

STRANGER THINGS

A FILM BY ELEANOR BURKE AND RON EYAL

Winner Grand Jury Prize Best Feature Narrative
2010 Woodstock Film Festival

Official Selection 2011 Slamdance Film Festival

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Overview

Stranger Things is the first feature film by Eleanor Burke and Ron Eyal. It was filmed with a light, fast-moving crew and shot in script order. The filmmakers directed the actors using untraditional methods: collaborating with them to build their characters and back-stories, and only revealing the script to them in segments, so the actors would only ever know what their character would know in any particular scene. The result is an unusually delicate, intimate and surprising film.

Stranger Things Logline

An unusual and touching bond develops when grieving Oona reaches out to a mysterious homeless man, offering him a place to stay in her garden shed.

Stranger Things Synopsis

Oona, a young woman dealing with the loss of her mother, reaches out to a stranger: Mani, a mysterious homeless man of Middle-Eastern origin, whom she invites to stay in her garden shed. Despite the space between them, Oona and Mani gradually form an unusual intimacy.

This delicate and compelling film, set on the south coast of England, explores themes of friendship, grief and human vulnerability.

Long Synopsis

Oona, a recent university graduate, returns to her mother's house, a small run-down cottage in a quiet village on the south coast of England. Her mother has died several months previously and Oona is left to sort out her belongings and deal with the property.

After showing a realtor around the house, Oona thinks herself alone in her childhood home until a noise in another room alerts her to the fact that there is an intruder on the property. Oona cautiously approaches and as the intruder emerges through a doorway, she attacks him with a broom. The man, a young vagrant of Middle-Eastern origin, flees from the house.

After the incident, Oona finds a sketchbook belonging to the intruder. Seeing a connection between him and her artist mother, she goes in search of the vagrant and finds him hidden in a bus shelter. Oona invites the vagrant, Mani, to stay in her garden shed.

Mani leaves Oona, but soon returns to her and the shed. He begins to reach out to Oona as she reaches out to him. As a former anthropology student, Oona is interested in interviewing Mani. Mani is pushed away by her efforts. But despite the space between them, Oona and Mani gradually form an unusual intimacy.

Oona eventually invites Mani inside her home, where he helps her clean up and indirectly helps her deal with the loss of her mother. However, Mani also has a past that pulls upon him, and which threatens to disturb the bubble Oona and Mani have created around them.

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About the Filmmakers

Eleanor Burke and Ron Eyal are a writing and directing duo who use actor-centric methods to create a fresh style of dramatic filmmaking. They were recently featured in *Filmmaker Magazine's 25 New Faces of Independent Film*.

Burke and Eyal grew up far across the pond from each other, one in England, the other in California. They met while attending NYU's Graduate Film Program and started their collaboration with the short film *Ruth and Maggie*, which premiered at the 2006 Slamdance Film Festival. Both filmmakers have received several accolades for their films and screenplays, including a fellowship award for excellence for Eleanor Burke from director Ang Lee. Their debut feature, *Stranger Things*, was an official selection of the 2009 IFP Narrative Filmmaker Lab, where it won the lab's top award.

Stranger Things won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Feature Narrative at the 2010 Woodstock Film Festival.

Michael Taylor, Editor

Michael Taylor is a New York City-based film editor. His narrative credits include Julia Loktev's *Day Night Day Night*, winner, Le Prix Regards Jeune at Cannes, and Zeina Durra's *The Imperialists Are Still Alive!*, starring Elodie Bouchez and Jose Maria de Tavira, Sundance Film Festival. He also cut Peter Callahan's *Against the Current*, starring Joseph Fiennes and Mary Tyler Moore, Sundance Film Festival, Kevin Asher Green's *Homework*, winner of the Grand Jury Prize at Slamdance, and George LaVoo's *A Dog Year*, nominated for an Emmy award for Jeff Bridges' leading role. He is currently editing Julia Loktev's new film *The Loneliest Planet*.

Taylor's documentary credits include Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's segment of *Freakonomics*, closing night film of the Tribeca Film Festival, Mitch McCabe's *Youth Knows No Pain*, for HBO Documentary Films, Margaret Brown's *The Order of Myths*, Sundance Film Festival, and winner, Peabody Award and Stranger than Fiction Spirit Award, as well as Brown's *Be Here to Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt*. His most recent documentary credits are Josef Astor's *A Lost Bohemia* and Melanie Judd and Susan Motamed's *Adopt Me, Michael Jordan*.

Director's Statement

Although *Stranger Things* grew from a number of ideas, circumstances and influences, the first seed of inspiration for the film was the life of my Grandmother, Patricia Burke, who was itinerant at various times and who felt a great pull to the sea. Partly because of her, I've always been interested in outsiders and in the complex social relationships that exist between "inside" and "outside." *Stranger Things* is a story about those relationships and about the power of individuals to change these dynamics.

My directing partner, Ron Eyal and I met in 2003. We were in the same class in NYU's Graduate Film Program. We admired each other's work and started collaborating on our projects, one of which was a short film, *Ruth and Maggie*, which we co-wrote and which Ron directed and I shot. We filmed this short in London and it was on this project that we met Bridget Collins. Soon afterwards, back in New York, we started working with Adeel Akhtar, who was training at the Actors Studio.

