

**CRITIC'S PICK**

# Talk to Me' Review: Letting the Wrong One In

A bereaved young woman falls under the spell of a dangerous artifact in this vibrant and poignant horror debut.

**By Jeannette Catsoulis**

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**Talk to Me** · NYT Critic's Pick · Directed by Danny Philippou, Michael Philippou · Horror, Thriller · R · 1h 34m

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Steeped in yearning and chockablock with shocks, “Talk to Me,” the first feature from the Australian filmmaking brothers Danny Philippou and Michael Philippou, is a horror movie huddled tightly around a story of filial grief. The result is an enduring melancholy that no amount of ghouls or gore can entirely dispel.

A shifting weave of tones and textures, the movie owes much of its potency to Sophie Wilde’s continually evolving lead performance as Mia, an anxious teenager barely coping with her mother’s death a year earlier. Unable to connect with her emotionally distant father (Marcus Johnson), Mia has created a

surrogate family with her best friend, Jade (Alexandra Jensen), and Jade's younger brother, Riley (a remarkable Joe Bird). Yet Mia remains alienated, hanging awkwardly apart from her raucous, thrill-seeking friends, wearing her bereavement like a scarlet letter.

An opportunity to belong arises at a rambunctious house party, where a new game involving an embalmed hand — frozen in the handshake position and supposedly chopped from a long-dead medium — is being played. The rules are simple: Grip the hand, say “Talk to me,” and a ghost will appear. If you are then brave enough to tender an invitation, the entity will obligingly possess you while your guffawing friends, smartphones at the ready, gleefully capture its disturbing, sometimes embarrassing behavior. The spirit's move-in is easy; the eviction is where things get sticky.

Talk To Me | Official Trailer 2 HD | A24



Distinguished by wonderfully gooey practical effects and deeply distressing visual jolts (especially when young Riley falls under the hand's malignant influence), "Talk to Me" has a hurtling energy that's often violent but never purposefully cruel. The film's ideas are not novel, or even fully formed (the narrative has more holes than a lace doily); yet by choosing simplicity over specifics, the filmmakers free themselves from the weight of words and open up space for a mood of intense disquiet and unusual sensitivity. Their empathy for Mia — whose longing for connection has blinded her to the game's deceptions and dangers — is unexpectedly touching.

Unsettlingly attuned to familiar teenage behavior (the movie's scariest aspect may be its plausibility), "Talk to Me" refuses to view the youngsters' addiction to the hand, and the online attention it attracts, with satirical remove: Even the film's jokes feel strangely tender. And thanks to the snaking skills of the cinematographer Aaron McLisky, the movie's action — like a stunning opening sequence that caused my jaw to drop — is swift without seeming slapdash. Scurrying excitedly through rowdy crowd scenes, McLisky's camera nimbly differentiates key players, keeping our eyes on the plot and chaos at bay.

Spooky and sad, kinetic and occasionally clumsy, "Talk to Me" is far from perfect but close to fine. Watching Mia enjoy a fleeting moment of joy as she and Riley belt out Sia's "Chandelier" in a car before screeching to a halt beside a mortally injured kangaroo, we sense a mounting inevitability. Wherever this journey is taking her, we can't help but feel she's been heading there for a very long time.

**Talk to Me**

Rated R for dog-snogging, toe-sucking and stabbing-stabbing-stabbing. Running time: 1 hour 34 minutes. In theaters.

**Talk to Me**    NYT Critic's Pick

**Directors** Danny Philippou, Michael Philippou

**Writers** Danny Philippou, Bill Hinzman, Daley Pearson, Sophie Wilde, Alexandra Jensen

**Stars** Ari McCarthy, Hamish Phillips, Kit Erhart-Bruce, Sarah Brokensha, Jayden Davison

**Rating** R

**Running Time** 1h 34m

**Genres** Horror, Thriller

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