

# **TITLE: ONCE WERE WARRIORS**

**OFLC 000969**

## **Submission Procedure**

The video recording No. 000969 was submitted to the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) for classification by the Labelling Body under Section 12 of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 (the Act).

## **Decision**

Objectionable except if the availability of the film is restricted to persons who have attained the age of 16 years and are accompanied by a Parent/Guardian.

## **Descriptive Note**

Contains graphic violence.

## **Display Conditions**

Nil.

## **Contents of Video Recording**

The video recording featuring Once Were Warriors is initiated with two copyright notices and a Video Box Office logo. There are six trailers preceding the feature. These include: An untitled trailer about the Beatles, running for 2:44 minutes. The trailer presents quick scenes of the band playing. Wolf, running for 1:55 minutes, presents quick scene changes of a man changing into a wolf by moonlight. A woman he is sexually involved with tries unsuccessfully to restrain him with chains. The City Slicker II, The Legend Of Curly's Gold, running for 2:21 minutes, presents quick scene changes of a group of men in cowboy outfits searching for a legacy of gold on a treasure map. They meet "Curly's brother" and continue their search given various comical set backs. Widows Peak, running for 1:50 minutes, presents quick scenes of a story about a group of widows in a small town. They are out for some scandal to brighten their lives and apparently "... *get more than they bargained for.*" Like Water For Chocolate (Como Agua Para Chocolate), running for 1:01 minutes, presents in quick scene changes of a scenario of a "love story" involving a young woman with a "selfish mother" and a young man. Guarding Tess, running for 2:14 minutes, is a comic presentation of a Secret Service Agent who is employed by the President to "guard Tess". The quick scene changes show their activities in various settings.

The feature Once Were Warriors, has a running time of 98:18 minutes. The storyline follows a Maori family through the troubles they experience. The main focus is an exploration of the emotional and physical, social and personal consequences of violence.

The film begins by introducing the main characters. Beth, the wife and mother, walks home with a shopping trolley. Jake, the husband and father, eats a mussel at the fish market. Nig, the oldest son, lifts weights in a makeshift gym. Grace, the oldest daughter, sits under a tree in the yard reading a story about a tanewha to the two youngest children. Boogey, the middle son, is caught by the police robbing a car with a group of youngsters.

Jake arrives home with a parcel of kai moana (seafood), having been made redundant from his job. Discovering that the food is not just a treat, Beth becomes angry and resists his jovial sexual advances. Grace takes some of the food to her "best mate" Tu, a boy who lives under a graffitied bridge, in a derelict shell of a car. Boogey is brought home by the police. Jake leaves and goes to the pub. As he enters with a friend, a man is seen smashing another over the head with a bottle and head butting him. Three men are on the floor of the pub kicking and punching one another. A man turns on the juke box, and so doing, he drowns out the singing of a woman doing karaoke. Jake walks over to the man, punches and kicks him, and pushes him down onto broken bottles. He tells him to "*learn some respect*", and the woman resumes singing. The people at the pub move on to party at Jake's house. Beth is at home with the children, who are by now in bed. There is singing, laughter and drinking. Jake and Beth sing a love song together. Nig walks in and upsets Beth, by now evidently drunk. Jake demands she cook the men some eggs. She throws them on the floor. He punches her in the mouth and slams her against the wall. She is thrown about the room as those still present evacuate the scene. The children are upstairs huddled together, crying. Jake drags Beth up the stairs and slams her down on the bed, cut and bleeding. He tells her to "*do as you're fucking told!*"

The next day, Grace cleans up the aftermath of the party and the blood splattered walls from the fight. Nig tells her that the job of "*cleaning up after fucking parties*" will be hers in the future, once she's married and treated as her mother is. This she rejects.

Beth's face is cut and swollen with bruises. She is sick in the toilet. She makes excuses to Boogey that she can't go to court with him. She hides her appearance and distress from the boy. Boogey is handed over to welfare care.

Nig is initiated into the local gang "TOA". He is passed from one to the other gang members who each have a turn at brutally kick and punch him. The gang leader stops him, picks him up and says, "*Bro, now you've met your new family, whanau ko tahi tatou.*" He gets his patch and the first half of his full facial tattoo.

