

Hunt for the Wilderpeople



Tuesday 25th April 2017



Director: Taika Waititi

New Zealand 2016 / 101 mins / Cert PG

Starring: Sam Neill, Julian Dennison

Defiant city kid Ricky goes on the run in the New Zealand bush with his cantankerous foster carer Uncle Hec in this delightful comedy

***Hunt for the Wilderpeople* is the type of film that makes comedy look easy, a well-oiled machine that bounds back and forth from big laughs to heartbreak and back again.** One of Sundance 2016's most guaranteed hits, it's an adventure of storytelling itself.

In the film directed by the infuriatingly talented New Zealander, Taika Waititi, Julian Dennison plays pre-teen Ricky Baker, a chubby thug-culture-loving hoodlum brought to the New Zealand boonies to be set straight by loving matriarch Aunty Bella (an immediately endearing Rima Te Wiata) and her curmudgeonly husband Hector (Sam Neill). Though Ricky initially refuses to be happy under their watch, (trying to run away the first night, but passing out from exhaustion minutes into the journey), he does come around to like her. She respects his angst with a dry wit, and inspires within him a sense of adventure, especially that which can be found beyond self-isolation, although requiring the proper

guide.

A few days into their companionship, Bella drops dead. Not long after she is buried, Hector states that he isn't going to take care of Ricky in Bella's place, but wait for child services to come within a few days and put Ricky into government care. This causes Ricky to run away into the forest—for real, this time—with a dog he named Tupac in tow. Hector eventually catches up with Ricky, but doesn't get him back home in time for the government's visit. When the child service agent thinks that Ricky has been kidnapped by Hector, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* becomes a wacky homeward journey for the two, albeit being pursued by the military, police, and even a gaggle of hunters, while becoming the focus of a nationwide media sensation. Waititi nicely expands the story to such engaging ridiculousness with a fast pace and a lively, youthful imagination.

Always with a charm or surprise up its sleeve, Waititi's film wins its viewers over from the start, even if it does borrow from the overall charisma that made Pixar's *Up* such a dramatically thorough journey. The film certainly has the hyper, imaginative young kid in Ricky (whose facial reactions can get some huge laughs), and the grumpy old man dealing with his own place in the world, now that his loved one is gone. As the latter, Neill is a great straight man to a kid who talks in slang; in moments the film earns later, Neill also presents a depth to which he needed Aunty Bella for his own life redirection. Like in his own 2010 film *Boy* (of which *Hunt*

Stafford Film Theatre at the Gatehouse

Hunt for the Wilderpeople continued...

plays like it's in the same universe of good spirits on emotional adventures), Waititi proves here to be very skilled at mining the empathy that binds the inner comedy and drama of seemingly regular people.

The business of comedy within *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* is immediate, breathless. Waititi knows funny like a reflex, not something that many other filmmakers, who have made far more films than him, could ever claim. The film expresses this magnificent touch through a prevalent precision to its assembly: just as the movie separates itself into chapters, one has to imagine that Waititi has a complete, piece-by-piece vision of the story, regarding each goofy cut, each smash zoom into a close-up, every fast montage that further enlivens its animated dialogue (such as when Ricky's offenses are listed/presented). Even when the movie bungles one of its late additions (a "bush man" in the third act), it isn't the filmmaking failing with its exact beats or general skill, but its sense of humor just briefly overstepping its cartoonish impulses.

Though Waititi hails from New Zealand, Sundance likes to claim him as their own, and rightly so. Each of the former comedian's films (*Eagle vs. Shark*, *Boy*, *What We Do in the Shadows*) have played the fest, many of them worked on at the institution's workshops. To no small feat, Waititi may have been schooled during an indie filmmaking era that thrived on regurgitating Wes Anderson-brand stylization, but he has been able to build out with similar aesthetic tools to a style that is truly and warmly his own.

After Sundance, Waititi is essentially off to direct *Thor: Ragnarok*. It's not certain as which parts of his resume won him the gig, but I imagine his continuously precise and heartfelt vision of big entertainment didn't hurt. Here's hoping that Marvel lets him run wild.

