

## **Hauora: Now More Than Ever**

If there's been one constant around Aotearoa over the past few months - it has been an emphasis on wellbeing. Hauora.

Sure, it's been part of conversations and a buzz word for quite some time - the government even named one of its budgets directly after it - but it is oft paid little more than lip service.

But since the pandemic outbreak and the consequent impacts on physical and mental health, not one New Zealander hasn't given this aspect of their life some consideration, some genuinely for the first time.

Borni Te Rongopai Tukiwaho has known this day would come. As Director of Auckland Fringe and Kaiwhakahaere of his own company Taurima Vibes, hauora has been front and centre in his thought process

"It's not a new conversation with me, I've been swimming in this for eight years, knocking on doors and speaking with people," he explains.

"I can only speak for myself, but my experience is that it's taken about six years for the conversation around hauora in the arts industry for it to be healthy to speak to anyone, to talk with each other, not to be judged or ostracised. It's a conversation that I've been having for a while and now I think the powers-that-be really see the value because it's now affecting them."

Unconsciously, Tukiwaho (Tūhoe/Te Arawa/Tūwharetoa) has essentially been a mental health doomsday prepper. Instead of hoarding toilet paper and canned goods - he's been building an arsenal of resources, tools and experience to help the creative community through these most challenging of times.

As the arts sector fell into an initial state of shock when COVID-19 went from an overseas headline to an instantly altered state of lifestyle in Aotearoa, Tukiwaho's years of researching and resourcing writing skills were needed more than ever.

"I understood that I have networks and I have tools and there's a place I can function to help others to navigate the specificities," Tukiwaho says. "Part of that is to share those networks and tools and help people mitigate any small eruptions they have by doing the thing that I know works for me - finding information in the right place."



*Borni (centre) with his Fringe crew. Photo: Benny Joy Photography.*

The saying ‘knowledge is power’ has been turned into a cliché or after-school special style slogan but that doesn’t mean that it’s not true. For Tukiwaho, it’s grounded his entire approach over the last decade.

“It helps me to understand what’s going on so I can feel safe and solid - then helping to guide people to other places or other people, I’m essentially a broker, to help them find the information that they need.

“I feel very privileged to have all this experience behind me to say I can feel comfortable to move forward. I have a purpose.”

That wasn’t always how Tukiwaho felt. In fact, he spent much of his life sidestepping a grounded, meaningful role in the arts community. After leaving his hometown of Rotorua at 19, Tukiwaho spent the next 22 years living and working around the globe, He was on and off in Europe, but most of that time was spent across the ditch.

“I did an apprenticeship in the 80s as a hairdresser and I used that as my tool to be able to travel around the world and through that I built my business brain and I was sitting quite comfortably,” Tukiwaho reminisces, “Every time I had an opportunity to move more towards the arts, I baulked a little bit, it was too unsure financially for me.”



*A portrait of Borni, painted by friend Jack Trolove*

It was in 2009 that he found himself needing to make a decision. It wasn't a career crossroad, rather a family one.

“I was doing quite well financially in Australia when our father had passed away and our mother wasn't well. It was pretty much a given I needed to move home but within six weeks of a decision to sell everything I own and move home.

“I arrived with pretty much nothing and knowing nobody, so I thought I have nothing, so it's no problem heading into an industry that doesn't give you any money,” he laughs raucously.



*Borni performing at the Puāwai Festival. Photo: Evan Donnelly.*

The arts weren't new to him. Tukiwaho has been immersed in it all his life. Growing up singing, acting school in Sydney, brother to the wonderfully talented performer Tainui Tukiwaho (the director of Te Pou Theatre). He was always flitting in and out of the performance space. "It wasn't until I came home that I bit the bullet and made the decision to make it a career."

Not that it was always a straightforward decision.

"I have to say right at the beginning because I didn't know it was what I wanted to do 100 percent, my brother was probably a big catalyst for me to feel comfortable," smiles Tukiwaho. "We're very close. We're very different people but our similarities are our strength and our bind together. There's a connection to art and being Māori - it's an intrinsic part of our being. Music is where we come from, movement is where we come from."

Engaging and affable, but earnest and dedicated to his mahi and his role in Tāmaki Makaurau, Tukiwaho's place in the arts community has been built from a spark that was missing from his life when he was overseas.

"For quite some time, a lot of my world was based on aesthetics. I was a singer in a band so I was constantly on stage, I had a career in the fashion space, everything was based on what you look, it always felt a little hollow, superficial.



“When I got back (to New Zealand), my friends Sally Barnett and Brownyn Bent had just started an initiative with the Auckland City Mission called the Hobson Street Theatre Company, working with the homeless to build a theatre company for people on the street.

“I went to volunteer six months after they started and I haven’t left. It was then I started to realise that, for me, it wasn’t about giving back, it was actually having a reason for art, to be able to feel solid in what I’m doing.”



*Borni (centre) as Taurima Vibes won best Community Engagement Award at the 2018 Wellington Theatre awards.*

Tukiwaho loves that he can “feel strong and grounded” at this stage of his career. He speaks with passion and genuine warmth. There are plenty of other goals that would be easier for Tukiwaho to tick off. But it’s his work in wellbeing that remains at the forefront of his mind.

“One of the things that’s been mulling over in my brain for the last 6 months - this is the right time for it to flourish. I have a project that I’m trying to find funding for that is a national hauora resource for the arts sector - to try and roll this out over the next year so that we can respond to the changes in the climate as they happen.

“I had a conversation with one of our sector’s leading spaces last year that I feel now is a good time to revisit. I told them in the middle of last year that this was a need - they see the need now because it’s affecting them and their organisation.”

Tukiwaho is at pains to make clear he's just one of many up and down the country trying to make a difference in this area. When pressed about being a leader, he's quick to change the point of reference to service, an acknowledgement of his involvement in the Mana Moana Facebook group that supports the Pasifika and Māori creative communities since the start of the COVID-19 crisis.

As we start to move back into a world where live performance can become a reality again, Tukiwaho can sense a togetherness.

“In and around our sector, everyone has united a little bit more, there's fortification about what's happened for us...as a community we're more likely to band together to figure out we can help each other. I'm positive in the support space within our sector, I'm unsure what the wider community will want to do in regards to moving into our public spaces. That fear could sit there for some time, I think there will be lots of different responses.”

So for someone who was originally put off by concerns about uncertainty and instability, how does Tukiwaho feel about being part of the arts in its most confronting hour?

“Coming home was the best decision I ever made. That's not just about being comfortable where I am in life, it feels like the right place to be. I've been able to watch my nieces and nephews grow into amazing humans, I've connected back to te ao Māori that I wasn't able to do for 20 years living in Europe and Australia. The benefits outweigh anything else, even in my first few years in my brother's basement not being able to afford a bus ticket to Uni (laughs.)”