Beth's friend Marcie visits her. They discuss her wounds and Marcie tells her that to keep safe, "*Keep your mouth shut and your legs open.*" Beth talks to Jake about his temper. He replies, "*At least I try to make it up to you... jeeze you're pretty.*" He gives her his winnings from the races, and agrees to a family day out to visit Boogey at the Boy's Home. She smiles and he says "*Now will you come here... tell Jakey you love him.*"

Jake, Beth and the children go to visit Boogey. They sing and drive out of town. The family stop and look across the water to the village Beth came from. Beth tells the

children about the place and Jake tells them, *"I wasn't bloody good enough... I come from a long line of slaves... fucking slaves."* Angry, he stands and they leave the place.

Jake drives to the pub. *"Just one beer... promise."* They never get there. Jake remains in the pub while the family wait all day in the carpark. Beth's explains to her disappointed and angry daughter, *"It's just a woman's lot."*

After the pub, Jake arranges for his friends to have another party at his place. Grace goes downstairs for a glass of water and "Uncle Bully" demands she kiss him. During the party, Bully creeps into her bedroom. He puts his hand over her mouth, *"Uncle Bully'll be gentle with you."* He rapes the girl under the covers as she clutches the bed spread, wide eyed and terrified. He tells her that *"Mum and dad going to be real angry at you, coming downstairs, turning me on like that."* When he's finished, he kisses her and says, *"It's our secret, eh Gracie... keep your mouth shut."* She pulls the covers over her head and silently sobs.

Grace scrubs herself and her sheets the next day. Her mother is ignorant of the goings on and thinks she has her period. She runs out of the house past her parents, who are yelling abuse at each other. She goes to her friend Tu. They smoke a joint and laugh and joke, until Tu lightly kisses her. Grace takes fright and runs off through the streets.

Marcie and Beth cruise the streets to find her. Grace arrives home. Jake and his friends are drinking and singing. Jake yells at her and tells her to kiss her Uncle Bully. When she refuses, he throws her to the floor and rips up her book of stories. Grace runs outside. Beth arrives home and runs outside after her, to find her hung in the tree in the yard. Beth is hysterical and Jake is angry.

The next day Beth arranges for her family to take Grace "home". Jake becomes abusive, yelling, *"Fucking Maoris think they're better than the rest of us."* Beth tells him that he is still a slave. He holds her by the neck against the wall, threatens to kill her, and smashes a bottle against the wall next to her head.

The tangi is held at Beth's birth place. Boogie shows his new found cultural pride by doing the haka with the boy's from the welfare home. Nig and the gang are there. Jake remains at the pub with his friends. He returns home, smashes things in the house, and takes to the tree with an axe. He screams, and cries on the ground. He watches dishevelled outside, as Beth's family bless the house.

Tu, Grace's friend, stays with the family. He asks to be read a story from Grace's book. Beth pastes the shredded pages and begins reading. From the book, she silently reads her daughters story of her rape.

The family arrive at the pub to confront Jake and Bully. They force Jake to read the story, and walk out as Jake goes berserk and attacks Bully. He kicks and punches Bully to the floor, smashes a bottle and stabs him with it. Jake runs after his family. Beth tells him, *"Our people once were warriors... people with mana, spirit, pride."*

He yells after her, “*Fuck off, go... fuck this warrior shit...*” The family drive off with Jake still yelling abuse in the background.

The video recording is concluded with a clip of the feature theme music, running for 3:27 minutes. The music clip includes replays of segments from scenes in the feature. There is a commentary, running for 6:50 minutes, by Rena Owen, who plays Beth in the feature, and Temuere Morrison, who plays Jake. The video recording ends with a music clip by Upper Hutt Posse, running for 3:48 minutes. The total running time of the video recording is 126:02 minutes.

## **Relevant Criteria**

- **Infliction of Serious Physical Harm s3(3)(a)(i)**

There are graphic scenes of violence within the feature. The activity portrayed includes: two pub brawls involving men beating one another with bottles, punches and kicks to the head and body and headbutts; a gang initiation involving a group of men kicking and punching the initiate; a scene of domestic violence, in which a husband attacks his wife, including punches and pushes and forceful blows to her face and head, culminating in the rape which is discussed below (under s3(3)(a)(ii)), her battered face, bruised, cut and swollen is shown the next day; and a scene in a pub where a man attacks another, including punches to the body, kicks to the head and stabbing with a broken bottle. Verbal abuse occurs throughout these scenes.

