

## Taika Waititi – Boy Wonder!

David Geary

*Kāore te kumara e whaakī ana tana reka. The kumara does not say how sweet he is. (Traditional whakataukī)*

*I directed this shizz. (NBC Brotherhood of Man Super Bowl Promo)*<sup>1</sup>

Ae, so much for humility. Taika Cohen/Waititi knows that if he does not promote himself front and centre in the film and television industry then he will ‘suck the big kumara’. Here is his mihi from the Kickstarter campaign to raise \$90,000 USD in pledges to release *Boy* in the USA:

I am a guy from the kingdom of New Zealand. I started out as an actor, and I also paint, draw, make photographs, invent stuff, sculpt air, fight evil, and generally break all the rules because I'm such a renegade. I used to perform stand-up comedy but then I realised comics are not fun to hang out with. I did two short films (one got nominated for an Oscar—I got in trouble for pretending to sleep through the announcement and therefore lost). Next came *Eagle Vs. Shark*, and a TV show called *Flight of the Conchords* that I wrote and directed on. I also got to act in *Green Lantern* which amazes me because I usually hate acting because I'm too good at it and it bores me. I recently directed a US remake of my mate's UK show called *The InBetweeners* which everyone will love except the British. Also, I am extremely good-looking which is actually more of a burden than a blessing. It means I don't get any of the interesting roles that people like Brad Pitt get. (2012a)

Taika Waititi is the Jewish-Māori boy with the chutzpah-cheek to put himself out there and make *Boy* the most successful film in New Zealand box office history. This commentary provides an overview of the creative risks Waititi took in making the film and some of the strategies he deployed to make the film such a success.

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<sup>1</sup> Taika Cohen Facebook update 5 February 2012.

I first saw Waititi perform in comedy revues with Jemaine Clement as The Humourbeasts in the late 1990s. Their classic comic play, *Untold Tales of Maui* (2004), contains my all-time favourite comedy line, “Māui...you’re a legend”. By then Waititi had already starred in the hit movie *Scarfies* (1999). He moved on to television acting gigs in the likes of *The Strip* (2002), continued to paint, and emerged as a screenwriter and director of acclaimed short films *Two Cars, One Night* (2003) and *Tama Tū* (2004).

While working on his second feature film, *Boy*, he was also writing and directing for the Emmy nominated HBO comedy *Flight of the Conchords* (2007, 2009), with long time collaborator Jemaine Clement, and Bret McKenzie, who would go on to win the Oscar for best original song for *Man or Muppet* in *The Muppets* (2012). Waititi also directed the first season of Madeleine Sami’s award-winning hit NZ comedy *Super City* (2011), and has emerged as an international commercial director, with work including the *NBC Brotherhood of Man* Super Bowl television advertisement and the *Cadbury Dairy Milk – Simply the Best* commercial for Team Great Britain at the London 2012 Olympics.

## **CREATIVE RISKS**

Often when a film becomes popular it seems as though its success was inevitable. But it is important to remind ourselves just how many creative risks Taika Waititi took in making *Boy*, and how easily it could have fallen flat.

### ***Written, Directed and Starring Taika Waititi...***

There are many other writer-directors out there, but for Waititi to also cast himself in one of the lead roles of his second feature was a massive risk. It meant he was working his nono off on both sides of the camera – trying to maintain his director’s vision, motivate and inspire a crew and then stepping forward to play a critical role. This, as well as working with inexperienced child actors is a risky proposition in itself, albeit something Waititi has achieved before.

Playing the role of Alamein, Boy's father, was not Waititi's first choice. Casting Director, Tina Cleary, auditioned many actors for the wannabe gang-leader/loser dad but no one could realise Waititi's specific vision for the character. Waititi decided he would play it, despite the risk that he would be stretching himself thin and his other roles in the film might suffer. That his portrayal and the film was successful is a tribute to Waititi's versatility and ability to shapeshift like the superhero Boy imagined his father to be, but also to the crew and production team that kept him and the film on track.