At this time, Ron and I were developing a philosophy of filmmaking that prioritized the actor and shed a lot of the traditional methods of large-scale production. We wanted to tell intimate, deeply-felt stories, the likes of which one could not achieve on a more conventional set. Bridget and Adeel were both outstanding new talents and they were great collaborators. When Ron and I decided to co-direct a feature, we knew we wanted to work with them both. We wrote the screenplay for them and invited them into the development process. We also wrote for the house featured in the film and, of course, for the surrounding area of East Sussex, England. It's an area that my grandmother would have loved and a place that accommodates great contrasts, which feed into the film.

During the lead-up to production and the 30-day shoot itself, Ron, Adeel, Bridget and I stayed on location, living in the house. We kept our set lightweight and flexible. Although I was the cinematographer, Ron and I collaborated to create the look of the film. We both worked with the actors and we gave them freedom to explore the scenes. Although we work-shopped the characters with the actors, we only revealed the story to them piecemeal during the shoot. Because of this, their reactions were incredibly fresh and we could trust them to discover real moments that went beyond the words written in the script.

As a result, *Stranger Things* reveals the gradual growth of an unexpected relationship in an intimate and delicate way, portraying the decision to step outside and the process of letting someone in.

– Eleanor Burke, co-director *Stranger Things*

CAST

Bridget Collins.....Oona
Adeel Akhtar.....Mani

(in order of appearance)

Victoria Jeffrey.....Lil
Kim Joyce.....Estate Agent
Keith Parry.....Bagman
Taran Wiseman.....Girl
Vivienne Burke.....Town Resident
Rebecca Ward.....Mother

FILMMAKERS

Writer/Directors.....Eleanor Burke and Ron Eyal
Producers.....Eleanor Burke, Ron Eyal
Director of Photography.....Eleanor Burke
Production Designer.....Kristen Adams
Editors.....Michael Taylor, Eleanor Burke
Production Manager.....Lindsay MacKay
Production Sound Mixer.....Ed Barnes
Sound Editor.....Daniel Pagan

77 minutes | Shot on DV, Exhibited on HD | 16:9 | Color | 5.1 Sound Mix
UK / USA | 2010

FILMMAKER's annual survey of new talent.

25

NEW FACES

of independent film

Morgan Jon Fox
Geoff Marslett
 Michael Palmieri & Donal Mosher
The Purchase Brothers
 Paula Huidobro

Nicole Oppen
Geoff Marslett
 Jessica Oreck
 Michael Palmieri & Donal Mosher
The Purchase Brothers
 Ian Olds

Steph Green
 Rooney Mara
 Tina Mabry
 Lest Zombies
 Jody Lee Lipes
 Jeff Mizushima
 Nat Sanders
 Asiel Norton
 Paola Mendoza
Eleanor Burke & Ron Eyal
 Frankie Latina

Bradford Young
 Lena Dunham
 Andrew Deizer
 Sebastián Silva
 Derek Cianfrance
 Destin Daniel Cretton

Eleanor Burke & Ron Eyal

"At some point in her life my grandmother was a bit of a wanderer," explains New York City-based but U.K.-born Eleanor Burke. "She was attracted to the beach and the seaside, and she was itinerant at different times of her life." Says Burke's partner, Ron Eyal, "We thought about that idea and then imagined Adeel [Akhtar] in that role [of the wanderer]." With Akhtar, another lead actor, Bridget Collins, and a small house belonging to a family friend near Hastings, U.K., Burke and Eyal riff on the themes of homelessness, loss and human vulnerability in their delicately beautiful debut feature, *Stranger Things*, currently in postproduction.

Stranger Things tells the simple story of a vagrant, played by Akhtar, who breaks into the home of a young woman's (Collins) recently deceased grandmother. Of course, a friendship follows, but *Stranger Things*' best qualities can't be captured in a plot synopsis. It's a small-scale story sensitively attuned to its fine actors as well as broader themes of responsibility, loss and community.

Burke and Eyal, who are engaged, met at NYU Film School in 2003. "We've worked on a lot of projects together," Burke says, "like documentary things I shot and Ron's directed. This was the first time we co-directed something, but we were always on the same page." "Before we shot," continues Eyal, "we got advice from the faculty at NYU, who all said we should split it up," with one director handling actors and the other overseeing the camera. "Eleanor's background is as a d.p., and we knew we wanted her to shoot it, but really quickly we learned that things didn't have to be that strictly divided. We both worked with the actors and I was involved with setting up shots. It was very fluid."

The couple worked at a homeless shelter in England while preparing the film. "There were people who were very vulnerable and who were in poor mental health and then there were recent immigrants who didn't have a place to go," says Burke. "We would prepare meals for them and just sit and talk." "It's stuff you just take for granted, like people enjoy eye contact and don't always get it from people," adds Eyal.

Burke and Eyal say they have other films to do together, but first they've got to finish *Stranger Things*, which recently completed the IFP's Rough Cut Lab. "We both like to tell stories about people on a very human level," says Burke. "We were hoping to make something that would deal with real emotions and real moments." Concludes Eyal, "It's kind of a tiny drama but we hope it can connect with people." — S.M.

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