The accompanying music in these scenes is haunting and dramatic, heightening the drama of the presentation. Tension is raised by renditions of Puaaoa, or Maori flute music, interspersed with the theme music.

The scenes are intense and occur throughout the feature. The violence presents in a raw and realistic manner. The violence is consequential and non-gratuitous, describing to the viewer the potent results of violent activity, both physically and emotionally. The powerful presentation is aimed to evoke an emotional response from the viewer ranging from empathy to sympathy with the characters and situations.

- **Violence or Coercion in Association with Sexual Conduct s3(3)(a)(ii)**

There are two rape scenes within the feature. The first occurs at the end of the scene of domestic violence described above. After a graphically presented beating, the man aggressively slams the woman down onto the bed. Her face is bloodied and she is evidently distressed and in pain. He yells abusively, “*Do as you’re fucking told.*” and the scene changes to the morning after. The rape of the woman is inferred rather than being graphically described on film.

The second scene occurs during a party scene after the pub. The children are upstairs asleep. The young girl (described to be 13 years) goes down for a glass of water. A man tells her “*Give uncle a kiss.*” Later, when the party is dying down, the man sneaks upstairs and with his hand over the girl’s mouth, he rapes her under the bed covers. The camera focus is on her terrified eyes and hand clutching the bedspread. The man blames her for his actions and tells her that she’s bad, “*Mum and dad going*

*to be real angry at you, coming downstairs, turning me on like that.*” as well as not to tell anyone, *“It’s our secret, eh Gracie... keep your mouth shut.”* He leaves and she pulls the covers over her head and sobs. Again, the actual act of rape is not explicit.

These portrayals of violent sexual abuse in the domestic setting are hard-hitting and emotionally charged. Both scenes present potentially real life scenarios. As with the violent scenes described above, the physical results and emotional consequences of this violence are dwelt on in the storyline.

- **Discrimination s3(3)(e)**

The representation in the feature of a Maori family dealing with the socio-economic problems of poverty, unemployment, alcohol, violence, abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence and youth suicide, is considered under s21(1) of the Human Rights Act 1993.

It is not considered that the representation in the feature is determined to depict members of our society in similar situations as inherently inferior or create negative stereotypes. Rather than create or reinforce negative social or cultural stereotypes, the storyline of the feature presents and acknowledges these problems as a potential reality in a graphic manner. The portrayal of the social problems in the feature are considered to be relevant cross-culturally in various forms. Released in New Zealand in 1994, Year of the Family, in a climate of social reaction to such domestic related problems, the film is a potent reminder of the difficulties people face.

- **Dominant Effect s3(4)(a)**

A potent and realistic portrayal of the action and consequences of violence. The presentation is emotionally charged and intent on audience reaction.

- **Impact of the Medium s3(4)(b)**

The production, a video recording, is most likely for small screen private viewing, or small group viewings.

The film is technically well produced, with high impact audio-visuals.

- **Character of the Publication s3(4)(c)**

There is social merit in the acknowledgement of the issues raised in the film. The educative merit of such an exposé includes the social interpretation and response to the messages contained within the storyline. Set in the Maori context, these messages are particularly hard hitting and relevant to New Zealanders. There is literary and artistic merit in the production of the film from an acknowledged writer, Alan Duff, and Director, Lee Tamahori.

- **Intended Audience s3(4)(d)**

The production is intended to be of wide community interest. The complexity of the issues makes adult interpretation and supervision important due to the trauma which could result via the emotive themes explored. The video recording is likely to be made available for a wide general audience, with such adult supervision and support intact.

- **Intended Use s3(4)(e)**

The production is most likely intended to be used for educative, literary and artistic purposes as well as entertainment.

### **Reasons for Decision**

The feature, Once Were Warriors, presents a graphic exploration of social issues including poverty, unemployment, alcohol, realistic presentations of violence, abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence and youth suicide. These are viewed from a perspective of consequence, both in personal terms, emotionally and physically, and in terms of social repercussions.

The serious and complex nature of the themes explored as well as the emotionally demanding audience response, makes this production appropriately viewed by a mature audience. The complexity of the issues makes adult interpretation and supervision important, due to the trauma which could result via the emotive themes explored. The video recording is likely to be made available for a wide general audience, with such adult supervision and support intact.