

Te Ohaki a Nihe

Television New Zealand's first Maori language play was screened recently during Maori Language Week, with the playwright Selwyn Muru confident the spark has been lit for Maori drama.

The play, *Te Ohaki a Nihe*, centers round the kaumatua, Nihe sharing his last days with the whanau surrounding him. Nihe shares the family's love of gambling on the horses and he dies providing them with a winner in more ways than one. It's this realisation of the final gift of Nihe, (*Te Ohaki A Nihe*) that gives so much power and purpose to the play.

Produced by Ray Waru, the play features Selwyn Muru in the lead role, with Dennis Hansen as the son and Waireti Rolleston his wife. Erena Hond and George Stirling are the next generation with Chris and Queenie Walker as the mokopuna.

Playwright Selwyn Muru, Ngati Kuri of Aupouri, wrote *Te Ohaki a Nihe* some years back, with the first public performance a radio play during 1978 Maori Language Week. For television, the play was shortened and made punchier.

Koha, television's Maori programme, has come of age as a bridge programme for New Zealanders according to its producer, Ray Waru. And he says this two way access has proved the point that it is possible to portray the Maori culture without losing integrity.

He believes many more people watch *Koha*, as shown by the programme moving from a fairly inaccessible Sunday slot to a mid-evening Monday one. Ray says the nature of programme has presented problems in handling, especially in the use of Maori.

For the fluent speakers of Maori, *Koha* has been seen as a jealously guarded treasure where the language should be uppermost, but for other non-speakers exclusive use of the language would have cut out a large percentage of viewers, Maori and pakeha.

So Ray says compromises have been made to retain the language where most fitting, with sub-titles explaining what's said. He says *Koha*'s been very fortunate to have fluent speakers such as Robert Pouwhare and Selwyn Muru on the team along with newcomer Aroaro Hond.

Ray's direction of *Koha* since its beginnings a few years ago, has been to reflect what is happening in the Maori community.

"It's been difficult to be objective at times because of the possessive way in which Maoris see *Koha*. At times it's been difficult to keep a distance because of the tribal thing. At all times we've had to be very sure of the kawa and that we didn't offend with our cameras and other gear."

Filming Maori life presents tricky aspects. Ray speaks of the need to have his team talk and eat with the tangata whenua before any shooting of film. "It's only polite to spend some time beforehand preparing and laying the groundwork for a successful shooting".

For example an item in the last series on the cowboys of the East Coast took two research trips before a camera crew flew into the area. Even then many filming days were lost because of rain.

Ray Waru says *Koha* has got punchier with the addition of new frontman Robin Kora, and there's more current affairs.

But Ray is shortly to leave *Koha* and is moving to Television New Zealand's Drama department where he'll be putting together a documentary about Maori life. It's planned to screen six half hour programmes in April or June 1984.

Ray's replacement is Ernie Leonard who plans to carry on the high standards *Koha* has set.

Koha may now be moving into a higher gear but its success must leave some questions for Television New Zealand, questions that have been asked for some time by the Maori community.

If *Koha* can succeed as a bridge programme between Maori and pakeha, why has Television New Zealand's News and Current Affairs not taken up the challenge to screen Maori news.

Obviously exclusive use of the Maori language may make the programme sound more authentic but it also cuts out most of the potential viewers. If instead lessons from *Koha* were taken and a blend of both languages used with a culturally sympathetic treatment, that may fire the spark for true dialogue in a country that calls itself 'multicultural'.

It's not enough each year to see the news media pop token programmes up during Maori Language Week. *Koha* has shown that the other fifty one weeks can be culturally filling also.

Gems and jests

Selwyn — "The Maori way of imparting knowledge is so much more informal than the pakeha. The old man, Nihe passes on his little gems with all the gentle nudges and jests that characterise our way. His view of pakeha medicine is that the pakeha creates new sickness and then sells the cure, making the patient pay both ways."

Selwyn believes Maori language and style fits well into drama, giving as an example that all the actors were amateurs.

"All of them were acting from the heart, the aroha, the ihi, the mauri. The dialogue of the play has risen from the

Ernie Leonard (left) new *Koha* producer and Ray Waru.

