

Interview with Taika Waititi

Interview by Dave Gibson

How would you describe your current smoking status? Are you a smoker, non-smoker, ex-smoker, social smoker?

I am all of the above but right now I am a non-smoker. I have smoked, well kind of. I feel like a bit of a fraud saying I was a smoker because I only ever smoked for like a year. I smoked for a year when I was about 23 and then I stopped and then like now and then I would like start up again for a week and then stop. And then this year when I did my movie because I was in the film, my character was smoking a lot and I ended up just smoking because and it was like on movies as well, there are just smokers everywhere.

I smoked a little bit when I was a teenager but the first time I tried smoking was with some friends at the back of school and I used to hang out with them because they were always smoking and one day I was like, 'Oh yeah I can have a drag of that' and I took a big drag and I didn't know how to smoke at all and I nearly puked. It actually put me off for like another eight years.

In terms of making the movie, was there a conflict creating a character who smoked while at the same time possibly promoting smoking to young people?

Yeah, I definitely had that inner conflict going on. But the film was set in 1983 and I was trying to make it authentic and growing up on the coast, it's set in the Bay of Plenty in the 80's in a really small Maori community and to be authentic, like everybody was a smoker then and that is all I remember like just cigarettes everywhere and alcohol. And so for me it would just be weird people not having cigarettes around because even in the early 80s you know people smoking in shops and they were smoking like all over the place you know even around kids. I hate to say it but there are 10 year olds who are no doubt going to start smoking within the next two years. But yeah, it doesn't make me feel good about that. I think films like Reservoir Dogs probably started shit loads of people smoking.

Yeah, it's hard when you're retelling history. I mean look at how ridiculous smoking was in the 80s and how far we've come.

Well yeah there is a scene in the film where the teacher is smoking in the classroom and I think that, if anything, is really highlighting how stupid it was.

Do you see a lot of smoking in the film/television industry?

When I was doing film stuff in like the late 90s I remember then it was really popular to smoke in between takes. But actually on this film there weren't too many smokers.

Do you think for today's generation, the romance has left the building in terms of smoking?

I think so. The other day I was watching some smokers and I just thought, 'Man that is so weird.' Like I was saying in there earlier just how fashions do change and how what I thought was kind of cool and romantic about smoking in the early days is just so different for me

now. I see something completely different and it seems strange, like if I see a girl smoking now, I'm like, 'Oh', it's almost like they are in a category which I don't want to touch in a way. It's very weird because when I was young, girls that smoked were just so hot, especially as a teenager but not now.

It's weird isn't it? Like the less normal it gets, the bigger and more unusual the thing starts to look in your hand.

Yeah, like it sticks out as well. My attention is drawn instantly down and I just got back from LA and I remember walking around different places and a lot of people have stopped smoking there. It's pretty weird I think but every now and then I would be like, 'Oh there is someone really good looking, someone really beautiful' and then my eye would just sort of trail down their arm to their hand and there would be this like big, smoking stick and I think 'Oh, urgh.'

So would you ever go out with a smoker then?

I couldn't say I would never but if I did I would probably ask them to stop or I don't know, I just don't really like the taste or the smell anymore. I would rather not.

Why do you think there has been that shift towards smoking being abnormal?

I think you know, it's almost like with cellphones, people don't know anything about them. I think in 20 years people are going to realise that they are probably killing us and it will be like the new smoking. There will be all these court cases with people saying, 'Oh you got me addicted to cellphones and gave me brain tumours' but you know there wasn't any education in the early days of smoking. But even when I was a kid, we all knew it was bad to smoke and all my cousins and I when we grew up on the coast, actually none of us really started smoking. I think just more and more people are making those decisions. I think they get that it's not cool and what is great about people telling kids that it is not cool is that eventually they get it and from generation to generation, more and more kids decide that it's not cool. That's why stuff like this campaign is great because there was none of this back then and smoking sponsorship was all over the sports when you were young. I don't remember having any conversations with teachers or any classes where they said, 'Don't smoke, it's bad.' I don't remember celebrities saying, 'Don't smoke.' But if a few of us can grow up and be non-smokers then I think it's a really great self-perpetuating force.

Where are your whakapapa?

Te Whanau-ā-Apanui.

So your marae is?

Pararaki.

Whereabouts is that?

That's in Waiho Bay which is about half an hour away from Te Kaha.

Your marae, is it a smokefree marae?

Yep. Oh, not completely, I mean there is only a certain spot that you are allowed to smoke, which is out the back of the kitchen. We will just tell people and I think most people now kind of know not to. You wouldn't take your tobacco inside or anything like that. Smokers will look for places where they can smoke on marae. At least in my experience you know, I wouldn't just light up any old place, I would sort of wait and see where the kitchen ladies would go or something.

