

Riding the whale of success

Filling the shoes of Keisha Castle-Hughes can't be easy. ZOE HOOPER speaks to Joylene Davis about her role on stage in *The Whale Rider*.

In the depths of the Civic Theatre, a 14-year-old girl is curled up on the couch in the greenroom — Burger King cup clutched in one hand, cellphone in the other, earphones firmly attached. Phil, the guy in charge, introduces us, and she momentarily puts down her phone to offer a soft handshake. Phil demands to know if she knew I was coming. Sorry Phil, she did.

It's five o'clock on a Thursday, and Joylene Davis hasn't been to school today. In fact, she hasn't been to school for a month — she's been like, reeeeeeally busy rehearsing the part of Paikea for *The Whale Rider*. "It's gonna actually be hard to go back, aye," she giggles. "It's not fame but just — I don't know — like, everybody wants to know me now, and it's just...ohhhkaay..."

So young, so popular, and they've given her a great dressing room too. One wall is lined with lightbulb-encrusted mirrors, there's a squishy couch, fake flowers, a vast array of hair products and family photos.

"We've got intercoms in the room and they can actually hear us," she says. I cross off a few questions in case Phil's eavesdropping. Joylene plonks her 165cm frame into a chair and puts down her drink and phone within arm reach.

Her looks are typically Maori — dark, clear skin and brown hair — and come from Ngati Whatua, Tainui and Ngatai. Even without makeup she is beautiful and her eyes are her best feature — a startling green that sets off the pink in her cheeks. She also looks like a typical teenager — with a pink and black trucker's cap, blue jeans, white sneakers and silver hoop earrings.

It's almost two weeks into *The*

Whale Rider's first season, and about six weeks since Joylene began rehearsing to fill the shoes of New Zealand's Oscar darling, Keisha Castle-Hughes. Only there's a slight difference — the cameras are replaced by a 2350-seat theatre.

"I almost, like, watch it every day — the movie — 'cos it's such a good movie. I don't actually, like, see it as the movie and the production, but I do sort of..." she frowns. "But not really."

Translated from teenage to English, that means she's not worried about being compared to Keisha because the movie and the stage show are very different productions — the show focuses on the whale's journey more than the movie does.

Despite being a minor celebrity herself, Joylene seems star-struck by her Paikea predecessor.

"I actually said hello to her because she was doing a book signing and stuff at the Aotea Centre and, like, all these other people were there as well and, like, they were just doing this book expo thing. And I went there and she was doing *Whale Rider* — her and Witi Ihimaera.

"And yeah, I just went to get her to sign my book and I just said hello, and then my nana had to butt in. She goes: 'Oh, my grand-daughter is going to play your part in *The Whale Rider* production.'" Joylene rolls her eyes, but her grin gives her away.

The offending nana has been bustling in and out of the dressing room throughout the interview. After tirelessly dropping Joylene at rehearsals, she caught the director's eye and managed to nab the part of Paikea's aunty. Esther Davis seems to have a knack for playing aunts — she is already well known for her role as Rangihis



TEENAGE STAGE STAR: Joylene Davis with the whale in the final scenes of the show.

aunty in *Shortland Street* several years ago.

"I was excited for her, knowing that it could lead to greater things," Davis beams. "I think she's always been a very confident girl. This has just given her a wider opportunity to demonstrate it." As well as aunty and nana, Davis also plays the role of mum and dad — Joylene's immediate family live in Sydney.

"I wanted to learn more about my Maori culture, and I think it's better education over here. It was a big move, but I'm used to it now"

You would never guess Joylene spent the first 11 years of her life in Australia — she has the distinctive Kiwi "fush and chups" accent — but she never felt at home across the ditch.

"My culture's Maori but I was born in Australia," she explains. "We came over here for holidays and I've always wanted to live over here."

Her parents wouldn't make the move, so she decided to take the initiative. She packed her bags, waved goodbye to mum, dad and four younger siblings, and moved to Auckland to live with her nana — a bold step for an 11-year-old.

