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Review 'The Strange Ones' is an odyssey and a mystery

By **Katie Walsh**

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Alex Pettyfer in the film "The Strange Ones." (Vertical Entertainment)

“**T**he Strange Ones” is a mysterious puzzle box of a film, anchored by a quietly mesmerizing performance by James Freedson-Jackson as a young boy on the road with an older companion. A bearded and bulked-up

Alex Pettyfer is nearly unrecognizable as his traveling buddy, whom we're never sure is a protector or a threat.

Co-writers/directors Christopher Radcliff and Lauren Wolkstein slowly parcel out and then scramble information about the two. Are they brothers on a camping trip? Runaways? Fugitives? With his placid face and clear, blue-eyed stare, the young boy seems an innocent caught up with a dangerous man. It's not until much later that we begin to wonder about his faculties with the truth, and even his understanding of reality.

The film, which largely takes place in woods and farms and roadside motels, is beautifully shot by Todd Banhazl, with rich texture and filtered natural light that belies its digital provenance.

The first half of the film is eerie and controlled, while the second half tends toward narrative abstraction, timeline hops, dream sequences and moments of fantasy, erring on the side of confusing. But it's an artful, boundary-pushing debut from Radcliff and Wolkstein, with breakthrough performances from Freedson-Jackson, and Pettyfer, perhaps signaling a new direction in his career.

'The Strange Ones'

Running time: 1 hour, 24 minutes

Rating: R, for some disturbing violent images, and brief sexual material

Playing: Laemmle Music Hall, Beverly Hills, Oct. 20-26 qualifying run; opens Jan. 5, 2018