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New Zealand's 'Boy' Takes On America

Sophia Stein · Friday, March 23rd, 2012

The year is 1984, and on the rural East Coast of New Zealand *Thriller* is changing kids' lives. Inspired by the Oscar nominated *Two Cars, One Night, Boy* is the hilarious and heartfelt coming-of-age tale about heroes, magic and Michael Jackson. The guy who brought the uproarious *Eagle Vs. Shark* to the big screen, writer/director/actor Taika Waititi, sits down with Sophia Stein to discuss his latest film, the importance of family, and growing up.

SS: *Boy* is the top grossing, local New Zealand film of all time —

TW: Yeah, I don't know how that happened? Wasn't even meant to happen!, that was a mistake. (Laughs)

Obviously you want your film to do well when you make one, and you want people to see it. Hopefully people don't make films thinking, oh, I want to break records and I want to make all this money, and I want it to be a box office smash hit. Having said that, I was really pleased when it did happen.

In New Zealand, you know, you can't really expect local films to do as well as mainstream films or Hollywood films because it's more of a risk. We only make between six and ten films a year. There is a sort-of golden ratio with art in general, which is like 80% of everything that is made is terrible, I'd say 10 % is like — acceptable, and 10% is actually good. And so, that same rule applies when you are making six or seven films in one country, six or seven local films. One is going to be really good, and the rest are not.

SS: Now *Boy* is playing in America – and you're self-distributing it. Why?

TW: The hard part for a film like this, is that distributors don't know how to market it. In the current environment, marketing rules the way they distribute films. We decided to do it ourselves, get our own investment and finance distribution ourselves, although we can't spend the $1 million minimum it would usually take. We're using the old model of word-of-mouth, where if an audience like something they talk about it. Response has been awesome. The film's bringing in incredible reviews, we're in our fourth week at the Angelica in New York, and we're opening at the Landmark Varsity in Seattle today (March 23).

SS: So to what do you attribute the mass appeal of this story?

TW: I just think the film was really good!, and I feel like people really appreciated that. It spoke to them because it was set in a time that a lot of people could identify with. It was also about kids, so modern kids could get it and identify with that. A lot of the older generation got it as well because it was a story about their children. The older generation knew that Alamein character — they were like, "that's my son, he became the idiot," and "those are my grandkids!" So I think

there was something for everybody. Also, because it was a lighter approach to a serious topic — this idea of families and the disconnects within families, it was approaching that and not hammering people over the head by saying, “we’re terrible parents,” and depressing people about it. Living as we do, I feel is a mixture of drama and comedy every day. Even in the darkest moments, as humans, we try and find light, try to find positive within the darkness. And so, life can’t exist as either just drama or just comedy, it’s always a mix. So that’s why I wanted to mix those two things and have a balance within the film.

SS: Waihau Bay, New Zealand, near “The Bay of Plenty,” is the location for your film. Can you talk about your connection to that particular place?

Well, that’s where I was raised. I grew up in the town that we shot the film in. We shot in my grandmother’s house, and I went to that school that the kids went to, and most of my family were involved in the film. So it’s a very small community of about two- or three-hundred people, and I’m related to most of them. So it’s a very personal film in that sense. But it’s not autobiographical — because the story is made up. But its personal in that, that’s how I grew up. And I tried to keep it as authentic to that upbringing and to that time, as possible. The idea for me is “our coming of age decade.” That’s why I thought it was appropriate to set this film [in the 1980’s]. A coming of age film in a coming of age time. It was a coming of age decade for New Zealand, as a whole. We were really finding ourselves. As Maori, we were rediscovering our culture. It’s what we call the Maori Renaissance. The 80’s, where we started our language schools again. We embraced our culture a lot more because we had spent like the last thirty years being punished for speaking [the Maori language] at school, and being made to feel ashamed of being Maori, and wanting to be anything but Maori. So Alamein’s character comes from that generation of people who were caught between two worlds. They were made to feel like being Maori was bad, and yet they couldn’t get jobs and they weren’t accepted into the mainstream society. So they had no place in Maori culture and no place in white, colonial society. So that’s why they went to the cities. They were just trying to do stuff, and that’s where all the gangs in New Zealand came from — from not having a place to go, and wanting to hang out with people like you, and wanting to feel like you were a part of some sort of family. It’s the same sort-of thing that happened here, that happened in LA, both the Bloods and the Crips started because people were disenfranchised, and they weren’t allowed in the clubs, they weren’t allowed to join scouts — and what are you going to do?! You are going to hang out and start your own clubs. As evolution dictates, those clubs then become something darker, kind-of a perversion of what they were originally set up for. So that’s what [Alamein’s] character comes from. That’s why he calls himself Shogun and identifies with Native Americans. He doesn’t want to be Maori, he’s sort-of shunning that side of himself. He’s saying, “Aw, I’m going to be a Samurai now”– it’s like he’s reinventing himself everyday. “Oh, don’t call me that anymore, call me Shogun,” So he’s got like ten different names, and he starts a gang.

