



PREVIEW

The Strays

+ Q&A with writer-director Nathaniel Martello-White and actors Ashley Madekwe, Bukky Bakray, Jordan Myrie, Maria Almeida and Samuel Small

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

A dark, disturbing thriller dealing with issues of generational grief and Black identity, *The Strays* stars BAFTA-nominated Ashley Madekwe (*County Lines*) as Neve, the deputy head of a private school who lives with her doting husband Ian (Justin Salinger) and teenage children Sebastian (Samuel Small) and Mary (Maria Almeida) in a nice suburban house in an idyllic country town. But her carefully crafted upper-middle-class life begins to unravel with the arrival of Abigail (Bukky Bakray) and Marvin (Jordan Myrie), two shadowy figures from her past who threaten to destroy everything she's created for herself.

'It's a psychological thriller exploring generational trauma through the context of a family,' reveals award-winning British actor, playwright and short filmmaker Nathaniel Martello-White making his feature directorial debut with *The Strays* which constantly reinvents itself to keep both the audience and its characters on edge. 'On a story level, it's a kind of fable. Then, on a cinematic level, it's playing with, and paying homage to, those movies where you have strangers turn up in quaint, perfect suburban towns. Films that were influential to me were Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* and *Hidden* along with Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*. So the story's leaning into genre, but is also playing with form in each chapter, where we have these gearshifts in terms of the style of storytelling. We switch POV and humanise the people who we set up as threatening and menacing.'

Nathaniel Martello-White started working on the idea for *The Strays*, the seed of which came from a story he'd heard about a biracial woman who had given birth to two sets of children, the initial pair black, the second pair white passing, and who then refused to acknowledge the first pair after having the second. 'When I was told that story it really stayed with me,' Martello-White reveals.

'The idea of this woman who was so caught up in shame that she would deny the existence of her black children. Also, with *Torn*, I had written all these interesting and exciting women from my family, women of colour, and I felt for the first feature it was important to come from somewhere personal but also have the movie sit in a more commercial space, so it would be wider reaching. I've always loved suburban thrillers, so it was the marrying of those two things.'

'We were aware of and loved Nat's work as playwright and actor when we started discussing ideas for a possible feature,' says producer Tristan Goligher. 'He had written and directed several thrilling, genre-hopping short films that had marked him out as a very special talent. From the first time he pitched the original kernel of *The Strays* we felt we had something special. A story that was personal, bold, universal and entertaining. So many aspects of his idea were attractive to us: a protagonist and a world that we hadn't seen

on screen before, the potential for great, multi-dimensional performances, and the promise of a thrilling ride.'

'What makes Nat such an exciting filmmaker is his unique tone and way of seeing the world,' says producer Valentina Brazzini. 'His work discusses political and societal issues through a stylish genre lens. We are always attracted by stories that challenge the viewer and highlight how people make extreme choices about the lives they want to lead. But what made *The Strays* stand out was Nat's ambition and cinematic vision, which elevated a powerful drama into an edge-of-your-seat spectacle.'

'Neve is a chameleon who has created a picture-perfect family life, home and career and has worked hard to blend in within a community of middle-class white people,' says Brazzini. 'Striving to be the best under any circumstances, she troops on, blocking out the daily micro aggressions from the members of her community. It is a high wire act – she knows that she will never truly be one of them – so she must always go above and beyond in all areas of her life to keep the plates spinning. She blocks out any references to her past, terrified that one slip and she will be found out.'

But when we meet her, she has got so used to her new identity that Neve isn't just a suit that she wears – Cheryl is buried very deep. It is only when she starts glimpsing Marvin and Abigail around the town that the woman she has pushed deep down inside her, starts to come out.'

Cheryl's reinvention takes physical form, too. As Neve, she's concealed her hair under a series of straight wigs that she keeps in a bedroom cabinet, attempting to pass herself off as white, and refusing to discuss her past with her husband, and her Black roots with her children who are struggling with their own issues of identity. 'Racial politics is, of course, inherent in the movie, but the wigs for me, and the way they present in that cabinet and her morning routine, is all about the cinema, rather than trying to make a worthy point,' insists Martello-White. 'We're playing with identity; with the way she presents like this chameleon. There is something about people of colour feeling if they get an opportunity to be successful in white society, can they take other people with them? Or is it just a one in, one out situation?'

Changing one's persona to fit a different society or social group is something that Martello-White can relate to on a personal level. 'I grew up in quite a working-class environment. I spend most of my time in middle-class environments and you find yourself code switching sometimes, shifting your accent, your cadence, and it shifts back again when you meet people from your area,' he admits. 'It becomes profound when you become successful and the relationship with where you've come becomes more complex and nuanced, because you want to be authentic, but you have changed. It's the same for Neve. She is white passing to a certain extent in that community.'

