

# SXSW Film Review: The Strange Ones

High-caliber thriller achieves the perfect balance of story and mood

By [Sean L. Malin](#), 12:15AM, Sun. Mar. 12, 2017

A long-awaited adaptation of the remarkable 2011 short film of the same name, *The Strange Ones* reiterates the immense focus and precision of its co-directors, Lauren Wolkstein and Christopher Radcliff.



The pressure must have been significant for these filmmakers, both of whose respected shorts – Radcliff’s “Jonathan’s Chest” and Wolkstein’s “Social Butterfly” - have played festivals around the world, including nearly annually at SXSW. For them to deliver something of great taste was a given; but given the responsibility of their mutual acclaim, it is a warm, deep breath of air that their accomplished film offers admirers and newcomers alike a film as perfectly calibrated in story and mood as any debut feature is likely to be this year.

It stars a gifted teenager, James Freedson-Jackson, and *Magic Mike's* Alex Pettyfer as a motley duo driving through God-knows-where, USA (filming took place on location in New York State). Those who have seen the short may recall that the older man – who Pettyfer portrays as a controlling, wounded person fresh out of his own adolescence – is not his companion's brother. But their relationship right to the end remains an enigma, as the boy falsely calls himself "Jeremiah" and refuses to answer questions about their journey to sympathetic strangers.

Freedson-Jackson and Pettyfer, stepping in for Tobias Campbell and David Call from the original short, are an electrifying team, using their faces almost exclusively to communicate feelings for one another. Radcliff's script, as Freedson-Jackson noted in the post-film Q&A, relied heavily on the younger actor's reaction shots when the pair's circumstances become dire. In certain two-shot exchanges, one actor's glance appears adoring and sensual, while the next seems aggressive, macho, and vengeful. It was a tremendous creative risk for Radcliff and Wolkstein to pivot their feature debut on the facial responses of a young actor, but Freedson-Jackson's "blank" look actually suggests an impossible intellect and self-control. It is a sensational central performance, and Pettyfer, as his non-guardian, serves as a powerful spotter.

Wolkstein's and Radcliff's direction and editing only extend outward in technical excellence from the actors with a tight orbit of handsome visual and aural contributions. Brian McOmber presents yet another tense synth score, this time including a trilling flute that becomes increasingly distressing in its recurrence. But at the film's World Premiere Saturday, the audience focused heavily on Todd Banhazl's sumptuous photography, and rightly so. Banhazl appropriates the noir-inflected blacks and grainy woodland images of *Martha Marcy May Marlene* here to disturbing effect; The characters' world is cavernous, blurry, and very, very wet. The film's photography is at odds without itself – utterly scary, but never less than beautiful.

Water is among many key motifs the filmmakers hone in on, along with childhood trauma, sexuality's fluidity, and the karmic nature of coincidence. Here is a film with ever-expanding mental boundaries, one which concludes as it opens: inconsequentially, unpredictably, and provocatively. By firing on all cylinders, *The Strange Ones* becomes the quite rare short-to-feature film adaptation that completely warrants six years of anticipation.

## [The Strange Ones](#)

Narrative Feature Competition, World Premiere

Sunday, March 12, 3pm, Alamo Lamar D

Wednesday, March 15, 8.30pm, Alamo Lamar E