

Boy, Oh Boy!

An Interview with Taika Waititi

Geoff Lealand

Introduction

When I first wrote this, for *Metro* [Australia] in late April 2010, Taika Waititi's second feature film *Boy*, was in its fifth week of release and had become the leading film comedy ever made in New Zealand, overtaking the previous contender *Sione's Wedding* (Chris Graham, 2006). Since then, *Boy* has earned over \$NZ9.2 million at the local box office, to become the highest grossing New Zealand film ever; a rare success for a New Zealand film, where the 'rule of thumb is that one (New Zealand-made) feature film in ten makes a profit and one in eight breaks even on production costs'¹

In the ensuing months, my interview somehow got lost in the transition between departing and arriving editors at *Metro*, and subsequently never got published. Rather than abandon this interesting interview, which involved some organization, I am adding it to this issue of *Script*.

Both *Boy* and *Sione's Wedding* reflect the multicultural shape of contemporary New Zealand: the latter is a celebration of the Samoan community in suburban Auckland (the largest Pacific Island city on the globe) and the former, although set in a 1980's rural and Maori-centric New Zealand, has been enthusiastically received by broad and diverse audiences as a celebration of a New Zealand way of life which may or may not be disappearing.

Along with other recent releases such as *No.2* (Toa Fraser, 2006), *Second-Hand*

Wedding (Paul Murphy, 2008) and *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* (Leanne Pooley, 2009), *Boy* could be regarded at the most recent example of an interesting new turn in New Zealand film-making. Revoking his 1995 judgement of New Zealand film as a 'cinema of unease'², Sam Neill declared, in 2007, that it might now be considered a 'cinema at ease', in the wake of a number of sunnier, 'feel-good' local productions.

This could be an over-confident judgement by Neill, but *Boy* is certainly a sunny film in its setting (the beautiful Waihou Bay on the East Coast of New Zealand) and its lyrical portrayal of a recent past. But there are darker moments in its themes, in that it engages with parental neglect and self-delusion, principally through the figure of *Boy's* inept, wannabe-gangster father Alamein—a richly worked character played by Taika Waititi.

Indeed, Taika's finger-prints are all over this film; he stars as Alamein, the film itself was inspired by Waititi's Oscar nominated short *Two Cars, One Night*, and there is possibly a touch of autobiography in the story. Given this, it was appropriate to direct questions about the genesis and purpose of the film to its writer/actor/ director. The following interview took place via email in April 2010, whilst Taika was taking a significant acting role (as the Green Lantern's best friend) in the shooting of the superhero movie *The Green Lantern*, being filmed in New Orleans by expatriate New Zealand director Martin Campbell.

Geoff Lealand,
Screen & Media Studies, University of Waikato

² As explored in his *Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey*, the New Zealand contribution to the British Film Institute *Century of Cinema* video series.

¹ From a Discussion Paper for Review of Government Screen Funding Arrangements. Wellington: Ministry of Culture and Heritage, 2009.

The Interview

Q. You are currently involved in the shooting of *The Green Lantern* in the USA. Does this mean that you are joining the exodus of New Zealand film-makers overseas, or will you be back in New Zealand soon?

I'll be back in NZ soon-ish, I have no plans to escape New Zealand, it's my home. I'm very patriotic. They're listening.

Q. What projects do you have lined up after *The Green Lantern*?

Just a lot of writing if I can get the time. I need to finish some other scripts and plan my next project. I have no idea what that project is so I should really think about that. Probably something set in New Zealand seeing as I'm very patriotic.

Q. Do you see yourself as primarily a New Zealand actor/director, or more of an international artist (following in the footsteps of Cliff Curtis or Temuera Morrison)?

I'd like to think the art I do is international in that it is accessible by all people, universal in theme while being distinctly New Zealand in presentation. As I keep saying, I'm a proud New Zealander. But I also need to escape sometimes because I'm related to everyone.

Q. What has been the highlight of your career to date?

Apart from the opening week of 'Boy' in New Zealand in which it did extremely well and proved New Zealanders want to see New Zealand films, the highlight was the premiere screening in my hometown of Waihou Bay. Friends, family, locals, all coming together where the film was shot and watching it before anyone else.

