

STRANGER THINGS

A FILM BY ELEANOR BURKE AND RON EYAL



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Overview

Stranger Things is the story of an unexpected encounter which leads to a surprising friendship between a vulnerable young woman and a streetwise homeless man. It is set in a remote village on the south coast of England: a place where the usual suspicion and indifference of modern life exist, but where quiet and isolation allow them to have less of a hold.

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. The result is an unusually delicate, intimate and surprising film.

The film stars Adeel Akhtar (*Four Lions*, *The Dictator*) and new talent Bridget Collins.

The film was shot on location in and around Pett and Hastings in Sussex, England.

The behind-the-scenes team includes editor Michael Taylor (*The Loneliest Planet*, *Day Night Day Night*) and production designer Kristen Adams (*As I Lay Dying*, *The Broken Tower*).

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.

Synopsis

This delicate and compelling film, set against the backdrop of a quiet seaside village in England, explores themes of friendship, grief and human vulnerability. A young isolated woman, Oona, returns to her childhood home as she grieves the loss of her artistic mother and deals with her belongings. Soon after she arrives she reaches out to Mani, a mysterious homeless man whom she invites to stay in her garden shed.

Despite the space between them, Oona and Mani gradually form an unusual and touching bond. With a great sense of calm and joy, we are reminded that anything in life is possible and that very often strange things can bring with them unexpected happiness.

Winner, Grand Jury Prize for Best Narrative Film, 2011 Slamdance Film Festival;
Winner, Grand Jury Prize for Best U.K Narrative Film, 2011 Raindance Film Festival;
Winner, Grand Jury Prize for Best Narrative Film, 2010 Woodstock Film Festival.

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Short 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

On a bright spring day, Oona (Bridget Collins) a 21-year old recent university graduate, returns to her mother's house: a small run-down cottage surrounded by an overgrown garden and overlooking the sea. Stepping out of the sunshine into the dim interior of her childhood home, the task facing Oona is overwhelming. This is the first time she has been back since her mother died a couple of months ago and now she must sort out her belongings and deal with the property.

Spending her first night back in the village with a neighbour, Oona takes refuge in tape-recording memories of her mother. Meanwhile a mysterious vagrant of Middle-Eastern origin, Mani (Adeel Akhtar), breaks into the empty house through a back window.

Mani is there asleep when Oona returns the next day with a realtor, but wakes up in time to hide himself away. When the realtor leaves, 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. Alarmed and vulnerable, Oona approaches the sound and, when the intruder emerges, she attacks him with a broom. An injured Mani flees from the house.

On discovering an abandoned sketchbook belonging to Mani, Oona sees a connection between him and her artist mother. She goes in search of Mani and finds him hidden in a bus shelter. Oona invites him to stay the night in her garden shed.

When Mani moves on the next day, he finds himself once again without shelter and returns to Oona and the shed. Stumbling upon Oona in her grief, Mani reaches out to her as she reaches out to him. Despite the space between them, Oona and Mani gradually form an unusual intimacy.

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

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About the Directors

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 awards for their films and screenplays, including a fellowship award for excellence for Eleanor Burke from director Ang Lee. Between them the two are fellows of the Toronto International Film Festival Talent Lab, the Berlin Talent Campus, the Edinburgh International Film Festival Talent Lab and the BFI London Film Festival's "Think Shoot Distribute" lab.

Their debut feature, *Stranger Things*, won the top prize at the 2009 IFF Narrative Filmmaker Lab. It went on to win the Grand Jury Prize at the Slamdance Film Festival and the Woodstock Film Festival and Best UK Feature at the Raindance Film Festival, among other awards. Burke and Eyal are currently developing their second feature *Bright As Day*, which was a selection of the Hampton International Film Festival's Screenwriting Lab and the Sundance Creative Producing Lab.

Michael Taylor, Editor

Michael Taylor is a New York City-based film editor. His narrative credits include Julia Loktev's *The Loneliest Planet*, starring Gael Garcia Bernal, Loktev's *Day Night Day Night*, winner, Le Prix Regards Jeune at Cannes, and Bryan Witzmann's *About Sunny*.

He also edited Rick Alverson's *The Comedy*, starring Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim, Michael Walker's *Price Check*, Ron Eyal and Eleanor Burke's *Stranger Things*, winner, Grand Jury Prize at the Slamdance Film Festival, Zeina Durra's *The Imperialists Are Still Alive!*, Peter Callahan's *Against the Current*, Kevin Asher Green's *Homework*, winner, Grand Jury Prize at Slamdance and George LaVoo's *A Dog Year*, which was nominated for an Emmy award for Jeff Bridges' leading role.

Taylor's documentary credits include Margaret Brown's Peabody Award-winning *The Order of Myths*, winner, Truer than Fiction Spirit Award. He is currently editing Liza Johnson's *Hateship, Loveship*, starring Kristen Wiig, Guy Pearce, Nick Nolte and Jennifer Jason Leigh.

