

Risk-Taking Director Pushes the Studio Button



Frank Langella and Cameron Diaz in a scene from Richard Kelly's new film, "The Box."
By ARI KARPEL

AT the beginning of Richard Kelly's new film, "The Box," a mysterious parcel is delivered to a suburban family's doorstep. Inside is a device with a button, which Norma (Cameron Diaz) and Arthur Lewis (James Marsden) soon learn will earn them \$1 million if pressed. It will also cause the death of someone they don't know.



Richard Kelly and James Marsden on the set of "The Box."

The Lewises take the risk and push the button, plunging themselves into a world filled with zombielike mobs, a rash of bloody noses and one disturbingly deformed messenger (Frank Langella). Mr. Kelly has taken a risk of his own in making the film, and the consequences may well be more real if not so frightening. "The Box," a Warner Brothers release with a mostly straightforward, linear story, is deliberately calculated to be commercial and, he hopes, keep him viable within the Hollywood studio system. "I have a lot riding on this film," Mr. Kelly, 34, said over lunch at Greenblatt's Deli, a Sunset Boulevard staple. "Until I have a theatrical hit, people aren't going to keep giving me chances."

It's a sentiment that's hard to imagine coming from Mr. Kelly, whose previous movies could never be described as straightforward or studio-friendly. Mr. Kelly, a University of Southern California film school graduate, earned cult status with his first feature,

“Donnie Darko,” a 2001 psychodrama about a sleepwalking teenager (Jake Gyllenhaal, then unknown) who receives messages of the pending apocalypse from a man in a giant bunny suit. But six years later a three-hour rough cut of “Southland Tales” — an ambitious, postnuclear mishmash about commercialism, war, homeland security and Los Angeles, among many other things — made its debut at the Cannes Film Festival to a chorus of boos. The slimmer finished product fared little better with domestic critics (the words “fiasco,” “self-indulgent” and “disaster” were common, although Manohla Dargis in The New York Times found it a “funny, audacious, messy and feverishly inspired look at America and its discontents”) or audiences (it took in just \$275,000 in the United States).

“It was incredibly painful,” Mr. Kelly said. He conceded that the film was self-indulgent but insisted he had no regrets. “It’s one of those things you can do only once in your career,” Mr. Kelly said. “I’m very proud of the movie.”

But he quickly realized that he needed to change perceptions about himself. His trippy films have made people assume he’s “like Edward Scissorhands living up in some weird castle,” he said, alluding to the Tim Burton-Johnny Depp film. “But that’s certainly not who I am.”

In person Mr. Kelly comes across like a former fraternity guy, his torn jeans and gelled hair complementing a T-shirt that reveals an obsessive weightlifter. “My dream is to be able to have thought-recognition software that, as I’m exercising, will just write the script,” he said.

His Twitter feed (with more than 5,000 followers) has revealed his love of University of Southern California football, beer pong and the Coen brothers’ movie “A Serious Man.” (“Oy vey! This goy is beyond smitten!” he tweeted.)

Everyone interviewed for this article mentioned the dissonance within Mr. Kelly. “A contradiction would imply something that would be understood,” Mr. Gyllenhaal said, “two things that would be a yin and a yang. He’s not that.” Mr. Gyllenhaal then took a moment to formulate an accurate description. “I sometimes feel like he’s out of the mind of John Hughes. He’s like the missing character in ‘The Breakfast Club.’”

Though “The Box” is intended to be a crowd-drawing thriller, it returns Mr. Kelly to the setting and some of the themes found in “Donnie Darko”: Both are set in upper-middle-class Virginia suburbs (Mr. Kelly grew up in Newport News and Richmond) and pose questions through tales of a traditional family in an unusual circumstance. “The suburbs are emblematic of the life we pretend to enjoy,” he said. “All those houses that look like a gigantic machine just squirted them out. Obviously some people do enjoy that life, others do not, but they all try to pretend to.”

The screenplay is based on a 1971 short story by the sci-fi writer Richard Matheson (“I Am Legend”) called “Button, Button.” (The movie also evokes 1970s conspiracy theory movies like “The Parallax View” and “Three Days of the Condor.”) Mr. Kelly optioned that 11-page tale, which has also been adapted into a 1986 “Twilight Zone” episode, but he added a new layer to its minimal plot.

