

## The Long Walk

Nancy Brunning is no stranger to storytelling, working for screen and stage as an actor and director for more than 20 years. This March her new play *Hikoi* will have its world premiere as part of the 2015 Auckland Arts Festival.

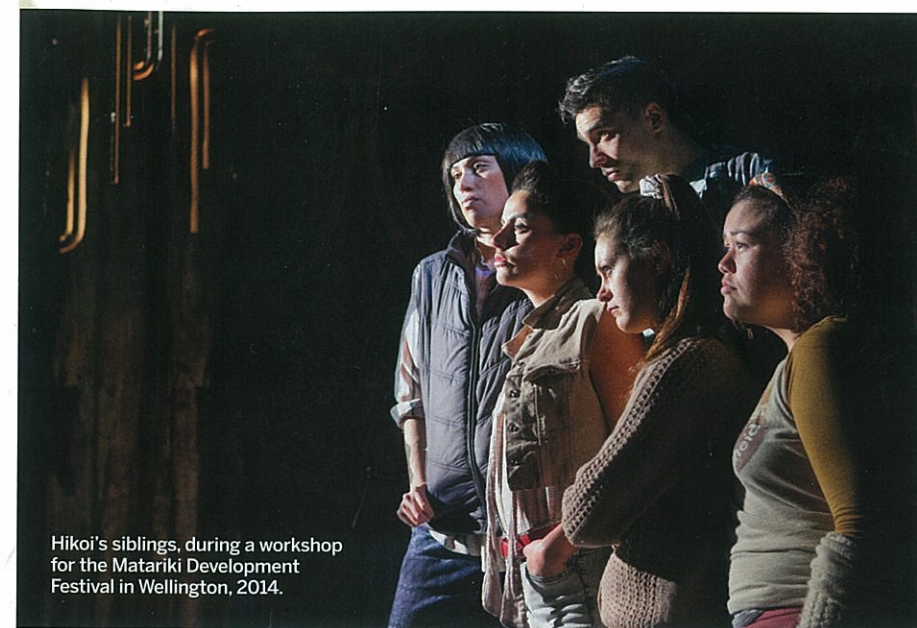
**M**Y MUM WAS a fluent reo Māori speaker but she never spoke Māori at home," recalls Nancy Brunning (Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāi Tahu). "As a kid, I remember running past her once while she spoke to my uncle at a whānau gathering. Their conversation stopped me in my tracks. I turned to her and asked; 'what are you speaking?' I never forgot that sense of not recognising my own language."

Later in life Brunning realised her mother's hesitance to teach her children te reo stemmed from her own past. Severe beatings at school and home were common punishment for speaking Māori. "Even as adults some of [mum's] cousins were too scared to go back to their home towns because it reminded them of the shit they went through as kids. It stripped them of all their confidence."

In 2011 when the Te Reo Mauriora review predicted the impending death of the Māori language, the situation touched a sore spot for the actress, writer and director. She was amongst a group of Māori who couldn't speak te reo fluently and, despite her daughter attending kohanga and kura, they did not speak Māori in their home.

"I was thinking, 'how could we be in this situation when we have iwi radio and Māori Television, kura kaupapa and

Writer/director  
Nancy Brunning



Hikoi's siblings, during a workshop for the Matariki Development Festival in Wellington, 2014.

kohanga, a Māori language commission and events like Te Matatini?" she says.

The report ignited the flame for Brunning to finally write the play she had been working on in her head for years. The disconnect of language and culture became the "real guts" of *Hikoi*.

Set in the 1970s and '80s, *Hikoi* takes place during a changing time in New Zealand history. When Māori All Blacks were made 'honorary whites' on their tour of South Africa, Ngā Tamatoa initiated protests at Waitangi. Whina Cooper led the land march to Parliament's steps and Bastion Point was occupied by Ngāti Whātua. The play follows a family of five siblings, not too different from Brunning's own, who embark on a journey of cultural discovery to connect with their whakapapa.

Although it touches on historical changes within the political landscape, the tale is one of family, communication and hope.

"A lot of people don't go back to

their papakāinga because they're frightened," says Brunning. "It's that fear that stops us from moving forward. That fear around culture and language is generated from years of colonisation that filtrates into our psyche, changing our behaviour. In *Hikoi* the father decides to cut all ties to his family, he wants to start anew. The mother has an urge to revisit her papakāinga. The children are trying to find that connection again without any resources, knowledge or understanding. What transpires is a fear and burden of trying to discover your roots."

A lot of the content was drawn from Brunning's own teenage years. There are similarities in the family dynamic, life experiences and unspoken roles she and her siblings assumed within their own whānau.

*Hikoi* also pays homage to the activists of the time. "People like Syd Jackson," she says.

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Developing her labour of love has had its challenges. The script grew one character at a time over a period of years before she sat down to a dedicated year of writing. Having previously worked as a script advisor, helping others develop their works, she has learned from acclaimed writers Briar Grace-Smith, Hone Kauka, Witi Ihimaera and Jane Campion. Their influence has helped shape and develop her storytelling.

"I kept *Hikoi* very close, I didn't want anyone to know I was writing it until I had finished a draft," she admits.

It premiered in 2014 as part of the Matariki Development Festival at Circa Theatre in Wellington and she used the opportunity for further script and character advancement.

"I'm a writing newbie. I do take on board some of the feedback I receive but I also have to remind myself to see the tohu and listen to them. I'll walk down the street and hear something on the radio and it will be relevant to the play or someone will talk to me about a relationship they're having with their brother, and it will be relevant to the play. These things too, have influence."

"The reality is, this is not just my story. It's not just my experience. I am not all of the characters, although there are aspects

of me there. There are elements of lots of different people and experiences people have had over time."

After the Auckland Arts season Brunning says she will let the play go. Having put so much of herself into its development, her satisfaction of seeing

it achieved on stage will be enough for her to then move on and open it up for someone else to come in and put their mark on it.

She won't be resting on her laurels though. Her next creation is already in research mode and, although she's keeping the details close to her chest, she is confident there are lots more ideas in her head to put pen to paper for a long time yet. **QIANE MATATA-SIPU**



Papakāinga—home soil; communal land  
Tohu—signs; symbols