When Waititi was nominated for an Oscar for his short film, *Two Cars, One Night* he pretended to be asleep. Waititi claims this was a prank gone wrong (Coleman) as the other nominees had agreed to do the same but decided not to. Waititi may not have won the award, but, in an industry that is all about 'buying eyeballs' people definitely remembered him. This act speaks of his subversive spirit and his joy in playing the jester no matter what the court.

### ***"Oh, Not Crayfish Again."***

*Boy's* wide comic appeal also lay in many moments of recognition, such as when the East Coast kids sat down to dinner and one complained, "Oh, not crayfish again." But it also had what all classic comedies need, the joy of wild surprises – such as wannabe gang leader Alamein modelling himself on a samurai warrior. Sometimes the comedy was broad, such as Boy's fantasy of how his father escaped from prison in a slapstick routine, but the comedy was often cleverly undercut with moments of high drama, where we went from laughing at Boy to feeling his pain.

So, the second major creative risk that *Boy* takes is to make a comedy from material that is not ostensibly funny. The film features neglected children, absent fathers, bullying, minors running drugs, gang members, violence, swearing, sexual references, kids boozing and smoking dope and a mother dying in childbirth – not your standard comic fare. But the film uses comedy as a positive changing force – to deal with 'heavy' issues without the dull moralising that can weigh down similar dramatic material.

The best example of this comes in ‘The Jacket Scene’, half way through the movie. In terms of story structure it is *the point of no return* – beyond which lead characters will be changed forever, and can not return to their former selves. In the scene, Boy has ‘borrowed’ his father’s *Crazy Horses* jacket and wears it down to the local shop. By this time Boy has found his father’s buried loot, buys all his mates popsicles, wants them to call him “Little Shōgun” as he brags about “rooting” Chardonnay and warns her new boyfriend that he’ll make him drink a “gumboot of knuckles and sandwiches”. It is a funny scene but Boy is most definitely pride waiting for a fall. It arrives in shocking fashion when Alamein’s car promptly pulls up, he jumps out and rips the jacket off his son, humiliating Boy in front of everyone. After this, Boy surely would have no more illusions and tell no more stories about his father, who is clearly a bully and a loser. Yet, the hero (and resilient child) that Boy is, he chooses to forgive his father two scenes later, when Alamein appears outside his window that night to apologise, and ask if his son can handle having a father who has “a bit of the Hulk in him”.

After Alamein has attacked his son, the truth-speaking shopkeeper Auntie points out that Alamein is the real “frikkin’ egg” who needs to be taught a lesson, and not, as Alamein claims, Boy. Alamein will later realise he is indeed the one who needs to grow up, grieve for his wife and be there for his kids. So this is a ‘coming of age’ story for both father and son, something that gives it a stronger dramatic undercurrent than the average comedy.

### ***Popular Culture and Māoritanga***

A mix of popular culture and Māoritanga can be found in the film’s opening, where traditional and modern Māori are blended together to make a ‘cinematic mihi’ that invites us onto Waititi’s ‘movie marae’. The opening shot is of a billboard that states “You are entering the lands of Te Whānau-ā-Apanui”. Then it cuts to a blackboard with “1984” and the words “WHO AM I?” Boy welcomes us to his interesting world, and gives us his whakapapa – Nan looks after him, his brother Rocky and some younger cousins. His grandfather fought with the Māori Battalion in WWII, which is how his father got the name, Alamein. His Auntie does just about all the jobs in town, and he has a pet goat called Leaf. In his ‘cinematic mihi’, Boy also acknowledges his kaumātua – Michael Jackson.

