



The Characters are “Young. Wild. Free.” So is the Screenplay

NEWS

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PARK CITY, UTAH – JANUARY 22: (L-R) Algee Smith, Thembi L. Banks, Sanaa Lathan and Sierra Capri attend the 2023 Sundance Film Festival “Young, Wild, Free.” premiere at Library Center Theatre on January 22, 2023 in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Monica Schipper/Getty Images)

By Peter Jones

Teenage Brandon is having a bad week, and it’s about to get a lot worse.

A de facto parent to his younger brother and sister, Brandon has just lost his job at the local burger joint. He is also having problems at school, and his mother’s house is facing foreclosure. Then the hapless shoplifter is nearly killed, as a bystander, during an armed robbery.

Enter a teenage femme fatale, who is a bit more young, wild, and free than Brandon.

Young, Wild, Free. premiered January 22 at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival at the Park City Library. Director Thembi Banks and principal cast members were there for a Q&A.

“This is an epic journey where you’re going to be along for the ride and you never know what’s going to happen,” Banks says of her engrossing feature-film debut.

As a title, *Young, Wild, Free.* is as in keeping with the film’s structure as it is with its characters. The film teases the viewer, weaving at first from seemingly light comedy and romance to psychological drama in ways that trust the cast and the audience to find their way.

“We established the chemistry in rehearsal. We did a lot of rehearsal,” says Algee Smith, who plays Brandon. “Every time with rehearsal, we were just hammering through different emotions. We would practice different things to prepare for when we were in those moments. ... We had a toolbox of things we could grab onto.”

Brandon serves as a reluctant but diligent caretaker to his siblings and a mother with drug and mental health problems, but the teen’s life spirals out of control as he falls under the spell of Cassidy, a movie-loving bad girl who wears trouble like a smile. The relationship and Brandon’s grasp on reality are both tested when the teen starts letting Cassidy make the decisions.

The camera, like a character itself, studies this passionate, dangerous couple, never losing sympathy for Brandon in the film’s ambiguous reality, where things may not always be as they seem.

“Just letting the camera sit — and being in a close-up without words and without any type of action is sometimes one of the most beautiful moments you can have in a film,” Banks says. “Also, when you have strong actors, you just have to let them be.”

Sienna Capri, who plays Cassidy with determined sensuality, credits Banks for most everything.

“I’ve been on many sets, but I’ve never had the director take the time to actually get to know their actors and spend as much time as Thembi did,” Capri says. “It really helped our chemistry on screen, and I’m really glad everyone seemed to like it.”

Veteran actor Sanaa Lathan, who plays Brandon’s troubled mother, says *Young, Wild, Free.* was an easy project to say yes to.

“It was the script. It was the company. Fabulous people,” she says. “And then Thembi. For me, I am so excited to see women, especially Black women, behind the camera. In my long-ass career, there have been just a handful of them. It is so important because it’s a different reality we’re seeing. ... She really had a vision, and you can see how beautiful it was.”

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