SS: You have a couple of different names —

TW: I do have a couple of different names.

SS: Sometimes you credit yourself with your father’s surname, “Waititi” (Taika Waititi) –

TW: Yeah.

SS: And sometimes you use your mother’s, “Cohen” (Taika Cohen).

TW: Yeah.

SS: So what is that about?

TW: It’s just tax purposes. (Laughs)

It’s really because — both my parents are in the arts. My mother is a writer and a schoolteacher; my father is a painter. Growing up I was doing a lot of acting and stuff. And because Cohen is on my passport, I would use Cohen through school, and I was known as Taika Cohen. And then,

when I went to live with my dad on that side of the family, I was known as Waititi. So I always used both names throughout my life according to where I was living. As a painter, I often felt like that was more the Waititi side of myself; I would be Taika Waititi as the painter. And then, because I made my first short film in that area where I was known as Waititi, that was the name that was put on the film. And that film did really well and suddenly I had a career as a filmmaker, and now everyone knows me as Waititi. It's not like I'm running away from Cohen or anything, it just happened. And I'm still Taika Cohen on all my of legal documents.

SS: So this feature was actually inspired by your short film, *Two Cars, One Night* which was nominated for an Oscar in 2003. As a result, you were invited to participate in the Sundance Writer's lab. How did the lab figure in the development of the screenplay?

TW: The lab is a fantastic process because it's really about servicing the story. There is no — or there shouldn't be — ego there. So you turn up with your script, and then a bunch of these established writers — who've all got great backgrounds, but all come from different backgrounds — they all critique your work and give you notes and ideas. But with six different people talking to you for two hours each from completely different backgrounds — and some do Hollywood films, some do art films, some are foreigners — you can't possibly hope to get a straight idea of exactly what you are going to do. So the idea is to get all of this information, bombard your head with it, go away, let it sink in, and then whatever resonates with you, then you apply that to your story.

SS: Was there a particular mentor with whom you bonded?

TW: Frank Pierson (*Dog Day Afternoon*), he's writer royalty, he was amazing; David Benioff (*Troy*); Susan Shilladay (*Legends of the Fall*). I can't remember any one piece of advice or any one note. It just happened to really be helpful, and I enjoyed the process.

SS: You paint this picture of a "small town, run by children," in a world where the narcissistic adults are oblivious to nurturing the "potential" of their children. Versus today, where parents obsessively attempt to manage every aspect of their children's lives —

TW: Oh, God, it's awful, isn't it? If you have kids, you have to organize a play date – "oh, you've got play date from 3:00-4:00 pm, and you're going to go and visit this friend" –- scheduling children's lives, it's just the worst. I'm going to be a parent in May, and I am not going to let my kid just do anything, I am going to be strict but … I loved growing up in a time where you went back home when it got dark. And parents were like, "I don't want to see you until nighttime." I appreciated that because it's putting trust in the child to look after themselves. Kids hang out with a bunch of kids, and you all look out for each other. I feel that teaches you independence and social skills in a much more effective way then a parent always being there to guide and hold someone's hand.

SS: You made a short film about Maori soldiers in Italy during WWII, do you have any desire to make that into a feature?

TW: Yeah, I'm trying to write that into a feature. That film is called *Tama Tu*, and it was about the Maori battalion in World War II, which is very famous in New Zealand. Again, I would mix comedy with the drama to make a sort-of comic look at the horrors of war.

SS: What do you hope people get out of this film?

TW: Well, the first thing I want people to take away from this film is a ticket stub!

And the second thing I want – is for people to take away the experience of having gone to somewhere that they might physically never get to, because it's a very remote part of New Zealand, and it's a very special place that has never been on film before. The experience of journeying to this place, in a time that is now gone. In the eighties, where things were very different. But also seeing a very human story that reaffirms that we're all the same – no matter where you are from, the idea of family and of parents and of children and the way that they try and

connect, and the way that families circle around each other and orbit each other, and the great distances between these people who are supposed to be very close — that is actually relatable to most people in the world.

Image from the film: Rocky, Boy and Alamein (director Taika Waititi) playing war on the beach.

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