

Taika Waititi's Geeky, Deadpan 'Eagle vs. Shark' is Antidote to Slapstick

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on June 22, 2007 - 9:54pm

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CHICAGO – “Playing out extreme or unusual characters in the straightest of ways is what makes deadpan serious so funny,” said “[Eagle vs. Shark](#) [9]” director [Taika Waititi](#) [10]. “It is the antidote to slapstick.”

As for the million-dollar question to a comic about what makes funny really flippin’ funny, he says it’s about letting loose and being real.



[11]Jemaine Clement and Loren Horsley star in “Eagle vs. Shark”

from Miramax.

Photo courtesy of Miramax

“It’s about not trying to push the funny,” Waititi said in a Chicago interview with Adam Fendelman. “It’s looking at truth in human situations and having empathy. I especially love the funny that comes out of tragedy. I like situations so uncomfortable that you produce that nervous, cringe kind of laughter.”

Known professionally as Taika Waititi along with Taika Cohen (he’s Kiwi; not Jewish), the New Zealand independent film “Eagle vs. Shark” is the first feature-length film for the young comic star. It was shot for \$1.35 million in 25 days using a homegrown crew of 35 close-knit people.

The film, which opens in Chicago on June 22 and heads to the U.K. and New Zealand in August, harmonizes a story that’s wrapped in dead-serious droll with how cool it is to be geeky.

Two dominant animals – the eagle and the shark – represent sky and water. In the animal kingdom, they live in worlds that would never meet. Just as both animals are loners, the main characters are also outcasts who bridge a wide divide.

“Though the characters are weird and the situations extreme, everyone can relate because it’s about family dysfunction and the tragedy of day-to-day living,” Waititi said. “Being a human is being a geek.”

[Jemaine Clement](#) [12] plays Jarrod and [Loren Horsley](#) [13] plays Lily, which is a role she created after wandering the streets of Utah completely in character. Horsley said: “The test worked. I took Lily out for a trial walk and the Red Sea parted. No one wanted to be near her.”



[14]Photo courtesy of Miramax

"Creating Lily was a cathartic process," Horsley said in an interview with Adam Fendelman. "Being a human is strange. Lily was about finding that vulnerable, awkward feeling. Growing up, I was a loner who was raised by hippies in a conservative place. I was weird. I know that feeling very well."

While his project embraces a style that decidedly parallels "[Napoleon Dynamite](#) [15]," Waititi says that film wasn't an inspiration for his. The script for "Eagle vs. Shark" was written before becoming acquainted with its smash-hit brethren, which has grossed \$46 million in worldwide receipts on a \$400,000 production budget.

While Clement's expressionless character is strikingly akin to Napoleon Dynamite, it was Horsley's that really took the cake from this critic. The magnetic eccentricity in her eyes, the gawky facial expressions and her innocently peculiar mannerisms were distinctly charming. She's someone you'd want to befriend.

Jarrood, on the other hand, isn't. Waititi added: "He's all the very worst traits of every male you've ever known – including myself – all plonked into one package."

"He represents danger and adventure. She represents peace, compassion and acceptance," Waititi said. "He's fighting to get out of his circumstances to be better than what he is. It's a relationship built on those conflicting ideas. They cross over, she becomes more confident and the powers shift."

To Waititi and Horsley, telling such a story inspires people to reflect upon what it does to them emotionally. They speak of intense disappointment with many films Hollywood has been pooping out over the years and find themselves yearning back to 1970s films in particular.



[16]From left to right: Loren Horsley, Taika Waititi and Jemaine

Clement in "Eagle vs. Shark".

Photo courtesy of Miramax

"In the 1970s, Hollywood was making really good, smart films about human behavior. Then someone realized you can make hundreds of

millions of dollars," Waititi said. "I'm sure McDonald's was a pretty good restaurant when it had one. Now it's like a hideous beast no one wants to touch. That's what has happened to Hollywood."

Echoing the perks realized today by many indie filmmakers across the globe, Waititi craves the freedom, creativity and control achieved through independent film.

"A small film can be your film. The studio can really muddy your vision," Waititi said. "Our actors know they're not going to get paid much money. They do it for the love of filmmaking, the story and the chance to work with creative people. That's why so many movie stars these days are dying to get into indie films."

He added: "They can't stand being in such big franchises. They get depressed when they're done. Sure, they make millions, but that doesn't satisfy them creatively."

While in his hotel room for the Chicago junket, Waititi says he couldn't find a film on TV that'd keep him glued for two hours. Like you'd expect from indie talent, Waititi and Horsley were overwhelmed by the grandeur of Chicago's Four Seasons setting.

"It's surreal," Horsley said. "Right before this interview, we were running around the room – doing laps – and laughing at how huge it is. About 0.1 percent of people actually live like this."



[17]Photo courtesy of Miramax

"I don't feel like a star at all," Waititi said. "I feel like a guy in a band just starting out. I feel like a Beverly Hillbilly. Soon we'll return to New Zealand and go back to paying rent in our little apartment with five other people. We'll be fighting over bills."

While many Americans who aren't rich could quickly figure out what to do with gobs of dough if it fell from the sky, Horsley says she can't conceive of how to handle millions of dollars.

For Waititi, he says living life ideally would be making films like this, traveling, frequenting the festival circuit, viewing evocative films and making just enough loot to pay the man. He says his films don't have to tip the scales so long as people connect with his message.

Beyond box-office receipts as a barometer of a film's success, Waititi understands that the mark of a good film is one that is timeless. When asked what he thinks "Eagle vs. Shark" will look like in 30 years, he said: "Its feeling is already clumsy and archaic. The technology is already obsolete. Setting it here and now automatically dates it."

Rather than a fine wine maturing with age, Horsley said: "It's more like a strange cheese. While you don't know if it'll mold or dissolve, it will be delicious."



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Source URL (retrieved on Mar 28 2024 - 4:32pm): <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/2007/06/taika-waititis-geeky-deadpan-eagle-vs.html>

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