“I decided to take this gift of a short story and make it about people I care about and respect,” he said. “I’m not interested in telling a story about a couple of selfish jerks who push a button.”

So he adapted details of his parents’ lives. He set the film in 1976 because that’s when his father helped design the camera for the Viking project, which sent a robot to Mars. “I was in awe of my dad’s work,” said Mr. Kelly, who lobbied for a year to be granted the rare privilege of shooting on the Langley campus of NASA.

He mined a more personal aspect of his mother’s life for the film. When she was a teenager, Mr. Kelly’s mother had an X-ray taken of her foot. This normally routine assessment took a bizarre turn when the doctor left the room, accidentally leaving the machine on. Extended radiation exposure left Ms. Kelly in the hospital for months and without a number of her toes. “My mother actually endured and lived through something from a horror film, essentially,” Mr. Kelly said. “One of the reasons I wanted to make this movie was to pay tribute to that experience, pay tribute to her.”

“Richard has really commercial taste,” said the producer of “The Box,” Dan Lin, a former production executive at Warner Brothers, which has a tradition of making mainstream movies with artistic directors, like Spike Jonze’s “Where the Wild Things Are” and Steven Soderbergh’s “Oceans Eleven” series. “He can elevate the material without selling out. He still has his own style.”

Mr. Lin added, “There’s a real grounding in who these characters are as people, and I think actors really respond to that.”

Getting the go-ahead for the movie was helped along immensely by Ms. Diaz, the star of “What Happens in Vegas” and “In Her Shoes,” among others, agreeing to sign on. A close friend of Drew Barrymore, who produced and had a supporting role in “Donnie Darko,” Ms. Diaz was dating Justin Timberlake while he was shooting “Southland Tales,” so she was familiar with Mr. Kelly’s work. “I loved ‘Donnie Darko,’ ” she said. “Richard is an artist; he has such huge ideas.”

And having Ms. Diaz on board helped ground Mr. Kelly. “Cameron would police me,” he recalled. “She would say, ‘Richard, now you need to keep this focused, you need to explain this because this logic doesn’t work.’ ”

“I constantly have these voices — my manager, my agent, my producing partner — to make sure people can follow it, make sure it’s not too long,” Mr. Kelly added. “Make sure that it’s not self-indulgent.” He doesn’t mean that he’s going to water down his ideas, but he’s making sure to get his point across clearly.

“When he tries to pile too many ideas on top of each other — when he can’t explain it himself — that’s when you’ve got him,” said his producing partner, Sean McKittrick, who runs Darko Entertainment, which has made non-Kelly films like the recent comedies

“I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell” and “World’s Greatest Dad.” “Richard’s greatest strength is his imagination, and sometimes it’s his biggest hurdle.”

Mr. Kelly’s immersion in his work has meant he has often neglected his need for a stable home, opting to crash on friends’ couches for extended periods, as he is now, rather than rent an apartment. “It’s a good thing to be emotionally invested in your work,” Mr. Kelly said, “but I can’t keep doing it to a point where it consumes my entire life anymore.” Mr. Gyllenhaal has his own take on Mr. Kelly’s willingness to work inside the studio system. “I think what Richard’s saying is, ‘I kind of have to wake up every once in a while, live in reality and not just explore my dreams.’”

“I’m amazed by Richard’s courage. By how he really believes in something and even when he’s doing something for the studio, he can’t do something not from who he is.” Mr. Kelly is already deep in preparing for the film he hopes to make next, which he describes as a “post-9/11 reconstruction thriller set in Manhattan in 2014.”

“It’s right from my bone marrow,” he said. “It’s absolutely what I want to do next.” At the same time, he said, it’s quite commercial. “It’s also provocative and risky and very much reliant upon a very big star who could anchor it.” Mr. Kelly won’t reveal more, but he knows that getting backing to make it depends on the success of “The Box.”

“I would like to stay in the studio business,” he said, naming Christopher Nolan, who’s moved from “Memento” to “The Dark Knight,” as a model. “Because having to depend upon a film festival and trying to get a distributor, having acquisition executives hem and haw over this and that — I’ve done it, it’s scary and I just don’t want to do it anymore.” “Ultimately you can’t beat the studio,” he added. “Maybe Spielberg can because he owns a studio. They’re the bank, so you’ve got to just figure out how to work with it. I’ve learned that the smart way to go about it is to learn how to play ball.”