"I wanted to learn more about my Maori culture, and I think it's better education over here. It was a big move, but I'm used to it now. My mum was proud of me for coming over here because she knew that I'd be safe...I'm living with my nan. My dad was a bit worried and he was a bit scared, but...I'm all right now," she laughs.

She points at the photos plastered around one of the brightly-lit mirrors and begins chirping: "That's my baby brother, that's my dad, that's my family from up north, that's my baby brother and that's my brother's touch team...and that's my dad with me — but you can't really see me 'cos I'm cut out." She pauses for a breath then adds: "I miss them." Does she want to go back? "Sometimes I wanna go back over...but I don't think so."

Now she's a year nine — that's third form for the unlightened — at Auckland Girls Grammar School. It was through the school that she got her acting break.

"I wasn't expecting this or anything," she says. "It was on a school day and I was late and my deputy principal wanted three, oh four girls to audition for the part for Pai... she was actually picking the people and so was my teacher. She [her teacher] picked me and three other girls, but it was, like, only gonna be three 'cos she thought that I was gonna be away...When I came she was so surprised, but she was happy because she knew that I would get the part."

And her teacher, Mere Snowden, agrees. "As soon as they said, 'can you think of anyone?' she was the person who came to mind. As a performer I thought she was absolutely beautiful — it's just a natural talent she has — I thought she'd go really well in the audition."

The praise keeps flowing.

"I was so naughty in Australia, I was just like...I was so bad"

sounding like an excellent school report: "She's a good all-round student. She gets on really well with other kids because she's quite a beautiful girl, but she doesn't see herself in that way. She's quite humble with everyone." It seems Joylene may be the teacher's pet.

She left school in October to start rehearsing, but keeps up her school work through private tutoring and working at home. "I actually concentrate more, 'cos I don't really concentrate at school and, like, all my friends get in my way and it's like they're talking to me and I'm trying to learn at the same time."

She takes her school work very seriously — she wants to go to university after graduating from Auckland Girls — but it is a new found attitude.

"I was so naughty in Australia, I was just like...I was so bad," she confides. "I used to steal my mum's packets of cigarettes...I was nine. I thought it

was cool 'cos, like, everybody else thinks it is but I don't like smoking anymore 'cos it's dumb." She's also stopped drinking — she used to steal her dad's alcohol to wash down the cigarettes.

After moving in with her nana she turned over a new leaf. "She's actually a good role model for me cos, like, she's actually putting me, heading me in the right direction," says Joylene. Part of her transformation is a weekly attendance at the Destiny Church.

She didn't join the recent march on Parliament to protest the state of the nation — she was far too busy rehearsing. When asked what she thought about the march, she's reluctant to talk. "Mmm, I don't know. Not really bothered...I don't know aye...I've just, like, been actually paying attention to my church."

But does she think it was a good idea? "Yeah! Yeah it's actually pretty dumb, like, having children before getting married...especially young mothers having babies and getting...what are they called?"

"Abortions?" I suggest. "Yeah, abortions and stuff, and I dunno...that's really bad. It's pretty stupid getting pregnant in the first place."

So she doesn't believe in abortions? "Oh yeah I believe, like, I believe them and stuff — I know that it's real and stuff."

She thinks she'll probably wait until she's married before she has sex — then she wants three children. But before that, she's going to finish high school then study psychology or speech language therapy at Auckland University of Technology. Of course, this is after she tours internationally with the show — the arrangements are underway at the moment.

Esther Davis swishes back into the room — she has just come back from make-up and is adorned with a painted moko. Now it's Joylene's turn, and the interview is quickly over. The night's show begins in just over an hour.

"That was fun," she chirps, while snatching up her drink and cellphone and bouncing out of the room. "You can text me if you want."



PLAYING THE FAMOUS PAI: Joylene Davis and Rawiri Paratene as grandfather Koro.