

Study Guide for Once Were Warriors (1994)

Facts

1994, New Zealand, 90 mins
Director Lee Tamahori
Producer Robin Scholes
Director of Photography Stuart Dryburgh

Summary

A raw, uncompromising working-class drama, *Once were Warriors* is compelling film-making. This extremely violent, yet deeply moving tale of the Hekes, an alienated Maori family living in an urban New Zealand wasteland, is as powerful as it is disturbing. The film's tense, gritty, hard-edged, feel perfectly matches the family's disintegration under the burdens of domestic violence, alcohol abuse, unemployment and poverty. Jake ("the Muss" – for muscle), the father of the family, has an extremely volatile personality and likes to prove his machismo with his fists. Often bearing the brutal brunt of this is Beth, his wife of eighteen years, who, despite their blighted relationship, still loves him. Beth comes from a noble Maori lineage, but abandoned her tribe for her love of Jake, a descendant of intertribal slavery. Although this practice was abandoned long before Jake was even born, its slur has left in him a bitter rejection of his Maori heritage. Unvalidated also in mainstream, pakeha (white) culture, Jake is a man with a chip on both shoulders – angry, confused and unanchored.

Unsurprisingly, the couple's five children are variously emotionally damaged. Nig, the oldest, despises his father and seeks a substitute family in a Maori street gang, the violence of whose initiation rituals, ironically, match anything Jake can dish out. Second son, Boogie, is involved in petty street crime, and is remanded into Social Welfare custody (placed in protective care) when Beth is unable to show up to speak on his behalf at a court appearance, due to the severe beating Jake had given her the previous night. In custody, Bogie encounters proud Maori warrior traditions such as the haka (war dance) through Bennett, a charismatic social worker. The Heke's aptly named daughter, Grace, often acts as surrogate mother to the family: it is she who goes to court with Boogie: she who comforts the younger children, Polly and Huia, when Jake beats up Beth; she who cleans up after her parents' frequent, drunken parties. Grace finds solace in writing stories and in her friend, Toot, a gentle, illiterate and homeless teen who lives in an abandoned car under a freeway.

It is on Grace that falls the awful blow which finally makes Beth leave Jake: one night while Jake and his mates party, and while Beth sleeps in the adjoining room, Grace is raped in the children's bedroom by Uncle Bully, one of Jake's drinking mates. Shortly afterwards, reeling from this and despairing of the incoherence all around her, Grace hangs herself. Insisting on a Maori tangi (funeral) for her daughter, Beth rediscovers the power and coherence of the traditional culture in which she grew up. She determines to start anew and do the best for her children. When, in a climactic scene, she discovers, via Grace's story book, why her daughter committed suicide, Beth fearlessly confronts Jake and Bully. Jake reacts in the only way he knows how, and in his frenzied rage, murders Bully on the spot. As Beth leaves him, he yells

abuse and threats at her, as he has so often done: this time, however, he is powerless to stop her – the film closes on his tiny raging figure amidst bleak urban decay, as sirens howl and his fate descends on him.

Cultural Context

A controversial book and film *Once Were Warriors* was the feature film debut for director Lee Tamahori, who had worked as an award-winning television commercial director since the early 1980s. In this 1994 film, Tamahori brings together a provocative version of an already-controversial book, the talents of Director of Photography, Stuart Dryburgh (nominated for an Academy Award for *The Piano* in the previous year) and remarkable performances by Rena Owen and Temuera Morrison. (Morrison was a most unlikely choice for the role of the violent Jake; he was at that time a star of the popular New Zealand soap opera, *Shortland Street*, playing the role of the nice-guy doctor). *Once Were Warriors* was a huge success in New Zealand: the highest grossing film in the country's history, its box-office takings surpassed even *Jurassic Park*.

