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Te reo excellence and a viral sensation

Wairarapa Midweek, Wairarapa

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Te reo excellence and a viral sensation

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Awards for te reo excellence, tributes to the heroes of Māori history, renewed calls to “Toitu te Tiriti”, and a sultry viral video were just some of the highlights for Wairarapa at haka at the Olympics of kapa haka.

Late last month, over 2.5 million viewers around the world tuned into Te Matatini o Te Kāhui Maunga 2025 – to watch “the cream of the crop” of Māori performing arts compete for the title of National Champion.

The competition, held in Ngāmotu New Plymouth, featured 55 rōpū (teams), which captivated live and online audiences by combining theatrical choreography, impeccable chorale harmonies, chanted poetry, and impassioned haka.

Among them were Masterton rōpū Te Rangiuira o Wairarapa, which received praise for its bracket (routine) steeped in the region’s kōrero (stories) – including the return of Wairarapa Moana to local iwi, Wairarapa’s role in last year’s Hikoi mo Te Tiriti, and the impact of kohanga reo.

For their bracket, Te Rangiuira took home both the Te Kairangi o Te Reo Ā-tuhi Award for excellence in the Māori language, and the Titonga Hou trophy for haka composition.

Also representing the region was Te Whirikōkō o Rangitāne, a Manawatū rōpū with 16 members from Wairarapa – including seven who travel to Palmerston North for rehearsals.

Though Te Whirikōkō didn’t receive any official accolades, the rōpū was acclaimed for its magnetic stage presence and creative choices: From its “sparkly” white and gold costumes, to its haunting mōteatea (chant), to a poi routine infused with playful sensuality.

In fact, their latter routine went viral – with a reel of the performance shared on Te Matatini’s social media channels attracting over one million views.

The video zoned captured an interaction between Wairarapa kaihaka (performer) Iraia Matthews and his poi partner Oriwia Naera, and left viewers enchanted by their charisma and flirtatious chemistry.

Te Whirikōkō kaiako (tutor) Shari Taylor-Kawana said the rōpū was “so happy” with their debut Matatini performance – the culmination of seven months of intensive rehearsals and, for the Wairarapa members, innumerable late-night car trips.

It was particularly “awesome”, she said, to see the younger Wairarapa contingent, aged 18 to 23, “standing in their mana” throughout the competition.

“Every single one of our kaihaka left all of themselves up on that stage,” Taylor-Kawana said.

“The best part was seeing our rangatahi so comfortable and confident in themselves as performers, and in their identity as Māori. That brings such a beacon of hope for other young people.

“To see them glowing like that made everything worth it – the long hours, the sore knees and headaches, the tears, the arguments, all the bottles of water we go through...

“Proud would be an understatement.”

Junea Silbery, kaiako for Te Rangiuira, also expressed pride in her rōpū – not just for its awards, but for “achieving goals that go beyond the stage”.

“That includes things like normalising te reo Māori in our communities,” she said.

“It’s things like committing to living healthier lives, providing opportunities for their children to do kapa haka, and showing young people they can be unashamedly Māori.

“At the moment, we’ve got people who’d moved away from Wairarapa wanting to come back to do kapa haka. That’s the impact we’re having.”

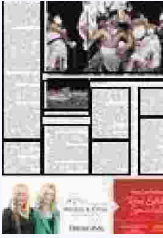
Te Rangiuira, which has appeared three times at Te Matatini, celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The group was formed in 2015 by graduates of Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Wairarapa, who wanted to reconnect fellow alumni to te reo and tikanga Māori.

Celebrating te reo is one of the “pillars” of the group, Silbery said – and its whakawātea (exit) paid tribute to the kohanga reo movement, and its role in reviving the Māori language in Wairarapa.

Tino rangatiratanga was also a recurring theme – including a mōteatea honouring the leaders who have championed Māori rights through protest.

“The banner we used during our mōteatea was actually used in te Hikoi mō te Tiriti,” Silbery said.

“My daughter was born during the hikoi, and she was the one who inspired that piece. It’s important that we pass on this knowledge to the next generation.



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“As Māori, we have an oral culture — so we put that knowledge into song.”

Te Whirikōkō’s bracket also paid tribute to great Māori leaders throughout history.

Their whakawātea paid homage to Wairarapa’s own “wahine toa” Ninewa-i-te-rangi, influential in forming the first Māori Parliament at Papawai, and their mōteatea was based on a letter from military leader Keepa Te Rangihwinui, calling for an end to the Taranaki Land Wars.

Their viral poi routine, Te Kete Ngē, was inspired by legendary rangatira Toi-te-hua-tahi, and his pursuit of his wife Te Huiarei.

Taylor-Kawana said the waiata, choreographed by Wairarapa kaihaka William Ratapu, was an ode to the “beauty of conception, intimacy and connection”.

“Te ao Māori has many beautiful love stories – and you can’t have love without lust. There’s nothing wrong with owning your sexuality, which these guys absolutely did. It was just gorgeous.”

In fact, some viewers were convinced

poi partners Matthews and Naera were a real couple.

What audiences didn’t see, Matthews (22) pointed out, was the months of hard graft which led to “that perfect moment”.

“People were like, ‘I’ve never seen that side of you before!’ But we’ve been doing [that routine] for so long, it had just become another part of us,” he said.

“Every rehearsal, we do a top-drop, where we do the bracket from start to finish, several times in a row. Each time, at full volume and intensity.

“I think we’d done our bracket about 500 times over seven months.”

Since Te Matatini, Matthews said he has been approached by several delighted fans in the street — but, as he has learned through his kapa haka practice, he is keeping his feet on the ground.

“One of our whakatauki is ‘Tū nui, noho iti’ — basically, go big on stage, but be humble off stage.”



Iraia Matthews and Oriwia Naera of Te Whirikōkō o Rangitāne went viral for their chemistry during their poi routine.



Te Rangiura o Wairarapa used a banner from te Hikoi mō te Tiriti as part of its mōteatea.

TE MATATINI ENTERPRISES