This is after the opening credits of the movie have featured a quote from *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), “You could be happy here... we could grow up together.” It is an engaging and surprising introduction. We are entering into a really interesting world, one where popular culture and Māoritanga will be mashed up in a unique way. One of the most surprising things is just how many references to 1980s popular culture *Boy* embraces. For an audience who grew up in these times there are many personal connections to be made – love them or hate them – to Fonzie, The Goodnight Kiwi, Billy T James, Prince Tui Teka, *Poi E*, *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-82), *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-85), *The A-Team*, (1983-87) *Shōgun* (1980), *Smurfs* (1981-89), *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Dallas* (1978-91), *Dynasty* (1981-89), *Falcon Crest* (1981-90), *Thriller* (1983) and Michael Jackson.

To include so much popular culture is also risky. It could have seemed tokenistic, and alienated those audience members who did not grow up with all these things. But for all the references that some might miss there were others they got. As it turned out one of the people most disturbed by the movie’s pop culture references was influential US movie critic Peter Debruge:

Waititi has scrubbed away all the culturally specific traits from his growing-up-Kiwi comedy, concentrating instead on the same things that might infatuate any other 1984-era moppet: a schoolyard crush, a missing dad and, above all, Michael Jackson... Long since severed from their tribal past, these kids have names derived from pop culture – Like *Dynasty*, *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest* – and their conversation revolved mostly around music, movies and girls. (2010)

Aue! Perhaps the kids should have been discussing the Treaty of Waitangi? Debruge went on to say in his review, “Only *Boy*’s kid brother, Rocky (Te Aho Eketone-Whitu) seems remotely spiritual, spending his free time at his mother’s grave (she died during childbirth) and daydreaming about magic powers (blending comic book fantasy with a sense of Māori mysticism).”

Debruge’s criticism is unfair because it does not recognise several instances where *Boy* is clearly in touch with his “tribal past”. He gives the aforementioned mihi at the start of the film, he says a karakia as a grace before the other tamariki eat, he is careful to make sure Rocky

washes his hands after leaving the urupā, and when his father talks about Shōgun, Boy likens them to Ariki. His father replies that “Samurai are better than Ariki”. This illustrates to an informed audience just how alienated Alamein has become from his heritage, and not Boy. Jo Smith further unpacks Debruge’s expectations of Indigenous creatives in her article in this issue.

### ***Michael Jackson – Graverobbing or Homage?***

Finally, in the analysis of creative risk, there was the curveball that no one saw coming. On 25<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Michael Jackson died of respiratory arrest after intoxication with the powerful anaesthetic propofol. His personal physician was later convicted of involuntary manslaughter. Jackson died while *Boy* was in post-production. The makers now faced the possibility that including anything about Jackson in their film could be seen as bad taste: as cashing in on the star’s tragic demise. Instead, I believe this gave the film an edge, as, in the wake of Jackson’s death, *Boy* allowed many of us to again appreciate the huge influence his music and moves had on a generation. And that nostalgia for the Jackson of the 1980s resurrected him from the ‘Wacko Jacko’ of tabloid press and court case that tainted his image in later years.

## **SUCCESS STRATEGIES**

### ***“It’s Business Time”***

The table below allows us to evaluate the financial success of *Boy* (New Zealand Film Commission). It sets out the top fifteen New Zealand films at the local box office as of 29 February 2012.<sup>2</sup> There are several points to be gleaned here. Firstly, *Boy* is way out in front, earning over \$2 million more than its nearest rival, *The World’s Fastest Indian*. *Boy* is an original screenplay which is traditionally a harder sell – when the majority of the top earners are adapted from successful books or based on true stories. It is also not a sequel. It is heartening to see that four of the top six movies are ‘Māori’ films, and that *Boy* carries on the tradition of Māori film performing exceptionally well at home. Interestingly, *Waititi* appears further down

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<sup>2</sup> This table excludes Jane Campion’s *The Piano* and Peter Jackson’s *Heavenly Creatures* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as they were mostly financed overseas.

the list as one of the lead actors in the film *Scarflies*, an experience which may have served as an apprenticeship in how to make a hit movie.