But while the film interrogates ideas of racial identity, it's not, says Martello-White, necessarily making a political statement. 'For me, it's about the way generational trauma spreads through a family,' he explains, 'because despite her colour, had she come from a more stable, healthy, nurturing environment, both as a child and as a woman, she might not have left. So, when Cheryl leaves, it's more about the impact that has. When Carl and Dione turn up, we see they're the product of her abandonment and the life she ran away from. It feels like the politics of the movie sits in them as characters.'

The Strays is split into several chapters or acts: 'Neve', 'Carl and Dione', 'Cheryl' and 'Family Reunion'. Each has its own title card, each has its own

narrative point of view, and each has its own a distinctive filming style. ‘The switch of point of view and reveal at the end of act one was conceived within the story from the start, and it’s one of the elements that made the film feel so original,’ says Brazzini. ‘This bold narrative structure was always organically linked to the story and its themes, which is what makes it so refreshing. It’s because of Nat’s unique story telling device that we are challenged to question our preconceptions about the characters and are made to change our allegiances as the story unfolds. When it came to film a script with such a strong structure in place, it was crucial to find a language that would enhance the peculiarity of each act, while still creating a coherent vision that could carry from start to finish. Together with cinematographer Adam Scarth and production designer Francesca Massariol, Nat refined a language with subtle but compelling differences between each act, each time creating a thrilling shift in gears.’

Production notes

THE STRAYS

Directed by: Nathaniel Martello-White

©: Netflix

A Production from: The Bureau, Air Street Films

Presented by: Netflix

Developed with the support of: BFI’s Film Fund through The National Lottery

Developed in association with: Film4

Executive Producer: Vincent Gadelle

Producers: Tristan Goligher, Rob Watson,Valentina Brazzini

Line Producer: Eimhear McMahon

Production Manager: Elena Santamaria

Production Accountant: Habib Rahman

Script Supervisor: Sara J. Doughty

1st Assistant Director: Steven O. Eniraiyetan

Casting Director: Shaheen Baig

Location Manager: Ben Lee

Unit Manager: Paul Young

Written by: Nathaniel Martello-White

Director of Photography: Adam Scarth

1st Assistant Camera: Malte Hübner

Gaffer: Seth Crosby

Editor: Mark Towns

Post-production Supervisor: Gerardine O’Flynn

Special Effects: Asylum Models & Effects Ltd

Visual Effects by: JAMVFX

Production Designer: Francesca Massariol

Art Director: Byron Broadbent

Prop Master: Steve Register

Costume Designer: Saffron Cullane

Hair and Make-up Designer: Bean Ellis

Music by: Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch

Production Sound Mixer: Jake Whitelee

Supervising Sound Editor: Joakim Sundström

Sound Designer: Steve Browell

Sound Mixer: Jake Whitelee

Re-recording Mixer: Per Boström

Sound Effects Editor: Steve Browell

Dialogue Editor: Jorge Alarcón

Stunt Co-ordinators: Paul Heasman, Belinda McGinley

Cast

Ashley Madekwe (*Neve/Cheryl*)

Bukky Bakray (*Abigail*)

Jorden Myrie Marvin)

Samuel Small (*Sebastian*)

Maria Almeida (*Mary*)

Justin Salinger (*Ian*)

Lucy Liemann (*Amanda*)

Tom Andrews (*Barry*)

Rob Jarvis (*Robert*)

Michael Warburton (*Kenneth*)

Alastair Ellery (*Keith*)

Vanessa Bailey (*Elle*)

Joanna Brooked (*Betty*)

Lara Steward (*sign teacher*)

Izzy Billingham (*Emily*)

Cornelius Booth (*Mr Fillet*)

Al Nedjari (*hotel manager*)

Rosie Akerman (*Sonia*)

Toto Bruin (*waitress*)

George Greenland (*delivery guy*)

Aliyah Odoffin (*voice of Rain*)

UK 2023

98 mins

Courtesy of Netflix

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Preview: Suzume + Q&A with Makoto Shinkai

Wed 1 Mar 18:00

Doctor Who: The Sea Devils + Q&A with Katy Manning

Sat 4 Mar 12:00

Glasgow Film Festival Preview: How to Blow Up a Pipeline

Sun 5 Mar 19:50

TV Preview: Inside No. 9 + Q&A with Steve Pemberton, Reece Shearsmith and Adam Tandy

Mon 6 Mar 18:15

WOW Festival Presents Prima Facie + panel discussion

Wed 8 Mar 18:15

Preview: Winners + Q&A with director Hassan Nazer

Thu 9 Mar 18:15

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 13 Mar 18:30

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