Nick Allen, *rogerebert.com*, 24th January 2016

From the Village Voice

One of the nicest surprises at this year's Tribeca Film Festival — at least, if you're not familiar with New Zealand director Taika Waititi (soon to direct Marvel's *Thor: Ragnarok*) — has been *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, an alternately conventional and peculiar feature that plays out like a Kiwi variation on a Wes Anderson fable. Reminiscent of *Rushmore* and *Moonrise Kingdom*, Waititi's follow-up to last year's vampire-reality-show comedy *What We Do in the Shadows* is a deranged coming-of-age adventure about a young delinquent prone to expressing himself via haiku.

Ricky (Julian Dennison), an overweight foster kid with thug-life aspirations, is compelled by child protective services' Paula (Rachel House) to live with cheery farmer Bella (Rima Te Wiata) and her gruff husband, Hec (Sam Neill) — Hec first appears carrying a hog on his back as Paula's cop escort remarks, "He's giving that pig a piggyback!" Ricky quickly warms to Bella, thanks partly to the hot-

water bottle she sticks in his bed every night. However, no sooner has he accepted her as his new "auntie" — and received a dog from her that he dubs "Tupac" — than she dies, leaving him alone with scruffy, surly Hec, desperate to avoid re-entering the foster system.

Ricky fakes his own death and flees into the bush, and he and Hec, considered fugitives, soon become national news items (complete with Hec slandered as a "pervert"). Much hunting, chasing, bickering, and bonding ensues, and while Waititi's tale (based on Barry Crump's novel *Wild Pork and Watercress*) is destined for an upbeat ending, the path it charts to that conclusion is uniquely strange, told with crossfades, off-kilter compositions, random fantasy sequences, deadpan edits, and a cheeky Eighties-style synth score. The picturesque material becomes downright dreamlike.

Neil proves compellingly gruff as a reluctant father figure, though it's the trash-talking, family-craving ten-year-old Dennison who steals the show, exuding a wacko, wounded attitude rooted in Ricky's backwoods Rambo-Scarface-Mad Max reveries. *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* elevates its sentimental formula through weird, wonderful personality, plus amusing one-liners from not only its leads but a paranoid psycho (Rhys Darby) and an odd pastor (Waititi, delivering the funniest funeral sermon in recent memory).

Nick Schager, *Village Voice*, 20th April 2016

Produced by
Carthew Neal
Leanne Saunders
Taika Waititi
Matt Noonan

Written by
Taika Waititi
Based on the book
*Wild Pork and
Watercress* written
by Barry Crump

Additional Writing
Tearepa Kahi

Cinematographer
Lachlan Milne

Editors
Luke Haigh
Tom Eagles
Yana Gorskaya

**Production
Designer**

Neville Stevenson

Original Music
Lukasz Burda

Samuel Scott

Conrad Wedde

Sound Recordist
Ande Schurr

Costume Designer
Kristin Seth

@Majestical

Pictures Limited

**Production
Companies**

Defender Films, Piki

Films & Curious
Films present in
association with
the New Zealand
Film Commission

& NZ On Air a
Taika Waititi film
Developed with the
assistance of the
New Zealand Film
Commission He
Ara Scheme, Piki

Produced with
the assistance
of Dolby Family
Sound Fellowship

Financed in
association with
Kiwibank

**Executive
Producers**

James Wallace

Charlie McCellan

Cast

Sam Neill

Hec

Julian Dennison

Ricky

Rima Te Wiata

Bella

Rachel House

Paula
**Tioreore Ngatai-
Melbourne**

Kahu
Oscar Kightley
Andy

Stan Walker
Ron
Mike Minogue
Joe

Cohen Holloway
Hugh

Rhys Darby
Psycho Sam

Troy Kingi
TK

Taika Waititi

minister

Hamish Parkinson

Gavin

Dolby Atmos

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Vertigo Films

Credits from *Sight & Sound*, July 2016

Stafford Film Theatre at the Gatehouse