	<b>Amount \$NZD</b>	<b>Film</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Screenplay Origin</b>
1	9,294,450	Boy	Taika Waititi	2010	Original
2	7,047,000	The World's Fastest Indian	Roger Donaldson	2005	Biography
3	6,795,000	Once Were Warriors	Lee Tamahori	1994-95	Adapted from Novel
4	6,400,000	Whale Rider	Niki Caro	2003	Adapted from Novella
5	4,075,000	Sione's Wedding	Chris Graham	2006	Original
6	3,200,991	What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?	Ian Mune	1999	Adapted from Novel
7	2,420,000	Footrot Flats	Murray Ball	1986-87	Adapted from Cartoon Series
8	1,910,000	Second-hand Wedding	Paul Murphy	2008	Original
9	1,813,572	The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls	Leanne Pooley	2008	Biography
10	1,792,700	Sione's 2: Unfinished Business	Simon Bennett	2012	Original
11	1,600,000	Goodbye Pork Pie	Geoff Murphy	1981	Original
12	1,505,842	In My Father's Den	Brad McGann	2004	Adapted from Novel
13	1,259,626	Scarflies	Robert Sarkies	1999	Original
14	1,135,685	Out Of The Blue	Robert Sarkies	2006	Docu-drama
15	1,123,061	Home By Christmas	Gaylene Preston	2010	Original

The first caveat to this table is that the dollar figures are for the years the films were released and not adjusted to match the price of a box office ticket in 2012, when the table was compiled. One can then argue that the likes of *Once Were Warriors* or *Footrot Flats*, released in 1994 and 1986 respectively, should rate higher here. That said, the box office of *Boy* and other recent films, such as *Sione's 2*, were dented by illegal downloads of the films being made available on the internet, something that the earlier films did not have to compete with but is an unwelcome reality for all films made in the last few years.

The second caveat to consider is that although a film may have performed extremely well at the box office, this does not necessarily mean that it made its makers a huge profit. Often, the advertising and distribution costs of a film are so high that the income barely covers the costs. However, this is more the domain of forensic accountants and what we should celebrate here is that *Boy* is acknowledged as a stellar commercial success at home, and that many Kiwis went to see it. Just how successful the US distribution of *Boy* has been financially, has yet to be determined.

### ***The Use of Social Media***

In 2009, when Waititi's film was just getting rolling, it was not as common as it is now to launch a Facebook campaign to sell a movie. Before it was released, Waititi posted YouTube clips from the film to help promote it. He also Facebook-friended a lot of people, making sure he was accessible to as many as possible to get the word out. As of 13 September 2012, Taika Waititi "Public Figure" has 2817 Facebook 'Likes', Taiki Waititi – Actor/Director has 500 'Likes', and Taika Cohen has 1415 Facebook Friends.

Waititi was also the first New Zealand film-maker to use Kickstarter.com to gain funds to release a film in the US market. With a goal of \$90,000 (USD), Waititi's innovative and aggressive social media strategy eventually raised \$110,796 (USD) from 1826 'pledgers' – another testament to his popular support. The film opened in select cinemas around the United States with Waititi attending every premiere. In the process the film garnered some very positive reviews which offset the disappointment of Debruge's *Variety* review. As a pledger to Waititi's Kickstarter campaign, I can personally confirm that he kept us all well informed of the film's progress in the US with entertaining updates. One example was the email he sent when the birth of his baby girl caused a delay in honouring his pledges:



Hello all of you! Okay, many apologies for the slackness. I have been raising the child and recently moved back to NZ to start a new film. It's Winter here. WINTER. This new film is about NZ vampires. Because obviously what the world needs now is another movie about vampires.<sup>3</sup>

Waititi's ability to spread the word, creating intimacy and loyalty through social media helped get him and *Boy* the essential 'word of mouth' it needed to become a hit. He appears genuinely excited that so many people want to support and celebrate him, and this ensures his fans remain committed to promoting him and his films in the future.