Citing as influences directors such as Sam Peckinpah, Francis Ford Coppola, Sergio Leone and Martin Scorsese, Tamahori says that he has “always admired films that make you reel out of the theater and you have to go to a bar and get a drink” (www.flf.com/warriors/wsfilm.htm – see Links). *Once were Warriors* does that and more. It is based on the incendiary and best-selling novel of the same title by Alan Duff, a book which caused much controversy in New Zealand for its unflinching look at an alienated, urban, Maori family. While the book's narrative flows through each character's stream of consciousness, Tamahori decided to considerably restructure this format and called in acclaimed Maori playwright Riwia Brown to adapt the screenplay to focus more intensely on Beth Heke. This had the effect of providing more hope in the film than is evident in the book, while retaining the violence that lies at the core of this tale.

Why was the book (and subsequently the film) so controversial in New Zealand? In brief, the issue was that of Maori representation. Critics argued that the dramatization of the awful, brutal underside of urban Maori life was devoid of any social or political context. They argued that this failure to recognize the long-ranging impact of colonization on Maori as the background against which Heke family's miserable life plays out, simply reinscribed conventional negative stereotypes of Maori. Champions of the book/film, however, claimed that it was to be commended for speaking out about issues too long ignored, excused, or glossed-over within the Maori community.

On this, at-times heated, debate, Tamahori comments:

...in the rejuvenation of the [Maori] culture in the Seventies and Eighties, there has been a small but vociferous group of people who feel very protective of the culture at every level. They just want positive imagery and positive reinforcement of the culture. I can't blame them for that. It's a good way to go. But I believe that any culture has got to be able to examine every facet of itself, whether it be good or bad ...

...These are kind of intelligentsia, or certain academics, or just people who have a radical position, and they're quite highly outspoken on these issues. So they always take a position that is pro-Maori and anti-white European culture ... I'm part Maori myself, I'm not going to beat up my own people ... At the same time, though, I'm going to be honest about it" (see Sklar – Resources).

The debate over the book and film was, in some respects, made more complex and intense by the fact that Alan Duff, the book's author, is part-Maori and grew up in the kind of milieu which the Hekes inhabit. And, as Tamahori notes, Duff is "a very controversial man because he has taken on a huge amount of self-appointed responsibility about articulating what's wrong with the Maori people. He draws a lot of fire and a lot of flack" (see Sklar – Resources).

The Maori

The Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand and currently make up 12% of the population of approximately 3 million. Before the colonization of Aotearoa (New Zealand), and the subsequent lengthy and bitterly-fought land wars of the nineteenth century (which ceased with the Treaty of Waitangi, in 1840), their numbers were much greater. The Treaty is, to this day, the single most important document in New Zealand's history, enshrining certain rights for both Maori and pakeha (white New Zealanders). In the past, Maori rights under the Treaty have often been ignored and the Treaty itself has been much contested, but in recent decades both have been (in general) accorded far greater respect.

In an interview on the film's official web-site, Tamahori provides this brief summary, for a non-New Zealand audience, of Maori culture and history:

"The Maori have a very strong place in New Zealand society, they always have. They are very closely connected with the land, very spiritual (like most indigenous peoples), very tied to intangible things unlike Europeans. Their place now, however, is one of an industrialized society, and one of a kind of alienation, which is what our film is about. There's a growing number of disenfranchised Maori who are losing touch with their own culture and society in general. Maori now constitute a large portion of the prison population and there's a lot of anti-social problems creeping in -- welfare dependency, unemployment, alcoholism.

Unlike other indigenous peoples of the world, there was no genocide ever practiced upon the Maori and they were never forcibly removed to other areas, so, by and large, our history is one of an appreciation of both cultures and intermarriage amongst them. There's probably a higher percentage of intermarriages between Maori and Europeans than with any other indigenous peoples. There's no overt racism and, if there are racist tendencies, they tend to be hidden and they never come to the surface. Should it appear, it gets trampled on very quickly. So, it's a very homogenous society but that's a bit of an illusion because the gap between rich and poor is widening and that has tended to make the Maori much more of an underclass.

