

Dramatic Lives, Cross-Cultural Memories:

Notes on Taika Waititi's *Boy*

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Boy (2010) tells the sensitive story of an adolescent, from the Māori rural community of Waihou Bay, coming of age in a world where the road to adulthood is a treacherous one. For the young protagonist who has a natural intuition about his life, growing up to take responsibility for, and a position of respectability within, the community of his upbringing, is the central issue. A key influence in *Boy*'s emotional life is his father, Alamein: a jailbird, a dropout, a boozier, a stoner, a loafer, and a common thief. Zaniily and poignantly portrayed by Waititi, Alamein is ultimately a tragicomic casualty of the indifference of the wider modern social system. *Boy* is ready to grow up, and is not at all shy of the challenges of becoming a teenager and then a man, but he needs a father who can be a hero, a mentor, a role model, a protector, a provider and a nurturer – in short, a role model of adulthood who is fully present. With his wild imagination, *Boy* invents glamorous stories about Alamein, seeing idealised, fantasy images of the man even when directly confronted with the hard reality. The difference between fantasy and reality, in the context of *Boy*'s difficult situation, becomes the source of both comedy and pathos in the film.

I would like to comment briefly on the theatrical and cross-cultural aspects of the film, writing within the disciplinary context of drama studies, and from the personal perspective of one who is a foreigner to the New Zealand context of the film. Regarding the disciplinary context, my intention is not necessarily to provide a 'specialist' view of the dramatic art, but rather to use the language of drama when discussing one or two aspects of the film that I find emotionally compelling. As for being a 'foreigner' to the social and cultural world of the film, I do not write on behalf of any specific collective of foreigners, whether that means writing 'as an African' or anything else. Rather, foreignness in this case is simply the place of ignorance from which one desires to come into acquaintance, neither to gain 'knowledge' of an 'Other' nor to presume that we are the same, but rather to watch the drama as drama, watch with a human eye, and give an account of how this drama appeals to me.

An issue that I am interested in, and which is dealt with clearly in *Boy*, is 'initiation' as a process involving the social and personal drama of passage from one stage of life to the next but not necessarily limited to culturally well-defined, traditional rites. As we see in *Boy*, urban imaginations can use the resources of their own environment, including contemporary popular culture, to create new dramaturgies of initiation, with the appropriate character types to fulfil the requisite roles of initiator and initiate. As the maturing director of his own life-drama, Boy casts Alamein as the initiator, and uses the figure of entertainment icon, Michael Jackson, to inspire character moulds as well as narratives. Using scenarios from Jackson's era-defining music videos, Boy imagines Alamein with qualities like courage, strength, prowess, grace and dutifulness; qualities that Boy wishes to learn from his reluctant father-mentor. Unaware of such expectations, Alamein responds in his own haphazard way by taking Boy through a process of trials and lessons that are not entirely ethical. On one level, Alamein's drama is an immature and dangerous construct for his son. However, this construct is also about experimenting with models of initiation where ancient codes, rites and resources for the imagination such as traditional mythology may not be as accessible or enforced as they once were.

The dramatic work of the body is central to this theme of the film. Through various costume changes and narrative scenarios, especially in Boy's daydreams, Waititi literally 'plays' with many different manifestations of masculinities, a playfulness emphasised through Waititi's stylised acting. By using the same approach to play the 'real' Alamein whom Boy romanticises, and allowing the character of Alamein to be so self-conscious in his attempts to become like the imaginary, heroic figures, Waititi clearly shows how the performance of 'character' is part of making 'real' masculinity. Through Alamein's clumsy and awkward attempts to embody various macho roles, we see that he has created for himself a repertoire of behaviours based on (often American) notions of male coolness, sex appeal, mysteriousness and dangerousness. The juxtaposition of such overt theatrics with the sincere emotionality of other actors and their characters can be uncomfortable to watch, for Alamein is not simply a funny character in film; he is really a man who lives among normal people and does not know how to break out of his own hazardous imaginary world. The reality of what his children are exposed to, how they begin to emulate him, and what might have made him this way, are disturbing thoughts, an effect produced not by the

comic techniques themselves but by the fact that they are used in conjunction with depicting a serious social problem. Yet, the elegance of Waititi's physical comedy also keeps such depiction extremely subtle and self-reflexive. What is much more palpable than any social discourse is the experience of gazing at the dressed and choreographed male body as performative locus for experiments with initiation, which are located in the fantasy worlds of global popular culture.

This link to global pop culture, in the service of an innovative dramaturgy of initiation, might be seen as instrumental to the cross-cultural appeal of this internationally successful film. The Jackson caricatures fit very well here. For a certain generation at least, the 'MJ' phenomenon was not merely entertainment. Imitating the dances and persona of this icon was part of enjoying youth, developing self-expression, competing for popularity and even trying to be macho, despite Jackson's androgynous image. Watching the characters of *Boy* go through these kinds of rituals of masculinity has brought back some powerful memories for me.

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