### ***Identity as a Film-Maker***

Waititi talks about not being in the industry to make money, but that by having fingers in lots of pies he can stay alive (Coleman). But there is more to it than that. He also states, "I don't ever want to be seen as a Māori artist. I'd rather be an artist who just happened to be Māori – and not like my art must always, and necessarily, reflect being Māori" (2009). I believe this speaks to a genuine fear that artists of any form can be pigeon-holed all too easily. And those who survive and thrive choose projects that ensure they are seen as flexible as possible.

After his two successful Māori-themed shorts, Waititi was astute enough not to get ghettoised as a 'Māori artist'. He made sure he kept his career strong in the alternative comedy scene by working on *Flight of The Conchords*, *Radiradirah* (2010) and in the mainstream by acting in the big budget US film, *Green Lantern* (2011). That said, it was on the strength of his two acclaimed 'Māori' shorts that Waititi was invited to the Sundance Institute to do film script development to turn *Two Cars, One Night* into a full-length film. However, he resisted pressure to make this film his debut feature. Instead, he chose to direct another script he'd been working on, the comedy of Kiwi geek love that is *Eagle vs. Shark*.

In the Catalogue for *Boy*, Waititi is quoted as saying, "I see *Eagle vs. Shark* as my second film. I learned a lot on the project but it's a film I made so that I could take people by surprise, because it wasn't the film they were expecting from me" (New Zealand Film Commission).

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication Taika Waititi. Email 7 August 2012.

Surprising us and not letting us pigeon-hole him is clearly important to Waititi. *Eagle vs. Shark* was a chance to learn the ropes as a feature director before he embarked on *Boy*. Although *Eagle vs. Shark* was not a big hit, it has charms as an alternative comedy in what Waititi himself has called an 'anti-romantic' vein, exploring the pain and awkwardness of relationships in a comic way. However, it lacks the true connection with characters and satisfying climax that we get with *Boy*. Waititi showed maturity to not rush into cashing in on the success of *Two Cars, One Night* and maintained control of his career. He learnt what he needed to from his debut feature then moved on to make *Boy* when he was ready to make it the triumph it is.

### ***"What's Potential?" – Cast and Characters***

In the part of *Boy* the film is blessed with one of the most likeable young characters to grace a film. From Anna Paquin in *The Piano* (1993) to Keisha Castle-Hughes in *Whale Rider* (2002), and Waititi's own *Two Cars One Night*, New Zealand has discovered several unknown child actors who have given luminous performances. James Rolleston joins their rank with his portrayal of Boy, a kid full of bravado but also capable of making us feel his hurt. But Boy is not alone, and special note should also be made of his brother in the film, Rocky, played by Te Aho Eketone-Whitu with great vulnerability. He is the perfect foil to Boy and their scenes together light up the screen.

Waititi must take much of the credit for helping to cast and then direct child actors to deliver such natural and sensitive performances. But in the part of Alamein, Waititi also delivers a fine performance himself. We have waited a long time for someone to update Billy T James' mad Māori-Mexican cowboy, the Tainui Kid, from *Came A Hot Friday* (1985). Waititi's portrayal of Alamein has all that crazy comedy but dramatic weight, too.

Turning to the script, the strength lies in the central relationship between Alamein and Boy. It is dynamic, full of conflict, and gives the movie a strong dramatic through-line. This is helped by Boy spelling out clearly what his objectives are: he wants his Dad back, to get with Chardonnay, and to see Michael Jackson live. These three threads help give the film drive and momentum as we follow Boy's struggle to achieve these things. By movie end, he fulfills his

potential to realise that growing up does not mean smoking, drinking, ditching the whānau and pretending to be staunch. He still wants his Dad back, but not before Alamein grows up and allows Boy to enjoy being a boy again.