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Director's Statement

The initial inspiration for *Stranger Things* was the life of my grandmother, who was homeless and itinerant at various times and who felt a great pull to the sea. Because of her, I've always been interested in outsiders and in 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 worked in a homeless shelter while developing the film. We were both struck by how isolating homelessness can be. There's a lack of human interaction, a lack of eye contact that is hard to imagine.

The script for *Stranger Things* was written specifically for the lead actors Bridget Collins and Adeel Akhtar. We also wrote for the location 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 all stayed on location, living in the house featured in the film.

In directing the actors, we used 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. 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.

– Eleanor Burke, co-director *Stranger Things*

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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 | HD | 16:9 | Color | 5.1 Sound Mix
USA / UK | 2010

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FESTIVALS & AWARDS

Slamdance Film Festival	<i>Winner Grand Jury Prize, Best Narrative Feature</i>
Raindance Film Festival	<i>Winner Grand Jury Prize, Best U.K. Feature</i>
Woodstock Film Festival	<i>Winner Grand Jury Prize, Best Narrative Feature</i>
Karlovy Vary Int'l Film Festival	<i>Official Selection in Forum of Independents</i>
BAMcinemaFEST	<i>Official Selection</i>
BendFilm Festival	<i>Winner Best Director</i>
Phoenix Film Festival	<i>Winner Best Director</i>
Lighthouse Film Festival	<i>Winner Grand Jury Prize, Best Narrative Feature</i>
Woods Hole Film Festival	<i>Honorable Mention from Feature Narrative Jury</i>
Rhode Island Int'l Film Festival	<i>Honorable Mention for Best Screenplay</i>
Wisconsin Film Festival	<i>Official Selection</i>
Ashland Film Festival	<i>Finalist for Best Feature, Finalist for Acting Ensemble</i>
Nashville Film Festival	<i>Official Selection</i>
Atlanta Film Festival	<i>Official Selection</i>
Little Rock Film Festival	<i>Official Selection</i>
SANFIC	<i>Official Selection</i>
Montreal World Film Festival	<i>Official Selection</i>
Corona Cork Film Festival	<i>Official Selection</i>

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Stranger Things

Writers-directors Burke and Eyal show a genuine gift for visual storytelling and emotional catharsis.

By JOHN ANDERSON

In delicate, dignified, soulful "Stranger Things," writers-directors Eleanor Burke and Ron Eyal show a genuine gift for visual storytelling and emotion. Like its diverse characters, this festival fave, which focuses on the relationship between a lonely woman and a homeless man, should find love, perhaps on arthouse circuit, certainly on VOD/DVD.

Shot on the English seaside and with a Dreyer-esque instinct for the complexity and frankness of the human face, the pic is essentially a two-hander, its action muted and its pretensions modest. At the same time, its theme -- the capacity of the heart to make connections, under odd and unlikely circumstances -- harbors something titanic. Much of this is conveyed via the directors' appreciation for revealing detail, and eloquent gesture.

Oona (Bridget Collins) has come back to settle her late mother's affairs, at the cottage she kept near the ocean. Upon arriving, Oona assesses the environs with both a weary and guilty eye: The place is a mess, bordering on the squalid, indicating Oona hasn't been there lately, that she neglected her mother, that the elder woman wasn't equipped for living alone and that the relationship between mother and daughter -- who, we will learn, certainly has the capacity for caring -- was best served by distance. Burke and Eyal tell us this with such graceful economy it imparts a sort of joy, even though one of the things they show us quite plainly is that Oona is a woman alone.

But not for long: Mani (Adeel Akhtar), a homeless man, mistakenly assumes Oona's house is empty, and is discovered and chased off by a frightened Oona. Her fear passes quickly -- Mani has dropped a sketchbook, which reveals his considerable artistic talent -- and just as quickly her compassion comes to the fore: She tracks Mani down, invites him to stay in a smaller structure behind her house (a childish "Oona" is scrawled on the door). Slowly, warily but deliberately, they gravitate toward friendship -- although mutual salvation may be a more accurate term.

Conflicts arise -- Mani has an allegiance to street life that prove problematic, for instance -- but the thrust of "Stranger Things" is pure humanity.

Both Akhtar and Collins exude intelligence and suggest a rare kind of inner life. Burke's camera allows a great deal of dramatic leeway, and both thespians take full advantage: One of the assets of "Stranger Things" is its air of mystery, and the actors give the indelible impression that they have much locked away inside.

Tech credits are good, especially Burke's intuitive, expressive camera work.

FILMMAKER's annual survey of new talent.

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NEW FACES

of independent film

Morgan Jon Fox Nicole Oppner Tina Mabry Steph Green Rooney Mara
Geoff Marslett Jessica Oreck Jody Lee Lipes Jeff Mizushima Lost Zombies
Michael Palmieri & Donal Mosher Nat Sanders Asiel Norton
The Purchase Brothers Paola Mendoza Eleanor Burke & Ron Eyal
Paula Huidobro Ian Olds Frankie Latina
Bradford Young Lena Dunham Andrew Betzer
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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