

# Terrence Malick Meets Andrei Tarkovsky in Atmospheric Thriller 'The Strange Ones' — SXSW 2017 Review

The feature-length debut of co-directors Christopher Radcliff and Lauren Wolkstein is an eerie coming-of-age story co-starring Alex Pettyfer and James Freedson-Jackson.

[Eric Kohn](#)



"The Strange Ones"

For a good 45 minutes, "[The Strange Ones](#)" is a bracing, unpredictable

movie, building its disquieting suspense around unknown relationships and invisible threats. Eventually, the feature-length debut of co-directors Christopher Radcliff and Lauren Wolkstein reveals all its cards, and the full picture of this brief tone poem doesn't match the level of engagement generated early on. But its atmospheric sophistication holds strong throughout, channeling a wonder for the natural world reminiscent of Terrence Malick with an air of existential dread straight out of Andrei Tarkovsky. The result is a strong indication of filmmakers in command of their material, and eager to keep viewers guessing throughout.

**See More** [The 2017 IndieWire SXSW Bible: Every Review, Interview and News Item Posted During the Festival](#)

The minimalist setup opens with a pair of siblings on the run. Buff hunter Nick ([Alex Pettyfer](#)) drives through a rural landscape with his apparent younger brother Sam (relative newcomer James Freedson-Jackson, one half of the young pair fleeing a devious Kevin Bacon in the 2015 comic thriller "Cop Car"). Fleeting cutaways hint at a dramatic, violent showdown with their now-deceased father, his house engulfed in flames — but the cause of the incident remains shrouded in mystery, as does the precise nature of their relationship. Initially reminiscent of Amy Seimetz's similar pulpy two-hander "Sun Don't Shine," the general sense of unease and desperation as the pair head toward an unknown destination looms larger than the precise set of events that sent them there.

Eventually, they arrive deep in the woods, where Nick finds a cabin and assures Sam they can stay there indefinitely, hunting for food and forgetting about the trappings of civilization. Without spoiling too much, it comes as no great surprise that Nick's utopian plan falls apart rather quickly, and Sam's forced to sort through the grim situation on his own terms. As "The Strange Ones" continues to reveal more details about Sam's past, the movie morphs into a fascinating coming-of-age tale in which the adolescent struggles to figure out how to explain his alienated mindset.

## Crazy pics of Jack Box leaked in latest #BaconButterHack!

The hackers have struck again & shown the world the Triple Bacon Buttery Jack from Jack in the Box. See photos and more on JackiLeaks.com

### Presented By: Jack in the Box

#### *Jack in the Box*

While Pettyfer makes for a sturdy paternal figure, Freedson-Jackson is an especially potent force, deepening the drama with a sturdy performance built around his distant gaze. It's matched by cinematographer Todd Banhazl's dreamlike imagery, which uses a "Badlands" template of deep greens and browns to enhance the earthy quality of this contained world. As the tension thickens over the course of the first act, it can be all too easy to settle into this placid environment, only to get shaken by another dark turn.

"The Strange Ones" is an expansion of the pair's 2011 short, and at times strains from the pressure to keep the material engrossing at feature length. However, Sam's plight makes for a steadily engaging genre exercise rooted in the challenges its young protagonist internalizes for much of the running time. Like Lenny Abrahamson's "Room," the grim story has less to do with literal events than a child's limited understanding of them, and how it opens up once he's pressed to express his true feelings.

Creepy, slow-burn portraits of alienation and discordant relationships have been a recurring motif in these filmmakers' other shorts: Radcliff's "Jonathan's Chest" involves a teenager confronting the abrupt reappearance of a brother with a mysterious past, while Wolkstein's "Social Butterfly" finds a thieving interloper wandering through a house party and pretending to know its hosts. In "The Strange Ones," Sam maintains an outsider status everywhere he goes, whether confronting his old community or encountering new rural characters, and there's ample tension developed

around whether he'll manage to find his place in this alien setting or face a darker fate.

That question never reaches a satisfactory conclusion, and the movie ends just when it manages to complicate his scenario. By retreating from the open-ended narrative to explain all the backstory and reach a tidy conclusion, "The Strange Ones" loses much of its intrigue and ends on an abrupt note. But the journey there is compelling enough to make it worth the investment, offering further confirmation of two directors keen on bucking expectations, and likely to keep it up as they continue to hone their talent. "The Strange Ones" isn't a giant step forward for the pair, but it's just enough to prove they have the chops to take one.

**Grade: B+**

*"The Strange Ones" premiered at the 2017 SXSW Film Festival. It is currently seeking distribution.*

[Stay on top of the latest film and TV news! Sign up for our email newsletters here.](#)