(An Interview With Warriors Director Lee Tamahori www.flf.com/warriors/waintv.htm)

(A more detailed assessment of Maori culture and history can be found in Anthony Adah's listed under Resources, below)

Colors

The predominant colors in Maori art have traditionally been black, red, and white. Even though the film is about an urban family, largely alienated from its Maori heritage, Tamahori strived to saturate the film with these traditional colors. Red is the only primary color in the movie, and is surrounded by the earthy tones of black, gray and brown. Additionally, a laboratory filtering process was used to enhance skintones and give a rich, almost sepia, look to the film.

“Cinema of Unease”

This film is featured in Sam Neil’s film *The Cinema of Unease* (refer to notes on the New Zealand film *Vigil* for details of the significance of this).

Viewer’s guide

This film has been categorized as both “melodrama” and “social realism”. Which (if either) of these does it most closely resemble?

Reviewer Desson Howe, writing in the *Washington Post* (see *Reviews*) notes that although the film “may be set in a world that is superficially exotic [to some viewers], ... its dark themes apply to the oppressed all over the world, whether they be East Germans in Berlin, [or] Native Americans in South Dakota”. Do you agree with his assessment of the universal applicability of this film? To what extent is the film specific only to a Maori situation?

Before a screening of the film at the Toronto Film Festival, director Lee Tamahori warned the audience about the violence they were about to witness. What is your response to the violence in this film? Is it necessary for it to be so brutal? Is it gratuitous in any way?

How many different versions of warriorhood are represented in the film? Which character represents each version?

While Jake is the internal force which is causing the Heke family to fall apart, there are also external forces which are contributing to this disintegration. What are these and how does the film depict them?

The beginning of *Once Were Warriors* very economically introduces us to each member of the Heke family and the milieu in which they live. What exactly do we learn about the dynamics of the family from these first few minutes of the film? How does the very first image of the film – the billboard – relate to these dynamics?

The sound effects in this film often underscore the tensions between the past (Maori cultural heritage) and the present (the alienated underclass to which the Hekes belong). In which scenes are the sound effects most notable? In which are they most effective?

Related to the previous question, in what other ways are the tensions between the past and the present represented in the film?

In certain scenes, there is an effective use of cross-cutting between events. What are those scenes and what effect does the cross-cutting generate?

What kind of shots are used in the scenes inside the Heke house? What effect do these have?

With few exceptions, the film is largely shot in interiors (the claustrophobic, ill-furnished Heke house, the smoky, tightly-packed “beer barn” of a pub that Jake frequents). What are these exceptions, and what is their significance to the film?

One reviewer describes the film as having “hyperreal stylistics” (Cynthia Fuchs – see Links www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/WomenStudies/FilmReviews/once-were-warriors-fuchs). To what is she referring?

A viewer’s response to Jake is something of a conundrum: although Jake is violent and volatile, the film also manages to evoke in the viewer a certain amount of sympathy for him. How exactly does it do that?

Beth is described by one reviewer as “both roughly confident and devastatingly vulnerable” (Cynthia Fuchs – see Links www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/WomenStudies/FilmReviews/once-were-warriors-fuchs). Precisely how does the film convey this about Beth?

What are the similarities between (the aptly named) Grace and Beth, and between Jake and Nig?

What is the “home” to which Beth returns, with her children and Toot, at the close of the film?

Resources

www.flf.com/warriors/index.html

www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/WomenStudies/FilmReviews/once-were-warriors-star

www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/WomenStudies/FilmReviews/once-were-warriors-fuchs

<http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-movie960406-267.story>

http://www.film.u-net.com/Movies/Reviews/Once_Warriors.html

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(Variant title: *Personal Journey* by Sam Neill. A personal journey and an excellent history of New Zealand film. Part of the Century of Cinema series of films)

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McKenzie, Stuart. "Warrior Cast: Interview With L. Tamahori." *Artforum International*. 33 (Feb 1995) : 64-7

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Contributor

Jo Seton, who has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is Australian, but also lived many years in New Zealand. She has long had an interest in the film industry in both countries. She worked for the New Zealand Film Archive in its early years, along with various other national cultural institutions in New Zealand. Currently she lives in a small town in the United States. She gets nostalgic about the Antipodes on the rare occasions on which she gets to see a movie from that part of the world.