

# SXSW Review—'The Strange Ones' Tells a Masterful and Unforgettable Tale of Innocence Lost

Mar 19



Perhaps no film at SXSW this year will leave audiences in a darker mental place than ***The Strange Ones***, an expansion of the [acclaimed 2011 short of the same name](#). The striking directorial debut of both **Lauren Wolkstein** and **Christopher Radcliff**, previously known for their incredible short films, continues their pattern of taking severe trauma and deconstructing it in deeply complex and cinematic ways. With the subject matter of films like *Mysterious Skin* and the subdued, nature-heavy craft of recent works like *Krishna*, the film rises above most indie features of its kind that tackle child abuse and accomplishes something far more sophisticated and sinister.

The film's titular "strange ones" are young Sam (played to perfection by **James Freedson-Jackson**, a star in the making who recently won the fest's Jury Award for Breakthrough Performance) and the older, rugged Nick (**Alex Pettyfer**, in a frightening and dangerously sensual performance). The two are introduced to us as brothers on a road trip, but things are most definitely not what they seem. Nearly every detail and moment in the first hour of the film hold crucial importance, whether it's a lingering close-up on Sam's bare back as he swims, or Sam feeding Nick a sandwich. By the time Sam delivers an eerie monologue to the owner of a motel where they are staying ("You don't know who he is," he warns her of Nick), viewers will know that this

film's subject matter and the places it will go with it will be anything but easy.

Without giving too much away, the film is almost split in two in its structure, focusing first on the brothers' roadtrip and then the aftermath and deeper implications of its events. While this may suggest a weak tone shift for many, it's a brave and intelligent way to look at the film's themes, and both halves contain haunting and effective moments that give us a thorough look at the psyche of its characters. Both halves of the film depend largely on the chemistry between Freedson-Jackson and Pettyfer, and the gamble pays off: they're electric together, the danger and unsettling nature of their relationship slowly revealing itself both through their scenes together and Wolkstein and Radcliff's masterful usage of close-ups and inserts.

Shot beautifully by **Todd Banhazi** and amplified by a gorgeous, moody score from the always-great **Brian McOmber**, *The Strange Ones* is able to elevate its performances and story with the masterful craft behind it. Indeed, the film is above all a tone poem, an elusive and ever-subtle evocation of the ugly and complicated emotions that develop between a pair as damaged and, well, strange as Sam and Nick. As the film elaborates on the horrifying truth behind their connection, it never goes for the easy way out; it is much bolder and braver than most films of its kind in how it approaches it. As with all great films, it takes an angle that we may have never thought of before, and one we may not soon forget.

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