Although the secondary characters have potential I believe they do not all get to realise it. Rocky has a belief that he has powers but they never quite pay off. Why, for instance, does he not try to use them to find his father's missing loot? Rocky's climactic scene, where he holds a sparkler and roller-skates towards down-and-out Dad to say, "I'm sorry for killing Mum", seems a little contrived. Especially when compared to what happens next – Boy attacks his father for failing to be there when their mother died. The latter is a shocking, revelatory moment, but I wonder why Rocky does not join in the fray and attack Boy. After all, it is Boy who told his little brother that Rocky killed his mother because she could not handle his powers. Rocky could realise what a terrible guilt trip Boy has laid on him and confront his brother. Then absent Dad could see his two sons fighting, realise that so much has happened he does not know about, and that he needs to step in and sort it out.

Rocky could have been more central to the story, a stronger character, but instead he is often sidelined by hanging out at his mother's grave or with the "Mental Fulla". Weirdo is another character who fails to deliver fully on his potential. I find his presence at times confusing, especially at the big reveal towards the end when Weirdo somehow embodies the spirit of their dead mother. This is what I take from how we first see her sitting on a log, then cut to the Weirdo sitting in the same place, when she/he saves Boy from his fall off the bridge. I could see the movie working without Weirdo. Then Rocky, or the Auntie, could save Boy and strengthen one of these relationships.

The 'Bridge Scene' does, however, showcase Waititi's strength at composing striking images that speak volumes. It is here that a group of lycra-clad cyclists stream past Boy, failing to notice the danger he is in of falling off the rail. As the cyclists are all Pākehā, it serves as a subtle commentary on how the two cultures operate at different speeds, failing to see each other. Waititi uses a cinematic image to make a point that he does in a far less subtle way when

Boy asks the Pākehā school teacher what potential is, and is told bluntly “It’s 3:30. I’m off duty”. Another instance of this is the scene most resonant of *Two Cars, One Night*, where Boy and a mate are waiting in a car outside the pub. The mate warns him, “Don’t end up like the other dope heads around here – laughing at nothing and crying at everything”. It comes across as strangely preachy, something that need not be said as it is already clear this terrible fate could easily befall Boy.

Another character still waiting for her potential to be realised is Boy’s Auntie. She is there when Boy is stripped of his jacket, and berates Alamein severely for this, but then offers no support to Boy when his father has gone. It seems an opportunity missed, as though no adults care for any children in this place. Also, it seems reasonable to assume Auntie knows Nan has gone off to a tangi so why couldn’t she check in on the kids left at home? She could also turn up at Alamein’s Crazy Horses’ party to stir things up and crack some ‘eggs’. In ‘The Jacket Scene’ she also hints at unfinished business with Alamein, as she knew his dead wife, but, again, there is no follow up.

Like the film *Whale Rider*, *Boy* relies on the death of the mother in childbirth as the tragic back-story that leaves a child in need of healing. In the two films a ‘salt of the earth’ Everywoman (both played extremely well by actor Rachel House), serves as the adult female influence in the story. But in both these otherwise successful films I feel bereft of a strong adult woman character, and the added complexity that would give.

Perhaps a bigger dramatic challenge in *Boy* would have been created if Boy’s mother was still alive, living in the district, but the kids had been whāngai to Nan. Then when Dad escapes from prison he not only gets to find his lost loot, and bond with his boys, but also deal with his angry ex-partner. Then Alamein could grow up to have some adult relationships with other adults. As it is, I find a certain heaviness creeps in whenever the mother’s death is referenced. I think her being alive would have avoided this, and avoided the *Whale Rider* comparisons. Then again, perhaps that is just me, the envious scriptwriter, speaking.

## SUMMARY

*Boy's* minor weaknesses are quibbles easily overcome by the charm and humour that pervades much of the film. The smiling face of Boy on the poster is also the cheeky grin of Waititi that fills every frame. He has taken huge risks but when we see how much he enjoys being a samurai one second, Michael Jackson the next, and how much potential he has created around him, then his fun is infectious. There is a joy in the performances and film-making that comes from his love of playing many different parts. He likes to play the fool especially, but takes it very seriously, with an awareness that though tragedy can be cathartic, comedy has the power to heal.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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