-era blockbuster that Swayze danced his way through in the mid-Eighties.

At times, "Donnie Darko" tries too hard to be a Reaganite riff on "American Beauty" -

- its depiction of suburban anomie isn't original by any means and its Christ-like crucifixion conclusion nearly collapses under its own bombastic, special effects-laden weight. The two-hour movie could easily lose fifteen minutes -- it takes far too long to set Donnie's heroic, metaphysical mission in motion and it's questionable whether the current generation of teens will be hip to the onslaught of Eighties references that course through the picture like lightning bolts.

But every time "Donnie Darko" threatens to veer into the formulaic, writer-director Kelly (who looks like he's still a teenager himself) manages to cough up some wildly original moment like a nefarious school talent show in which a squadron of pre-teen cheerleaders called Sparkle Motion performs a lascivious routine to the Pet Shop Boys' "West End Girls" that naturally earns the girls a slot on Star Search. A movie geek's wet dream for the ages, "Donnie Darko" should leave the underdog in us all swooning in nostalgia. . . the time of our lives, indeed.

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