

TAIKA WAITITI - Filmmaker

Growing up in Waihou Bay, a isolated coastal town on the East Coast of New Zealand, filmmaker Taika Waititi lived in awe of a certain pop phenomenon, recently departed; a king of sorts. “When we were kids we thought Michael Jackson was Maori. Same with Bob Marley, we thought he was from New Zealand”, says Waititi without a hint of irony, “Well, you know, they were brown.”

Jackson casts a long shadow over Waititi’s new film *Boy*; his second feature following *Eagle vs. Shark*. The film’s 11-year-old namesake, brilliantly portrayed by newcomer James Rolleston, is enthralled by the entertainer. It’s a hero worship second only to that of his absent father Alamein, whose sudden re-appearance after a lengthy stint in jail forces *Boy* to reconcile his prodigious fantasy world with reality. Waititi describes it as “a comedy about child neglect”. If that sounds like a jarring synopsis, rest assured, it works.

He elaborates, “Audiences are pretty au fait with the rules of genres these days. It’s hard to show them new things when you’re sticking to one genre and playing it by the book. I wanted to move away from that earnestness that so many American films are infused with. I’ve always tried to do that with stuff I’ve done – writing comedy with my friends in the past has shaped the way I deal with serious stuff”.

Boy is based on Waititi’s acclaimed short film *Two Cars, One Night*, which garnered a slew of international awards. “That was the starting point, really,” says Waititi. “*Boy* is basically about kids controlling their world – looking after themselves and how they see the adult world. It’s loosely based on how we used to live back in the ’80s, in the area where I’m from. In New Zealand, definitely, it was more a time of innocence,” Waititi continues. “When the floodgates opened, we had all this American culture coming through. With break-dancing and all the movies. I remember people telling me about computers and I was like ‘Oh! I really want to see a computer!’”

Waihou Bay was the only place Waititi could conceive making the film: “We shot in my childhood house. My aunty and cousins still live there,” he reveals. “It’s a really small community, so to get to get anything done you have to bring a crew into this tiny place, so we had to involve them all right from an early stage.”

Casting the lead role was crucial and proved to be a lengthy process. “The casting agent went to a whole lot of schools and held a whole lot of castings, going into small communities around the area. By the time we got to the rehearsal process, we realized that the boy that we had cast was a bit too old. It didn’t really work for the character so we cast him in another role and got in James, who we luckily found a couple of days before we started shooting. He was originally cast about seven months before, for a smaller part.”

Authenticity was of the utmost importance to Waititi – in fact, prior acting experience was not a pre-requisite. Rolleston had none, nor did Te Aho Eketone-Whitu who plays his younger brother. Alamein, the errant Father and object of Boy’s devotion was more difficult to cast – Waititi eventually assumed the role himself. “I wasn’t always going to do the part, I decided to about two months before. I felt that there aspects of the character that were quite specific. And I had quite specific requirements for it. I was confident in my comedic abilities and fairly confident with the dramatic stuff.”

Becoming an actor, not to mention a screenwriter and director, was not part of some grand design. Coming from a background in music and the visual arts, Waititi enrolled in a drama degree at university for unorthodox reasons. “I figured that the easiest degree was theatre, you could have a Bachelor of Arts in two years.” Nonetheless, he took to it with gusto, finding kindred spirits among his fellow students in Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie, aka Flight of The Conchords. “We were writing our own stuff because nobody would put us in plays. We were young and we hated mainstream theatre because it was just plays about old people” explains Waititi. “It was more that we knew what we didn’t like and tried to do the opposite and as a result we developed this irreverent comedy style”.

“We started writing for theatre and eventually I moved into film. I’d written ‘Two Cars, One Night’ as a dialogue between two kids and thought it might be good theatre piece.” However, he felt encouraged enough to move into another medium. The rest is, well, history. An Oscar nod, followed by an infamous prank, beamed across the world during the ceremony, in which he appeared to be dozing, as his name was announced onstage. What’s changed since?

“It has opened a lot of doors and I feel very fortunate,” he says, although he remains passionate about the industry he came up in. “I really want to make films in New Zealand. It’s hard when everyone

leaves all the time. I love the films that I'm making and the opportunities that I get. But at the same time, I've got an American agent and I read scripts and stuff and I've got a few films in development with some people over here. All my films fit into an undefinable genre... This film is funny but it's a drama. Eagle vs. Shark was a comedy but there was a lot of drama throughout it. It makes it hard to describe it, to market films like these. They're beautiful films but they don't follow quite the same rules." Waititi is breaking the rules in the best possible way: he's making his own. And be prepared. He's just getting started.

Interview Rebekah Davies