I watched a video about a year ago, I found an old VHS of us playing as kids on the marae and it would have been in the mid-80s and one of the images that really struck me was this shot of all of the adults all just like drinking. They had all these tables and trestles and stuff set up and they were just drinking and smoking all over the place and then like the camera moves along and there is this little flatbed trailer on an angle and it's filled with beer cans and cigarettes butts and there are four two-year-olds just like sitting in all these beer cans, just playing in them and it's just, it's insane. So times have changed and I just think that people know that to smoke on the marae and not only just on the marae atea but just smoke on the marae is just, I don't want to say fucked, but it is you know? You don't do it.

Do you think using services like Quitline is a good thing or does it show a sign of weakness?

I think it is a positive thing. I think that whatever you can get helps. Because I mean, my mum gave up smoking probably through sheer determination in the end but I know that she had tried a lot of those things. I don't think Quitline was around or maybe it was, I don't remember it being around until the 90s or something but I remember people talking about Nicorette. Patches, chewing gum, gurus, I think it all helps. Whatever you can use, whatever you believe in, if it helps you, you should use it. If it doubles your chances of quitting, that's pretty cool.

Have you got any mates that have quit smoking or tried to?

Yeah, a few of them, I know a couple of people that have had to give up because of health reasons and it's amazing what scare tactics can do. If every GP in the country just said to a smoker, 'If you don't stop right now, you're going to be dead in two months', people seem to suddenly miraculously be able to give up when their life is really on the line. And then I know other people who have just tried and tried and tried and then they still smoke.

Have you supported them in their quit attempts?

Yeah, because I know that it is difficult and there are so many types of addiction and this is just another one and so support is really key. When people feel like they are failing, that is when they try to smoke more and you know that happens with most addictions. When you feel like you are a loser and you are a failure and you can't give up, that is when you give into the thing that you are trying to get rid of.

It can take a lot of tries before people successfully quit. Do you think it's important for smokers to know that the quitting process can be a journey and it can take time and it doesn't mean it's over if you slip and smoke again?

Yeah totally. I mean if you can't give up it doesn't mean you are a loser, it just means that you can't give up at this particular time and you should try again and if it takes 14 times on average that means that is kind of normal. I think people need to know that if you can't quit

the first time, it's not the end of the world, you just have to keep trying, you have to keep going. It is a journey. The end result is life.

Does smoking affect people's acting performances?

A lot of people say, 'I smoke so it relaxes me and then I am more natural when I am performing' but you know there are a shit load of other ways to calm yourself down and to relax and to be a natural performer. I don't think, I don't actually think that smoking increases your confidence. If anything I think, hygiene-wise, being on set you are in quite a closed environment and the last thing you want to be doing is sitting next to someone whose breath smells like someone took a dump in their mouth.

What else do you think that we could do to reduce smoking in New Zealand? Do we ban cigarettes, do we ban displays, do we increase the tax so it's harder for people to buy them?

Yeah, I think that is probably one of the simpler ways, is just to make it, I don't know, like \$30 a packet, \$50 a packet. If people in lower socio-economic situations and from those backgrounds where they are pretty high users and they are using most of their money to pay for cigarettes, I mean they are going to get put off eventually and if they are pissed off about it, it's just too bad.

Do you think about smoking in terms of your reputation and what people looking up to you might think? Is it important to be smokefree?

Yeah it is important and I can't say for sure that I am not going to fall off the wagon at some point but at least I am aware enough to know that if I do I am going to try again. I am going to try and be smokefree because I've seen it affect so many people and I have seen really horrible sides to smoking. I have seen enough of the effects that it does put me off and I know that I am never going to be a permanent smoker. I think if I am a role model to anyone I do want to make sure that I am at least giving messages like that to younger generations. Just that health and awareness about this sort of thing is really important. I want to be smokefree and you know I want our rangatahi to be smokefree.

What are your thoughts on the tobacco industry?

I think that cigarettes shouldn't be on display in shops. I don't know how a drug has become so readily available to the public and up until a few years ago to like 15/16 year olds. I think it's weird because we keep talking about how far we've come, like how far humans have come and how great we are but I totally disagree with how it is still available. What I disagree with is still being able to walk around neighbourhoods and see teenagers, 13 and 14 year olds smoking and there is a way to stop that and it doesn't seem to be very high up on the agenda of the government, of any government. Let's get cigarettes out of shops, let's get them out of the hands of parents of young kids because I'm sick of walking around seeing young teenagers with cigarettes hanging out of their mouths and I would like things to change.