Q. Some questions about *Boy*: Can you briefly trace the evolution of your latest film.

Brain – Paper – Computer – Sundance Writers' Labs – Drawer – Brain – Computer – NZ Film Commission – Computer – NZ Film Commission (repeat back and forth 4 times) – Pub – Computer – Pub – Computer – NZ Film Commission Funding Meeting – Bank – Bar – Waihou Bay.

Q. Who do you hope will get to see *Boy* (who will be its audience)?

It was made, first and foremost, for New Zealanders. They get it and understand all the subtle nuances, lingo, historical references. However, outside of that audience I wanted to make something that everyone could appreciate, a film that could make them laugh and cry and connect with. The themes, what the film is really about is nothing specific to just Maori or New Zealanders, it is a human story. If you've ever had parents then you're going to get this film.

Q. How do you think Australian audiences will react to *Boy*?

See above. I think they'll love it. Our countries are very similar as is our sense of humour. We have a more subtle, darker view of what's usually considered funny. I think we share an understanding, a mutual appreciation of awkward, uncomfortable entertainment.

Q. Several commentators have suggested that much of the story in *Boy* is autobiographical. Is there anything to such claims?

It depends. It is shot in my hometown and many family members helped out and we used locations I grew up in and around. But apart from that the story's a crock of shit.

Q. *Boy* is set in a time past (1984), in a time that now seems rather mystical and idyllic. Do you think that New Zealand, in 2010, is a very different place?

Has Waihou Bay changed since 1984?

Yes. New Zealand is a different place, less safe but more connected, less racist but more ignorant. I do think times have changed and not necessarily for the better. The worst possible change or evolution I have witnessed is the sale and development of rural areas – land being sold and then re-sold to rich people (many foreigners), making it almost impossible for it to return to local hands. You see communities falling apart and being taken over and the next thing you know the area has become a holiday town for Aucklanders. Property developers are quite foul.

Q. The world—and New Zealand—in 1984 is seen primarily through the eyes of *Boy*. Was this a deliberate choice of perspective?

No, shooting in 1984 was an accident involving a time machine. I wanted to set the story in a time when kids had no access to computers, cellphones, Internet, playstations or PSP's; a



www.boythemovie.co.

time when you had to go outside to make your own fun, when TV was a treat and you were allowed to disappear with friends until it got dark. I felt I had no idea or access to kids' culture in the present. I don't get it and I kind of don't want to. I'm not interested in the cartoons, the after school programming, their social world. I grew up with Sesame Street and the Electric Company; shows conceived and produced by people on acid.

Q. What is the primary purpose of the animation inserts in Boy?

To entertain the 5 year olds.

Q. Some more general questions: You often draw on a particular style of comedy (daggy characters, buffoonery, taking the mickey) in your films. Do you think that there is something intrinsically New Zealand about such humour?

Sure. But Australians share that style. Just look at The Castle..

Q. You have noted, in the past, that you prefer to be thought of as a Maori who makes films, rather than a Maori film-maker. Can you expand on this?

I actually said I want to be seen purely as an artist rather than a Maori who makes art. My background is visual art, painting especially, and I like my work

to be seen as it is presented, I don't think the viewer needs to know that I cut off my ear or that I painted the picture with my feet or that I happen to be Maori. I carry that attitude through into filmmaking. It is, however, very important to me that young Maori are aware that I am Maori. It is vital that we Maori see ourselves doing well, especially in areas we normally wouldn't have access to.

Q. Are you keen to do a 'serious' film, in that humour is not so central nor important?

I think all of my films will be a mixture of comedy and drama. It's truer to life. It's more human.

Q. Is it important that New Zealand continues to produce locally-made film, TV programmes and music? For what reasons?

Yes, it is very important. Art is probably the one thing that stops us all from killing ourselves or each other. If we keep making our own work then we survive as a culture, we grow. Developing as storytellers or musicians in turn encourages the younger generations and our voice continues to be heard. Do you really want your children to be raised by Americans?

Q. How difficult is it to make films in New Zealand?

It's easier for me because I haven't stumbled yet. I have done well with my films and people believe in me. But for others it is very hard, especially if you have no track record and especially if you're a woman. Women aren't taken as seriously and get less opportunities than men to tell their stories. Woman is the Maori of the world.