

# Rena Owen



Rena was brought up in a strong Catholic-Māori family. Born on July 22 1962, her father, Kake Owen, was foreman at the *Morewa Freezing Works* in Northland and spoke fluent Māori. He was a direct descendent of chief Kawiti, an early signatory of the *Treaty of Waitangi*. Her pakeha mother, Cynthia, met Kake when she was 17, working a summer job in the canteen. Rena and her 8 siblings were brought up as Māori under the influence of Nanny Upa.

At *Bay of Islands College* she joined the *Māori Culture Group* and played *Bloody Mary* in their production of *South Pacific* and the lead role in *Calamity Jane*.

Career choices back then were teaching or nursing so Rena chose the latter and studied at *Auckland Hospital*. She left for London in 1982 and stayed for six years, becoming addicted and spending time in prison. In 1985 she studied Drama at the *Actors Institute* and worked as an actor and writer. Highlights included *Voices from Prison* for the Royal *Shakespeare Company*, *Co-Existences* for the *Elephant Theatre* and *Outside In*, which debuted at the *Edinburgh Festival*. She worked for two years with London based theatre company *Clean Break*, which produced the first play written by her, *The River that Ran Away*.

She returned to New Zealand in 1989 and in 1993 won the role of Beth Heke in *Once were Warriors*, voted one of *Time* magazine's top 10 films of 1995, and she continued the part in *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted* in 1999. Other NZ feature films included *Rapa Nui* (1993), *Nemesis Game* (2003), *Mee-Shee: the Water Giant* (2005), *Roimata, I'll Make You Happy* and *When Love Comes*.

During this period she also directed stage plays, worked as a Drama researcher for *Playmarket* and wrote and read short stories for *Radio NZ*. More recent theatre credits include *Haruru Mai* directed by Colin McColl for the *International Festival of the Arts*; and directing Toa Fraser's *Bare* for the AATC in San Francisco.



Her first *Star Wars* role was *Taun We* in *Attack of the Clones* (2002) followed by *Nee Alavar* in *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Back in New Zealand she played *Puhi Tatu* in Vincent Ward's *Rain of the Children* in 2008 and the next year had the lead in *Auckland Theatre Company's* play *Pohutukawa Tree* written by Bruce Mason. She also acted in *The Hungry City*, which opened the *Watershed Theatre; Whatungarongaro*, which toured NZ and played at the *Adelaide Festival* in Australia, and *Daddy's Girl* written by and starring Rena and Wi Kuki Kaa.

She was Hine Ryan in *Shortland Street* from 2010 to 2011; which won her the *Aotearoa Film and Television Award* for *Best Supporting Actress* in 2012. Rena has also won *Best Actress Award* at; the *Montreal World Film Festival*, *Oporto Film Festival*, *San Diego International Film Festival* and the *Cannes Film Festival Spirit Award* at the *Cannes Film Festival*. She won the *2003 NZ Toast Master's Communicator of the year Award* and the *Spirit Award* and in 1994 was given a *Special Variety Artists Club Benny Award* for her contribution to the industry.

During the last decade, Rena has extensively toured the International Film Festival circuit to promote various films and also served on the Jury of the Montreal, Manila, Hawaii, Santa Barbara and the USA Film Festivals. She has also served on the *Sundance Selection Panel*.