

“Hunt for the Wilderpeople”

New Zealand director Taiki Waititi is now two for two. In 2014 he gave us “What We Do in the Shadows”, a droll and priceless account of the trials and tribulations of a group of bickering vampires trying to make a go of it in present-day Wellington. His second foray into offbeat New Zealand life is “Hunt for the Wilderpeople”, the misadventures of tubby young social misfit Ricky Baker (Julian Dennison).

Ricky’s behavior (chronicled in an inventive flashback) has made him a persona non grata in a score of foster homes. As the film opens his unsympathetic caseworker Paula (Rachel House) is in the process of dumping him off at the isolated farm of his prospective new foster mother, Aunt Bella (Remi Te Wiata).).

A Nurse Ratched for our time, Paula’s recitation to Bella of Ricky’s colorful misdeeds would give Mother Teresa second thoughts about taking him in. But Bella is Paula’s polar opposite. A wellspring of caring and insight, she puts out the welcome mat for this silent and morose young boy.

Under Bella’s sympathetic tutelage Ricky starts coming out of his shell. Then something happens which compels Ricky to make a momentous decision. Should he put himself back into the not so tender hands of Paula or should he pack his knapsack and head off into the surrounding bush. Off he goes.

In Ricky’s mind he is a latter-day Daniel Boone. Sadly, his outdoor skills are nonexistence, his supply of junk food will soon run out and he learns to his dismay that his new forest home lacks such amenities as toilet paper. Things are looking bleak when salvation appears in the form of Uncle Hec (Sam Neill). A loner by nature, with years spent in the bush, Hec reluctantly takes Ricky under his wing.

All is going well until they discover that there is an evil spirit lurking in the woods. Paula is in hot pursuit. A woman who makes Captain Ahab look like a laid back seafarer, Paula is obsessed with returning Ricky to the “children’s home”. But she is getting nowhere until a chance encounter between her quarry and three good old boys out on a hunting trip changes everything. Ricky engages the trio of proto-rednecks in a free-wheeling conversation and is oblivious to the double meaning of what he is saying. Oops! Within days Ricky and Hec are the objects of a

nationwide manhunt. Special Ops forces scour the forest, helicopters crisscross the sky and the search for them becomes a media fueled extravaganza. This all leads to great fun, more adventures and close calls for our modern day Butch Cassidy and Sundance.

Among the many comedic riches of the film here are just a few:

Aunt Bella's display of her frontier skills as she dispatches a wild pig with her trusty knife. Even an animal rights activist would be hard pressed to suppress their laughter watching Bella gleefully go about her messy business.

Uncle Hec and Ricky's encounter with Paranoid Sam. A survivalist nutcase, Sam lives in a tumbledown trailer and wears an aluminum helmet to protect him against government radio waves trying to control his thoughts. When the trailer is surrounded by government forces Sam leads Ricky and Hec to his escape tunnel. It is the set up for a wonderful off the wall moment.

Rachel Hudson as Paula, the least "protective" child welfare worker you are ever likely to meet. With her permanent scowl and the DNA of Cinderella's step-mother, Paula is a great comic creation.

Julian Dennison as Ricky. Imagine Oliver Hardy as a young boy and you get the picture.

If you are looking for an original comedy with a big heart, you can't do better than "Hunt for the Wilderpeople". (Amazon Prime, along with "What We Do in the Shadows")