

# First look: Thriller 'The Box' contains plenty of challenges

By Susan Wloszczyna, USA TODAY

HAMPTON, Va. — Filmmaker Richard Kelly prides himself on thinking so far outside the box that major chunks of the Internet are devoted to deconstructing his intentionally murky movies.

His desire to bewilder has earned him a certified cult classic (2001's *Donnie Darko*) and an unmitigated flop (2007's *Southland Tales*), but no direct hit.

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For his third big-screen feat, the 32-year-old USC film-school grad is not only thinking inside the box. He is actually making *The Box*, complete with his first major studio (Warner Bros.) and an A-list star (Cameron Diaz) on board.

"God bless Cameron Diaz. The second she signed on, our lives changed in a great way," Kelly says on location at NASA's Langley Research Center. Wrapping up the film's final week, he spent a long day shooting inside a cavernous wind tunnel and atop a gantry, a 240-foot-high erector-set-style structure once used to train Apollo astronauts.

Unlike his previous efforts, the sci-fi-tinged thriller is a breeze to summarize. Its plot hook is inspired by a 1986 *Twilight Zone* episode that haunted Kelly as a kid: A couple (Diaz and James Marsden) open their door to find a box containing a button. If they push it, they will receive \$1 million. The catch? Someone they don't know will die.

Kelly settles back to reflect on what he calls his "first grown-up film," whose opening date is yet to be determined.

"We made *Donnie Darko* when we were 25, so obviously that has an innocence about it," he says of his unnerving high-school fable made with producer pal Sean McKittrick. The political satire *Southland Tales*, on DVD March 18, "is punk rock and rebellious. We love that about it." Still, the film was barely in theaters, grossing only \$273,420 on a nearly \$18 million budget. "There is no place for small movies to catch fire," he says. "We got with Warner Bros. as a means of survival."

He is ready to go commercial. "With *The Box*, I hope to make a more mainstream popcorn film."

Of course, nothing is ever quite that simple in a Richard Kelly film. Richard Matheson's original 1970 short story, *Button, Button*, is just a jumping-off point for the \$30 million morality tale. Embellishments include '70s kitsch, teleporting and the 1976 Viking mission to Mars.

"We don't feel like we are watering ourselves down," Kelly assures.

The man who delivers the title container? Masterfully creepy Frank Langella. "Richard is in a league of his own," the veteran actor says. "He has sort of an extraterrestrial creature running around in his head. That is what Steven Spielberg was like as a young boy."

Namely, someone who knows how to push an audience's buttons.