

Pana Hema Taylor - Actor

A community divided by two opposing factions – in this case Wairoa on New Zealand’s East Coast in the northernmost part of Hawke’s Bay. It’s a place where the Mongrel Mob and Black Power gangs coexist, not altogether harmoniously, as you might expect from a town with a population of some 8 and half thousand people.

Pana Hema Taylor, an actor, a young man of prodigious talent, grew up in this place where from an early age youth are drawn to the gangs; first as junior prospects, then as fully-fledged members. Taylor had an uncle in the Mob – he became involved with them at he the age of 12. He was tattooed with a dog’s paw on his shoulder, an insignia to mark his commitment. It looked like his future was mapped out; the die had been cast.

However his Mother had other plans. After a scrape with the law over a minor offense, Taylor was sent off to Aranui on the outskirts of Christchurch to live with his Father. It proved to be a turning point of immeasurable proportions. On a whim he joined the Drama department of the local Hugh School. Taylor resisted at first, still wearing gang colours to school, still entrenched in his upbringing. Eventually his interest was piqued enough to return to class, whereupon he found a mentor in the department’s head, Robert Gilbert.

Taylor was a natural, his raw talent nurtured by Gilbert, a man he now refers to as ‘Matua’, a term usually reserved for a male elder from one’s own family. Gilbert says he had the ‘it’ factor immediately. A scene-stealer, he quickly began to win accolades for his performances in the school productions.

“They were doing Hamlet in a Maori context”, recalls Taylor. “They offered me a part, so I said ‘Sure, I’d love to be in your play’. I did pretty well – I got an award for creating a magic moment. It was my first time on stage and I loved it. I totally loved it. I enjoyed the buzz. After that they asked me to try a

serious role. So we did (Stephen Sondheim's) 'Into the Woods'. I played this poncey prince and I also got an award for that".

The part of Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet came next. A tale of two warring families and the ensuing chaos? He surely had much to draw upon from his own experiences. Taylor was going from strength to strength and people were starting to take notice. "They saw something in me. It built up my confidence, I realized I wasn't too bad at acting".

Word was spreading about this rising star of regional theatre. The producers of a current affairs television series called 'Sunday' eventually approached Taylor in the hopes of bringing his captivating journey to people's attention. The result was 'Pana's Story'.

"They made a documentary about me. They had found out about my background and were interested in my story. They came to my school and stayed around for a couple of weeks. I took them to my whare (home) in Wairoa and they saw where I grew up".

Things moved fast after the piece was aired – firstly Taylor secured an acting agent in Auckland. "It went from there. I started getting work. My first job was on 'Whanau', an interactive drama series that teaches people how to speak Maori".

Someone else was taking notice of his ascent. Taika Waititi was in the process of casting his new film, when Taylor popped up on his radar. "I think Taika had watched the documentary or maybe heard about it. I got asked to do an audition for this film 'Boy'. I went away, didn't hear anything and thought "Oh yeah, that's over". Then they got me for a call back, and about a week later called to tell me I had the part".

While Taylor's part is a supporting role, he makes quite an impression in his featured scenes. More importantly, for him, working with Waititi proved to be an enlightening experience.

Taylor is full of nothing but praise for the Director. “I thought ‘Far out’, the dude’s written it, he’s directing it and he’s acting in it. He was doing so much on set, all the time. He’s a really unique person”.

Taylor is acutely aware that his life could have turned out very differently had he not been bitten bit the acting bug. Life as a gang member was almost a certainty had he not been taken under Gilbert’s wing. And now? “The doors are opening,” he says. They certainly are.

Intereview by Rebekah Davies