

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE



Worst. Chaperone. Ever.

DONNIE DARKO

2001 / RATED M / DIRECTOR RICHARD KELLY
CAST JAKE GYLLENHAAL, MAGGIE GYLLENHAAL,
MARY MCDONNELL, PATRICK SWAYZE, JENA MALONE

Be vewwy, vewwy quiet...

ONE THING YOU'LL never hear a filmmaker thank in their awards speech are limitations. Just as how Spielberg's lauded use of restraint in *Jaws* was more to do with a malfunctioning mechanical shark than artistic foresight, the brilliance of Richard Kelly's 2001 apocalyptic sci-fi *Donnie Darko* may largely come from the fact the filmmaker's debut feature was ordered to come in at under two hours and be filmed in a scant 28 days. For evidence, look no further than the 2004 Director's Cut, which added 20 minutes of superfluous scenes that, in trying to explain the obtuse plot further, only robbed the film of one of its greatest strengths: a pervading sense of mystery.

Back in 2001, a then 26-year-old Kelly would've just been happy his film was being made at all. After 18 months of knockbacks, Kelly's script finally caught the eye of Drew Barrymore, who financed it through her Flower Films production company. The John Hughes-meets-David Lynch narrative (involving time travel, high school romance, apocalyptic visions and a giant rabbit named Frank) may have been

a tough sell, but Barrymore was drawn in, and acting talent soon followed — both known (Patrick Swayze, Noah Wyle, Barrymore herself), and unknown (siblings Jake and Maggie Gyllenhaal before they hit the big time, playing brother and sister).

Dodging an undignified straight-to-DVD fate, *Donnie Darko* was released in the US on October 26, 2001, failing to ignite the interest of moviegoers (its final box office take after its US run was a meagre \$517,375). Arriving just weeks after 9/11, a plot involving a jet engine falling from the sky was floated as a possible reason. The real reason, perhaps, is that on paper the film is a Frankenstein's monster of tonal elements (comedy, horror, sci-fi, teen drama) that only coalesce on celluloid thanks to the conviction Kelly has in his story world. Audiences still needed to meet him halfway and, thanks to film fests and midnight screenings, they got the chance to. Good word of mouth saw the film rebranded a "cult hit" (the highest praise awarded a well-liked flop), and soon enough the mystery of *Donnie Darko* spread its weird spell over the (mad) world.

Right from the opening credits, where a dazed Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal) cycles down a mountain to the moody strains of Echo & The Bunnymen's *The Killing Moon*, it's easy to see why the cool kids finally caught on: the music was killer (Tears For Fears and The Church soundtracking two memorable sequences), the mysteries intriguing (the untraceable jet engine; talk of the "philosophies of time travel" and tangent universes; the grotesque Frank who may or may not be a part of Donnie's imagination)

and the humour warped (witness Donnie's conversation about the sex lives of Smurfs).

The heart of the film, however, belongs to the Darko family. Their dinner table discussion about the 1988 US presidential elections is by turns erudite, crude and hilarious, and it's the family's sense of normalcy that grounds the film and allows it to later spread into its dark corners. Donnie can come across as a moody jerk (you would too if you had recurring visions of the end of the world involving a nightmarish man in a rabbit suit), but it's the family love that puts us in his corner — we want to be a part of the Darko clan, even if Donnie isn't always so keen.

Fifteen years on from release, *Donnie Darko* still stands as a compelling, genuinely odd debut, and no film since has managed to combine its elements in quite the same way. Kelly tried again himself with 2006's ambitious *Southland Tales*, armed with a much bigger budget and enough buzz to attract a slew of big names (Dwayne Johnson, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Justin Timberlake and Amy Poehler). It was criticised for its sprawling, self-indulgent nature, although praised for containing a surplus of clever ideas and sci-fi concepts. Perhaps if Kelly could travel back in time, he'd welcome the limitations that corralled the mad vision of *Donnie Darko* into the cult classic it rightfully became. **JAMES JENNINGS**

DONNIE DARKO WILL SCREEN ON AUGUST 5 AT EVENT CINEMAS (GEORGE ST, KOTARA, BRISBANE CITY MYER CENTRE, MARION AND INNALOO) AS PART OF THE "IN THE HOUSE" SERIES. FOR DETAILS AND TICKETS, VISIT EVENTCINEMAS.COM.AU