Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 28 September 2004 18:00

DONNIE DARKO: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

After I first saw *Donnie Darko* on DVD some 16 months back, I did something I'd done only once or twice before, and never again since: I returned to the main menu, hit "Play," and watched the movie again.

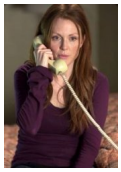
Since that day, I've been in thrall to this world of writer-director Richard Kelly, a genre-busting fusion of sci-fi, horror, comedy, and '80s-era teen pic that's quite unlike anything I've seen before or since. The movie isn't perfect: The scenes with Katherine Ross, portraying one of cinema's least-helpful psychiatrists, play like an unnecessary layer of psycho-babble padding, and – thrilling though it is to see a movie that, in the end, remains shrouded in mystery – the logistics behind its time-travel scenario are kept a little *too* vague; Kelly's work sometimes feels like a grad-school thesis project for those who found the *Matrix* plotlines too streamlined and obvious. *Donnie Darko* is a bit sketchy and overstuffed with ideas, yet it's also, I think, brilliant – a hallucinogenic trip through one boy's (possible) madness, told with an ironic, comedic detachment that can give way, in an instant, to shocking depths of emotion. (At one point, Jake Gyllenhaal's Donnie, sitting next to mom Mary McDonnell, plaintively asks, "How does it feel having a wacko for a son?" and she, with perfectly cadenced maternal understanding, responds, "It feels wonderful.") Since my first exposure to the movie back in 2002, I've probably seen it 10 times, and never find it less than exhilarating.

Though I'm sure Kelly and his collaborators would have loved for the film to have been a bigger money-maker when released theatrically in 2001, it makes sense that *Donnie Darko* first became a hit on DVD and video. Having arrived on video-store shelves relatively unheralded, it was the sort of movie you'd stumble upon accidentally, and one you felt that you, alone, discovered; for months after its video release, friends and acquaintances would come up to me and initiate a *Donnie* conversation with, "I saw this really great movie last night but I don't know if you've even *heard* of it ... ." Whether or not its viewers *understood* the film – and I'm ceratinly not implying that I fully

do
– wasn't even an issue;
Donnie Darko
, which emits a special kind of magic, is a work that you wind up feeling
personally
attached to. For viewers in on the movie's wavelength, you can feel that Donnie's journey is, in some way, yours as well.

The film has acquired such a voracious cult following that *Donnie Darko: The Director's Cut* was released in theatres this summer – it's currently playing at the Brew & View – with nearly 20 minutes of new footage. (For
Donnie
fans, this includes a far more comprehensive explanation of the time-travel element, delivered via passages from Grandma Death's book.) Yet, though the results are by no means fatally damaging, I'm not sure how
necessary
the expansion was. It's terrific that Kelly has made the time-travel plotline more specific, but its inclusion is awkwardly handled: Every few scenes, a title card tells us which chapter in Grandma Death's book is currently being referenced, yet the movie is
already
employing this type of device, with the title-card countdown to The End of the World ("October 18th – Twelve Days Remaining"). The use of
both
conventions muddies the narrative. And Kelly's less-obvious additions, oddly enough, often have the unfortunate effect of harming scenes that were just fine to begin with; the rhythm is off in the scene in which Patrick Swayze's Jim Cunningham speaks at the high school – the sequence now lasts twice as long as it should – and the emergency-PTA-session sequence now starts with a jokey moment between Drew Barrymore's Karen and Beth Grant's Kitty that misrepresents Kitty's intentions and makes her book-banning tirade more confusing than anything. The original version of
Donnie Darko
shows that Richard Kelly has an intensely impressive eye and ear, with a knack for getting a great deal of information across with just a few clever brushstrokes – his introduction of the high school's students and faculty, accompanied by Tears for Fears' "Head Over Heels," is already near-legendary – so it's all the more surprising that this director's cut isn't an improvement; maybe Kelly should have taken a tip from the Coen brothers' re-release of
Blood Simple
and actually
shortened
the movie. (As the deleted scenes in countless DVDs have proven, sometimes the stuff that stays on the cutting-room floor is there for a
reason
.)

Little matter – *Donnie Darko* is marvelous, even in unnecessarily elongated form. (Offhand, I can think of only two movies – *Aliens* and *Almost Famous* – that have truly benefited from the director's cut treatment, and several others – *JFK* being a prime example – in which the extra footage weakens the end result.) For those coming to the film for the first time, you'll be treated to some spellbinding storytelling, wonderful performances across the board (Jena Malone, Noah Wyle, and Jake Gyllenhaal's utterly winning sister, Maggie, also appear), superior sound effects, and the most disquieting six-foot-tall bunny rabbit you'll ever see. And for those visiting *Donnie Darko* for the third – or 23rd – time, it's a chance to see this exemplary work on the big screen at long last (it never reached our multiplexes in 2001), even if it's not exactly the *Donnie Darko* you remember.



THE FORGOTTEN

There's a visual effect in *The Forgotten* that's so comically terrifying you want to applaud: During the last few reels, characters will occasionally be in mid-sentence when an unseen force literally sucks them into the sky, as if they were clogs that had to be removed from some otherworldly drain. The moments come so quickly, and are so beautifully framed, that they almost make you forget how disappointing most of the movie is. Julianne Moore works hard as the mother trying to cope with her son's mysterious disappearance; Dominic West, with his natural aura of danger, matches her well; and Joseph Ruben's staging is mostly first-rate. But they're all undone by a sci-fi conceit that gets more and more incoherent as it progresses, and the film rapidly degenerates into what feels like one endless chase scene. As the 473rd thriller to be released in the past few weeks, *The Forgotten* certainly ranks among the better ones – not that that's much of a compliment – but it, too, will be less than a memory in no time at all.

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