



STRANGER

THE DIRECTOR AND STARS OF *STRANGER BY THE LAKE* TELL ATTITUDE ABOUT MAKING THEIR RIVETING CRUISING THRILLER

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BY MATT MUELLER

LAKE



If you haven't already, chances are you're planning to catch the erotically charged French thriller *Stranger By The Lake* while it's heating up cinemas with its uninhibited presentation of sexual abandonment. With its spicy gay sex scenes (including a cum shot) and actors baring all for most of their screen time, we wouldn't be surprised if critics were dismissing *Stranger* as art-wank porn. But far, far from it: *Stranger By The Lake* has been embraced with a critical fervour that acknowledges the intelligence at work in its story of how far one man is willing to go for love, even when he's fully aware that the object of his desire is a ruthless killer.

Stranger By The Lake's director Alain Guiraudie and two stars, Pierre Deladonchamps and Christophe Paou, sat down to discuss the themes, which kicks off as an idyllic portrayal of sunshine, joy and pleasure and ends in an after-dark nightmare, not to mention the challenges of shooting its no-holds-barred sex scenes. "I wanted to unite the spiritual depth of a physical embrace with the mechanics of sexuality, while avoiding pornography," explains Guiraudie when we meet him in a swish London hotel.

The man in question is Franck, who spends his summer cruising a popular spot. Every day, he strolls to the beach, swims, catches rays and cruises the woods; when he eyes tall, dark and handsome Michel, it's a thunderbolt attraction. Michel's affections are initially spoken for. But even after witnessing Michel drown his pretty-boy lover, Franck can't help surrendering to his passion. Why he follows this self-destructive path (which includes forsaking safe sex) is "la grande question," says Guiraudie: "How far are you willing to go to live out your desires? How strong is our sense of moral obligation given a powerful sexual attraction? For me, those are interesting



questions in an age where we're so frantically involved in seeking satisfaction. I don't know where or how far that's going to take us."

Stranger By The Lake is powered by Guiraudie's belief that gay sexuality has been subsumed into consumer culture. "I have the impression that the sexual revolution of the 70s has led us to a situation today where there's almost a social obligation to climax," says the filmmaker, who brings an intimate familiarity to the kind of naturist cruising ground he presents. "I think of the spots where men used to go to cruise and everyone had a place, regardless of their appearance or age. Now everyone goes to sex clubs, and there are less places like this."

When he was casting the film, notices specifying the nudity "and more" weeded out boys from men, and 500 actors auditioned for the two main roles. While Guiraudie insists it

never mattered to him whether the actors were gay, he also reveals that one of his two leads is. You can't help wondering if a straight actor could ever feel entirely at ease in some of *Stranger's* sexual sequences. "It's true that in some of the situations maybe the straight actor has to act more than the gay actor," laughs Guiraudie. Deladonchamps and Paou have both been insisting they're straight in interviews, so we'll have to guess which one is doing more 'acting'.

Before the shoot, Guiraudie spent a day videoing the two men in the nude to make sure they felt comfortable getting physical with each other. But boundaries were drawn from the outset, with neither actor wanting to take part in the unsimulated sex scenes between their characters. In the end body doubles were used for these pornographic vignettes – willing actors similar in physique to the two stars,

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who, while both good-looking, aren't perfectly sculpted gym bunnies. "I had boundaries," says Deladonchamps. "I didn't want to do the sex scenes but for being naked, I don't really care. I'm not proud of my body but I'm not ashamed of it either. Being naked was my costume."

"We had to be intimate and know each other's bodies, but it wasn't a big deal," he adds. "Sometimes it was embarrassing but sometimes it was funny. I was not attracted to Christophe at all but we had a big affection for each other and we used this to pretend we were a couple. I know it's a big, intense love story on the screen but we were like best friends having sex."

The film is rife with humorous observation about the procedures and politics of cruising, poking gentle fun at familiar figures like the voyeuristic wanker but never sneering; the most prickly inquisition comes from a detective who enters this cruising kingdom to investigate the murder and questions the anonymous ideology of its subjects. Shot in the southeast corner of France, it might look warm and summery on screen, but it was actually early autumn; the lake was bitterly cold and on some days the actors were freezing their arses off. "Sometimes it was horrible," says Deladonchamps. "It was sunny but the wind was so cold and you just had to pretend that you were relaxing on the beach and having a nice swim. Our lips were purple."

For his co-star, it could have been even worse. Guiraudie asked Paou to shave off all his body hair so Michel could be "like the mermaid of the lake". He obliged but subsequently developed an allergic reaction. "I liked the look but my skin didn't, so we couldn't keep it," chuckles Paou, who still sports the 70s porn star moustache he grew for the film.

For depicting casual sex in the woods in an



OPENING SPREAD: FRANCK AND MICHEL BY THE LAKE AS THE SUN SETS

OPPOSITE PAGE: FRANCK AND MICHEL ON THE BEACH; CRUISING UNDER THE TREES

THIS PAGE: KISSING IN THE WOODS; FRANCK CRUISING IN THE BUSHES

unsleazy light, *The Guardian* suggested that *Stranger By The Lake* might make an instructive double bill with *Cruising* – somewhat a case of ingesting the poison pill and following it up with an antidote. Guiraudie agrees it's a perverse idea: "The big problem with *Cruising*, apart from the fact the director isn't gay, is that Al Pacino is incapable of kissing a man. Apparently, Al Pacino says he had no idea what type of film he was making. It's a film he continually denies."

Stranger By The Lake had a glowing reception in France ("I thought opinions would be much more divided") but Guiraudie says his native country still has a deep-rooted ambivalence towards its gay citizens, citing a begrudging level of tolerance "as long as homosexuals stay in their corner". You only have to look at the huge protests that greeted France's legalisation of gay marriage last year to realise he's right.

And Guiraudie brings his own ambivalence to that issue. "As a gay man, I'm not interested in marriage at all," he blasts. "It's old Judeo-Christian idiocy. I demonstrated in favour of it because there was so much opposition, but even among the French gay community we were not that motivated to change the law."

Even as acceptance of gay lifestyles in mainstream society continues to expand, Guiraudie believes that promiscuity will always have a place in queer culture. "I think that straight love and gay love are very different," he says. "Maybe that's the result of moral representations in our head, or our education. Heterosexual love is based on fidelity, much more so than gay sexuality for which cruising will always have an important part to play."

• *STRANGER BY THE LAKE* IS IN CINEMAS NOW AND AT BFI FLARE ON MARCH 30