

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Donnie Darko*

USA, 2001. R. 113 min

**Cast:** Jake Gyllenhaal, Jena Malone, Drew Barrymore, Katharine Ross, Patrick Swayze, Maggie Gyllenhaal;  
**Music:** Michael Andrews;  
**Cinematographer:** Steven B. Poster; **Producer:** Chris Bell, Drew Barrymore; **Director:** Richard Kelly

*Donnie Darko* has that rarest of all qualities: it is unclassifiable. Even a glance at the array of trailers for the film illustrates the point: marketers had no idea how to sell this film (a fact which no doubt accounts for its paltry commercial performance; according to the-numbers.com, the \$4.5 million-budgeted film grossed just over \$500,000 worldwide). The goal of a trailer, after all, is to make the film seem familiar enough to be safe, but original enough to be interesting. Trailers for *Donnie Darko* suggested everything from a teen comedy to a sci-fi action film to a psychological drama. None, however, tried to convey what the film was actually offering, because no film had ever offered quite the same thing before. The secret to *Donnie Darko* - like the secret to almost all truly original films - is that it is like nothing that has come before because it is like everything that has come before.

Set in a comfortable suburb in the late 1980s, it gives us the Darkos: slightly boozy mom (McDonnell), conservative, sardonic dad (Osbourne), adorable youngest daughter, Samantha (Chase), brilliant oldest daughter, Elizabeth (Maggie Gyllenhaal), and, of course the middle child, Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal, Maggie's brother). The family's concerns are typical. Dad worries Dukakis might win the upcoming presidential election; Elizabeth hopes to go to Harvard; Samantha practices for her competitive dance troupe, Sparkle Motion (a cringe-inducing spoof on every stage-parent's micromanaged student ensemble).

Only Donnie's worries veer outside the ordinary: he's mostly preoccupied with Frank, the imaginary(?) six-foot rabbit warning him of the world's approaching end. Minus Donnie, the film could easily have gone in any number of other directions, and his presence is as upsetting to generic conventions as it is to his teachers, family and friends. Regularly seeing a therapist (Ross) and heavily medicated, stability nonetheless proves elusive for Donnie. Urged on by Frank, he routinely wanders off on somnambulistic nighttime jaunts to vandalize the school or set fire to the house of a smarmy motivational speaker



(Swayze). Each encounter with Frank brings Donnie another clue to the mysterious visitor's intentions, his message, and Donnie's destiny. By the time a jet engine falls from the sky and crashes into Donnie's room, we know we're in a world the cinema has not shown us before.

But describing the film to those who have not seen it is a frustrating exercise. In part, the moody, misunderstood Donnie is a perfect teen movie hero, holding a knowledge and understanding of the world the movie's adults, who are largely caricatures, will never approach. His methods, though often impetuous and misguided, are nevertheless driven by integrity and honesty, and his targets are essentially hypocritical buffoons whose downfalls we are encouraged to

cheer. At other times, however, the movie is a mystery, as we, along with Donnie, attempt to unravel Frank's cryptic clues. But wait: now it's a black comedy, as when Donnie reacts with eager earnestness to his new girlfriend's admission that her stepfather has "emotional problems." "I have emotional problems, too!" Donnie exclaims. "What kind does he have?" Turn your back again, and now the movie is a sci-fi adventure, as Donnie learns that the town's resident crank is the mysterious author of a book describing wormholes and time travel. And roiling away under all this is the eerie dread attendant to films from *Freaks* to *Night of the Living Dead* to the *Sixth Sense*.

The movie's success at conveying each of these disparate genres is nothing compared to the accomplishment of blending them together into such an original mélange. It is a busy, jam-packed thing, full of carefully balanced tones, intricately conceived visual cues, and ambiguous pop-cultural references (is the rabbit meant to recall *Harvey* or *Alice in Wonderland*?). Ultimately, its intentions are as inconclusive as some will find its plot (Kelly has said repeated viewings are best to discern its point), but that is the beauty of the film. Even as it puts its pre-conditioned audience through the paces of the familiar stories from which it draws, it transcends those familiarities, breaking free of itself and proving that sometimes the best movies are the ones we love even when we can't say why.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey