

Bush Cinderellas

YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS AND ROMANCE AT THE MOVIES, 1919–1939

IN 1989 a flyer advertising the Auckland Civic theatre’s diamond jubilee invited cinemagoers into a world of fantasy and romance. Architectural plans around the flyer’s edges evoked the expansive spaces of old-time glamour. Turrets and ornamentation surrounding the screen signalled exoticism and extravagance. In the centre, their heads filling the screen, were a man and a woman recognisable as Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, their lips just about to touch.¹ To celebrate the sixtieth birthday of an Auckland landmark people were wooed with romance, and romance was used to capture the heyday of cinema. Encouraged to imagine the luxury of being ensconced beneath the Civic’s starry ceiling watching a love story unfold, the brochure’s viewers were taken back to a time when passion and the cinema went hand in hand.

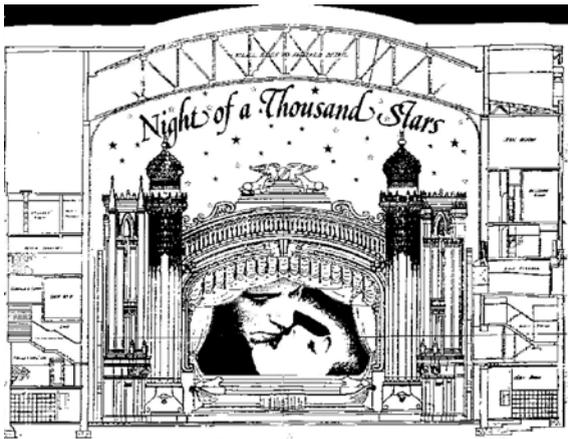


Figure 1: The ‘Night of a Thousand Stars’ referred to the Civic’s unique star-studded roof and emphasized the attraction of the movie stars on the screen. Civic brochure, TR 848, Box 2, Envelope 9, Civic Theatre/Wintergarden. Queen Street, Auckland, Ephemera, Auckland War Memorial Museum (AWMM).

The union of romance and the movies was long established. Since the early 1920s cinemas had habitually attracted patrons by telling them love stories. In 1989 the ‘Night of a Thousand Stars’ was a nostalgic one-night wonder. In 1929 New Zealanders expected picture palaces to deliver romantic magic every Saturday night.

The romance of cinema-going adjusts our view of young men and women in inter-war New Zealand. Most New Zealanders experienced strong social pressure to behave as many stoic men and self-sacrificing women do in our histories. The cinema offered young people alternative role models and a space where they could act in ways that were not written into the dominant gendered script. Young men's emotional investment in movie-going and courtship shows how expectations about masculine staunchness were relaxed for them. Courtship was a liminal state where social rules could be bent. New Zealand women were encouraged to expect fulfilment from personal relationships, primarily from marriage and family, throughout their lives. Many New Zealand histories describe how 'good' and 'bad' women were defined by lives led within or without such personal and domestic circles.² Film plots also focused young women's attention on finding a husband. However, at the pictures many young women enjoyed feeling glamorous, desired and titillated, with dates that were not necessarily marriage material.

Sitting alongside young men and women in the inter-war cinema does not overturn the gender order New Zealand histories have described. Yet, even by the dim light of a flickering screen, we can see that young men were more emotional and young women more vampish than we have been told. Inter-war New Zealand offered its youth breathing space from some of the constrictions of gender expectations. Young people's use of such a space, at the movies, may help to explain the 'elasticity and persistence of gender asymmetry' in New Zealand.³

This article replays the romance of inter-war picture theatres in three reels. First, I review claims that Hollywood romance had little relevance to local gender relations. The big screen makes the detail of young men and women's behaviour visible and complicates our vision of the gender tenets they lived by. Young women did not limit their attention to onscreen fashions or romantic plot lines; young men did not just lust after starlets or pursue sexual opportunities in the back row.⁴ Next, as we take our seats and the lights dim (and perhaps you reach for someone's hand), I trace the construction of the cinema as the ideal setting for young people's courtships. Finally, as the movie begins to roll, I turn my attention to the relationship of audiences with what was projected on the screen. Special attention is paid the star of the show, those archetypal matinee idols, the Hollywood pin-ups of the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout this triple feature, a shared culture of sex and romance remains in the spotlight. Young men and women's romantic fantasies were not stuck on separate reels; Hollywood vignettes placed them in the same frame.

As Henry Hayward declared on page one of the first edition of the *New Zealand Picturegoer*, an inter-war movie ticket bought 'Romance for Lovers' and 'screen lovers for the forlorn'.⁵ In cinema's early years, patrons had watched programmes that combined short films, live entertainment and newsreels.⁶ They could keep up with world events, experience the thrill of seeing local happenings projected onto the big screen, and develop pride in New Zealand via scenic films.⁷ However, the 'dramatic ascendancy' of Hollywood after World War I — a result of the devastation of the British and European film industries during the war — changed what was seen on screen.⁸ The new cinematic format was the 'double feature', consisting of Hollywood films that brought romance to the fore. In 1921 *The Sheik*, starring Rudolph Valentino, became the first great romantic box office

hit, and from that time romance — ‘lust and lip action’ — became ubiquitous. As a heartbroken youth complained in a 1932 cartoon, movies offered no comfort for the heartbroken (Figure 2).⁹

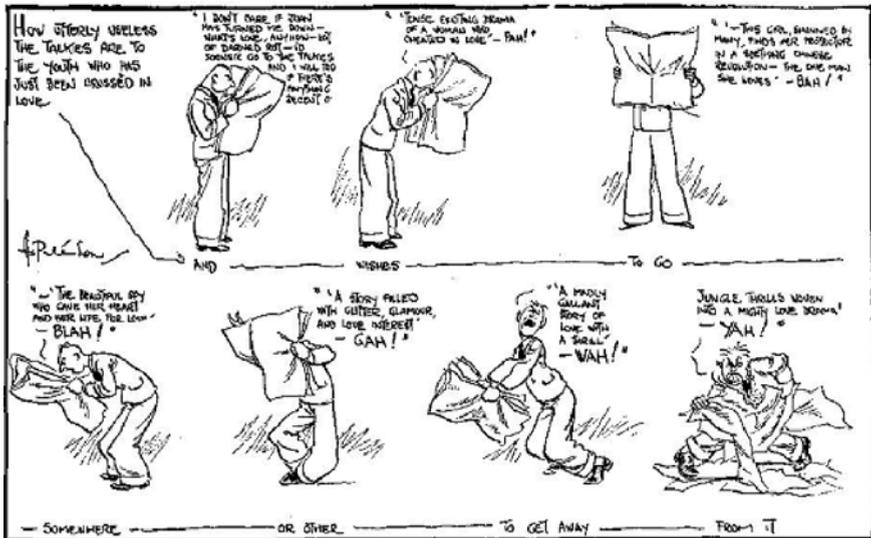


Figure 2: ‘Film Fun and Frolics’, 23 June 1932, p.29, Theatres, Cinemas, Auckland City, TR 848, Box 2, Envelope 3, Ephemera, AWMM.

From 1929 the introduction of sound made all-singing, all-dancing extravaganzas popular, but advertisers were still quick to add that ‘lovely romance’ was woven through talkies’ ‘super spectacle’.¹⁰ During January 1936, all the films shown in Auckland were about love and romance.¹¹ In total, 85% of films made in Hollywood before 1960 had romance as their main plot and 95% had romance as either a main or a secondary plot.¹²

By the 1920s ‘there was a theatre in every hamlet in New Zealand’ and improved roads and transport options made these venues increasingly accessible.¹³ A 1919 poem remarked on how easily humdrum New Zealanders could access the glamour of films, just by purchasing a ticket:

She’s going into the movies,
 Though she owns no pretty eyes
 Or handsome face, or winning smile,
 Or vampish ways and wiles.
 No aids like these are required
 By this fortunate lass;
 She’s going into the movies,
 ‘Cause someone gave her a pass.¹⁴

For most, attending the picture theatre was an affordable entertainment option at between 6d and one shilling for adults and 3d for children.¹⁵ It was also an

up-to-date amusement; New Zealanders often saw films before they were shown in smaller communities in the United States.¹⁶ Over the inter-war years attendance skyrocketed: an estimated 500,000 people a week attended a movie in 1917, rising to 700,000 people a week in 1928.¹⁷ More reliable figures from 1939 to 1940 number admissions at 31,171,000 per annum; on average, New Zealanders went to the movies around 19 times a year.¹⁸

There were scores of young people among the crowds that flocked to the movies. Many young adults had both economic independence and leisure time and were able to enjoy new consumer opportunities.¹⁹ Film advertising targeted youth by privileging romance and the joys of consumption, activities that were part of being young and modern.²⁰ People interviewed by Sarah J. Fyfe for her study of the 1920s agreed that 'the pictures were the thing to do every Saturday night'. Some remembered that in their youth they attended a theatre so regularly that the usherette got to know them well and showed them to the same seat every time.²¹ Accounts of attending the picture theatre also punctuated letters written between young New Zealand couples in this period.²²

The movie theatre has received considerable attention in New Zealand literature but its role as a site of courtship, romance and sex has not been explored in depth. Romance and sex are often alluded to as part of the 'mythology of moviegoing' but New Zealand scholars have not engaged with them further.²³ For example, work on the film career of director Rudall Hayward has detailed his use of New Zealand history but only briefly mentions the romance in his films.²⁴ Even Hayward's New Zealand fairytale *The Bush Cinderella* has been discussed as a film about 'colonial lore and New Zealand identity', rather than as a love story.²⁵

The last cinematic showing in this journal, Simon Sigley's account of the 'ruin' of the Wellington Film Society in 1933, was set in a 'narrow, strict and relatively sterile' society 'more preoccupied with respectability than stimulation'.²⁶ Sigley's depiction of the Film Society being squeezed out of Wellington aligns with James Belich's vision of a nationwide moral crusade 'tightening up' 1920s society 'like a giant spanner'.²⁷ By the 1930s New Zealanders' pennies were tight too, and many histories have described the nation's 'loss of heart' in the era long imagined as the 'sugarbag years'.²⁸ Yet there are alternative inter-war backdrops and characters. Notably, Caroline Daley's work foregrounds some of the 'Pleasure Seekers' who have populated our history, if not our historiography.²⁹ Couples certainly sought pleasure at the movies, where young men and women had fun and revealed their hearts in courtships played out beneath the silver screen.

When New Zealand gender historians consider movie-going, they most often transpose pioneering 'hard men' and respectable homemakers from farm and homestead to cinema chair. Jock Phillips has argued that romantic Hollywood heroes were rejected by New Zealand males who saw the practical 'man alone' archetype as more relevant to their lives.³⁰ In contrast, we are told that in 1938 every girl in standard six adored Deanna Durbin. Eve Ebbett suggested that, appropriately for future housewives, these young fans rushed to replicate the bolero and beanie Durbin wore in *Mad About Music* by making matching outfits in sewing class.³¹ Some historians have broken with these familiar refrains. Daley has highlighted a gradual renegotiation of gendered boundaries that meant young

women in Taradale in 1930 were likely to be 'less deferential and domesticated than their mothers and grandmothers'.³² Chris Brickell's history of gay New Zealand has begun to people our historiography with new *Mates & Lovers* and alternative masculinities.³³ At the movies we see that there were other possibilities for heterosexual men and women too. After all, there were few men alone in the back row of the cinema.

Phillips has described a whole cast of role models who encouraged New Zealand men to control their emotions and be more invested in sport, work and public affairs than in women and romance. The ideal men of twentieth-century mass media, novels and political life were admired for similar reasons, whether they were pioneers, rugby players, Anzacs or politicians. A central trait of these 'hard men' was their ability to control their feelings: they behaved according to a masculine 'habit of emotional repression', even in the face of pain or death.³⁴ At the same time, amorous activity on the movie screen presented male cinemagoers with a 'powerful image of the modern man as lover'.³⁵ However, Phillips suggested that New Zealand men behaved according to the rules of the sports field and the battlefield, not with the thoughtfulness and charm they saw at the flicks.³⁶ The New Zealand husband was a figure of practicality not of romance; he was 'rough but loyal, not a passionate Hollywood lover nor a heroic figure of drama, but a down-to-earth provider'.³⁷ In Phillips's account, New Zealand's strong male culture and its inflexible measures of masculinity meant that Pakeha gender relations were uneasy and distant. Yet going to the movies offered a place outside such hegemonic understandings, at least for young men during their courtships. Perhaps New Zealanders understood that 'real men' were made, not born, and expected males to be appropriately hardened by life experiences by the time they turned 30. Once these romantic young men were grown, married and supporting a family, their behaviour may have been more closely policed.

Phillips's key cinematic example of the unromantic New Zealand male was a publicity still published in the *New Zealand Observer* in 1936 for the New Zealand film *On the Friendly Road*, which showed the male hero looking 'laconically into the distance' while the woman was left helplessly 'clutching his side'.³⁸ Phillips contrasted this image with another still, also published in the *New Zealand Observer* in 1936, of a Hollywood couple gazing intensely into each other's eyes to suggest 'the limited impact of Hollywood's ideals in New Zealand'. In the pictured scene the hero of *On the Friendly Road*, Mac McDermitt, was certainly struggling with troubles that could have made him an emotionally detached 'man alone'.³⁹ He had been unjustly evicted from his farm and his anger threatened to explode in crime and larrikinism. But the strength of his relationship with his wife Mary — established earlier in an emotional scene of reunion — saved him from this temporary madness. After the moment Phillips's reproduced, the couple turned to gaze at each other as they agreed to 'start again', together. Mac offered his wife and children emotional fulfilment as well as the practical support Phillips's 'down-to-earth provider' would have privileged.⁴⁰ Phillips's presentation of Mac as the exemplar of male resistance to romance ignored *On the Friendly Road's* focus on romantic (as well as familial) love as a regenerating force. Mac was happily enmeshed within webs of love and obligation — he was not a man alone.

While *On the Friendly Road* centred on the bonds of marriage and family, it was unusual in doing so. New Zealand films in the inter-war period were more likely to focus on the trials and triumphs of courtship. Two-thirds of the 23 feature films made in New Zealand between the wars were concerned with courtship, and many relied on romance as their primary plot device.⁴¹ These films introduced a host of romantic figures, but the couple who received the most media attention as celluloid icons were Dale Austen and Cecil Scott, the stars of Rudall Hayward's 1928 film *The Bush Cinderella*.⁴² Media excitement over Austen's reign as Miss New Zealand 1927 and her subsequent contract with the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio had built an image of her as a beautiful and charming girl who could represent the nation through her promising film career.⁴³ In September 1928, anticipating the release of *The Bush Cinderella*, the *New Zealand Picturegoer* published a picture of Austen and Scott, gazing into each other's eyes, above the announcement: 'New Zealand has its own screen lovers'.⁴⁴ An image of the two stars posed within a heart was published twice in subsequent editions and reinforced the message that Austen and Scott were home-grown romantic icons (Figure 3).⁴⁵



Figure 3: Austen and Scott as 'New Zealand's Own Lovers'. *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 7 September 1928, p.2.

Cinemasgoers attracted by the promises of a bush romance would have been pleased with the film. From the initial meeting of the characters played by Austen and Scott, Margaret Cameron and Lieutenant Neil Harrison, the film saturated their relationship in romantic conventions. The initial sighting of Scott was a soft-focus shot of him turning over his shoulder to smile at Austen. It established him as a legitimate romantic interest for Austen and for the audience.⁴⁶ Although his

cardigan and pipe are not the marks of a screen stud today, they suited the film's 1920s sensibility. Indeed, the physical proximity required while Austen re-stitched a cardigan button that had been wrenched off Scott's cardie during a tussle with an assailant enabled the couple's first kiss (Figure 4).



Figure 4: This image from *The Bush Cinderella*, which captured the moment before Austen and Scott's first screen kiss, showed characters deeply engaged with their emotions. Image 18, stills from *The Bush Cinderella*, NZ1928, New Zealand Film Archives (NZFA).

Key scenes in *The Bush Cinderella* emphasized Austen and Scott's 'New Zealandness'. Austen was shown cuddling a kiwi, and later the couple frolicked in the bush (Figure 5). At the climax of this light-hearted scene Austen hid behind a fern. Unsurprisingly, Scott pushed it aside and — in a partial realization of the sexual possibilities allowed by their isolation — claimed a passionate kiss.



Figure 5: This flirtation among the ferns placed Austen and Scott in a distinctively New Zealand setting. Image 19, stills from *The Bush Cinderella*, NZ1928, NZFA.

Reviews of *The Bush Cinderella* confirmed the success of Austen and Scott as screen idols. The *New Zealand Picturegoer* considered that Scott 'captured the romantic air' necessary for his role as male lead and the 'Majestic Parrot' (a gossip columnist who commented on goings-on at the Strand and Majestic theatres) predicted 'exceptionally' large numbers of men would see the film as a result of Austen's allure.⁴⁷

The charming Scott was not the only model for romantic success that New Zealand films offered; less debonair heroes also populated the screen and claimed their girls. The combination of comedy and romance was a key attraction of inter-war movies and was emphasized in advertising for many Hollywood features.⁴⁸ This trend manifested itself in New Zealand film heroes who were both laughed at and swooned over. For example, in *The Adventures of Algy* the clumsy but endearing Algy won the heart of the heroine Kiwi, and ended the film by bending her backwards in a Hollywood-style kiss.⁴⁹ Rudall Hayward and Lee Hill's community comedies, made in New Zealand between 1928 and 1930, also starred men who united comedic and romantic appeal.⁵⁰ New Zealand heroes could also be practical without foregoing romantic success. In the 1936 film *The Wagon and the Star*, for instance, John impressed his sweetheart Mary by winning a car race.⁵¹ The film emphasized that John's rough edges did not rule him out of the race for love. Hidden under his car, he unknowingly dismissed 'sentimental nonsense' in Mary's hearing and then, during their first clinch, smeared car oil on her dress. Neither mishap troubled Mary, who went back for a second kiss. Characters that displayed elements of Phillips's 'rough but loyal' Pakeha male were as preoccupied with romantic relationships as Cecil Scott's Lieutenant Neil Harrison, they just sped down alternate paths to claim love as their prize.

New Zealand cinematic heroes and leads in New Zealand films acted out their masculinity in different ways from the soldiers and rugby players who had such a presence in twentieth-century public culture, and continue to dominate our gender histories. Admiration for masculine hardness was deeply ingrained in New Zealand society, and men could not easily discount this model for their behaviour. Yet on the cinema screen, young men saw that they could be romantic too, and on Saturday nights they entered the perfect setting for romance. At the movies, young men and women stepped out of the long shadows cast by the pioneer male and his helpmeet and into a shared courtship culture which flexed the boundaries of gendered behaviour.

In their architecture, advertising and fan magazines, picture theatre owners and film studios offered young people the chance to experience glamour, exhilaration and romance at the flicks. Young people accepted such invitations with enthusiasm, in New Zealand and internationally. Just as most films shown in New Zealand came from the United States (an estimated 350 out of 400 feature films in 1927), much of the material printed in New Zealand film magazines and picture theatre programmes was created by American studios.⁵² Hsu-Ming Teo has recently highlighted the 'transnational influence of consumer capitalism' on Australia's culture of romantic love.⁵³ Likewise, young New Zealanders' cinematic experiences show how their lives and daydreams were shaped by New Zealand's commercial and cultural links to the Anglophone world.

Inter-war moviegoers watched films in a variety of settings, but in urban centres cinema design followed an international trend of increasing luxury. The Regent cinema in Auckland was represented on the cover of its weekly programme as a sparkling example of this new grandeur; its doors blazed with light and people surged through them to experience the delights within.⁵⁴ Just as department stores constructed spectacular window displays to proclaim their modernity, cinema architects designed frontages to lure passers-by to enter and experience the elegance, excitement and up-to-the-minute entertainment within.⁵⁵ Inside, patrons of the new picture palaces enjoyed beautiful surrounds. In the Auckland Plaza, for example, they were able to ‘lie back in the front stalls’ and ‘gaze up and back at the wonderful ceiling, a glow of turquoise in an ether of pink’, a pleasurable experience that was remembered long after the films themselves were forgotten.⁵⁶ Letters written to the *New Zealand Picturegoer* praised the comfort and ‘soothing atmosphere’ of venues like the Majestic, ‘the limit’ in movie-going.⁵⁷ The cover of the Tivoli theatre programme conjured an image of opulence (Figure 6).⁵⁸



Figure 6: A fashionably dressed flapper surrounded by objects of decadence proclaimed the luxury of the theatre. Tivoli programme, 17 November 1922, front cover, Cinemas, Tivoli Theatre, TR 848, Box 3, Envelope 20, Ephemera, AWMM.



On Saturday nights, New Zealanders recreated the film star lifestyle in these sumptuous settings.⁵⁹ Sometimes, for the duration of a feature such as *Cocoanut Grove*, they could ‘DANCE WITH THE STARS!’ or ‘LIVE A NIGHT AS STARS LIVE!’ in their imaginations.⁶⁰ More often, they were encouraged to fulfil this fantasy by dressing up and attending the cinema with an equally well-turned-out date — just like the sophisticated moviegoers pictured on the covers of film programmes (Figure 7).⁶¹

Figure 7: This mixed-sex group dressed appropriately for the comfort and refinement of the picture theatre. *Civic Review*, 11 August 1930, Civic Theatre/ Wintergarden, TR 848, Box 2, Envelope 9, Ephemera, AWMM, front page.

Theatre owners sometimes added further aural and visual treats. For example, at the screening of *Blossom Time*, the love story of Franz Schubert, St James patrons entered a foyer decorated with floral arches and musical notes, and filled with music played by a quartet of young women.⁶² Later, in the spacious, darkened auditorium, cinemagoers could give themselves up to private fantasies. Patrons like ‘D. Q.’ revelled in the ‘bright lights, laughter and wonderful music’ that made them ‘feel the picture’.⁶³

Advertisers encouraged physical and emotional reactions to cinema's unique realism.⁶⁴ Readers who loved Tolstoy's *Resurrection* were told that they could not realize the 'power' of its romance 'from the printed page alone'; theatregoers who had seen *Seventh Heaven* on the stage were urged to see the cinema version as superior.⁶⁵ Films were 'vividly real' and alive: 'throbbing', 'beating', 'pulsing', 'thrilling' and 'as vital as life itself'.⁶⁶ A 1923 flyer for the film *If Winter Comes* described it as 'Mightier than the Book' because the characters had 'COME TO LIFE ON SCREEN'.⁶⁷ An illustration depicted a queue of film characters stepping out of an open novel, personifying cinema's realism and vitality. Advertisers repeated the technique for *The Rustle of Silk* and *Ramona*.⁶⁸



Figure 8: In this advertisement two lovers burst out of the pages of a book proclaiming that they had been 'brought to life' by film. *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 21 September 1928, p.4.

Cinema patrons were offered an exhilarating array of emotional experiences but romance was often privileged. A description of *My Best Girl* offered a 'symphony of laughter, adventure and thrilling suspense' but quickly reminded readers that the central theme was 'LOVE'.⁶⁹ The inner experiences of romantic entanglements were accessible as never before: thousands had 'read' *Ramona*, but those who went to the film would feel the emotions of the heroine and '[d]ream with her! Thrill with her! Love with her!'⁷⁰ Likewise, the 'romantic love story' of *A Southern Maid* would 'set your pulse racing with excitement and your heart tingling with happiness'.⁷¹ These descriptions were tailored to those readers who wanted to see romance on the screen and who expected to play a part in its drama.

Advertising used terms that had erotic overtones — throbbing, tingling, thrilling and pulsing — to describe physical experiences at the cinema. Readers were expected to be alert to these double entendres, as in a *New Zealand Picturegoer* joke: 'Her lips quivered as they approached mine. My whole frame trembled as I looked into her eyes. Her body shook with intensity as our lips met, and I could feel my chest heaving, my chin vibrating and my body shuddering as I held her to me. The moral of all this is: Never kiss them in a flivver with the motor going.'⁷² Other texts openly assured cinemagoers of erotic pleasures. Publicity material emphasized the number of 'dirty' lines in talkies, or pronounced films 'sextravagant', and spotlighted 'spicy' plots or attractive female body parts.⁷³ The 1928 advertising campaign for *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* suggested the

physical attractiveness of the heroine by abbreviating her name to ‘H–O–T–’ and invited audiences to ‘take a peep’ into her private life (Figure 9).⁷⁴



Figure 9: This saucy image invited audiences to lift the tent flap on Helen of Troy’s private life. The view through the gap suggested the tempting possibilities of nudity and sexual play. *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 11 May 1928, back cover.

The audience’s privileged view of the female body was embodied in an image of a filmmaker examining an isolated limb in search of ‘the finest and most shapely pair of legs’ in America — subsequently available for viewing in *Joy Girl*.

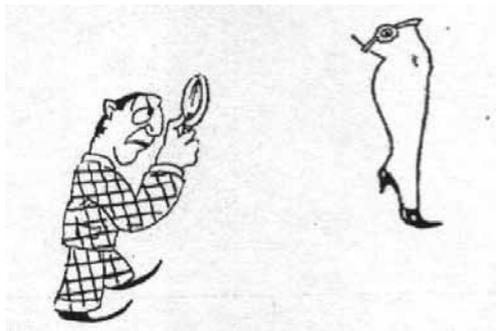


Figure 10: This filmmaker’s magnified gaze embodied the close attention moviegoers were able to pay to the female bodies displayed on the big screen. *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 30 December 1927, p.3.

Although the professional detachment of the filmmaker in the *Joy Girl* image was confirmed by his stern expression and scientific scrutiny, it was expected that, in the privacy of the cinema, patrons would be aroused by the visual delights on offer. Seductive scenes, such as Robert Taylor’s amorous moments with Barbara Stanwyck in *His Brother’s Wife*, would put viewers ‘in the mood for love, too!’⁷⁵ For Eileen Soper, it was Rudolph Valentino who created this mood: ‘When I was sixteen I saw Rudolph Valentino give someone a long drawn-out kiss and for the first time in my life I felt a strange thrill go straight through me. I didn’t understand it . . . I think I felt embarrassed and very self-conscious.’⁷⁶ While Soper was

disturbed by her new experience, others eagerly embraced the cinema's eroticism; Valentino's attraction was almost universal and his character's name, 'The Sheik', became slang for any young, attractive male.⁷⁷ Frequent criticism of the censor and his restrictive judgements suggest the pleasure local film patrons gained from racy scenes. A humorist expressed his desire for the unexpurgated versions of Hollywood's delights in verse:

A Censor I would hate to be,
Because they're hated so;
A censor I would like to be –
They see what 'doesn't go'.⁷⁸

Another poem, published in the *New Zealand Picturegoer*, dwelt on the attraction of villains declared '[t]oo hot' by the censor.⁷⁹

The picture theatre's luxury and semi-privacy, and its romantic and erotic offerings, made it the ideal venue for courtship. As one commentator quipped, some people loved to go to the movies but others went to the movies 'to love'.⁸⁰ The *New Zealand Picturegoer* described how cinemas set the scene for one happy pair: 'They sat closely together in a double seat, holding each other's hand tightly. The soft rose and amber light streamed down from the hanging lamps, tinting her cheeks warmly, and giving his hair "that patent leather finish!" From the orchestra well came the heart disturbing strains of Liszt's "Dream of Love". She wanted to tell him how beautiful it all was, but her shy words could not be spoken. She just held his hand a little closer. Romance was in the air.'⁸¹ Weekly cinema dates strengthened this young couple's relationship. After their engagement he selected a honeymoon destination from the screen and she made her first resolution for married life: 'The Majestic Once a Week'. Long-married couples were advised that a commitment to the cinema was a commitment to romantic renewal. The distance and strain of married life was contrasted with the romance of the movies: '[H]ere . . . there is no table between you. No lights to disclose hard realities. You sit close, side by side, and maybe your hands touch. You are learning how to be lovers again, from fleeting lights and shadows that move across a screen.'⁸² Many cinema seats had arms that could be raised, and the back row, in particular, was synonymous with sexual and romantic activity.⁸³ The *New Zealand Picturegoer's* weekly column 'From the Back Row' was headed by an image of a couple snuggled together with their heads touching, enjoying their relative isolation (Figure 11).



Figure 11: A back row couple. *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 25 May 1928, p.14.

Young New Zealanders viewed the cinema as a setting for their real-life love scenes. In 1931 Edna Carrie's fiancé Frederick Baker was away studying accountancy. Edna still went to the movies with family and friends but the

experience was unsatisfying: ‘somehow pictures seem so different when one can lie back and feel a strong arm there, feel a gentle pressure every now and again on the hand lying in ones lap, and incidentally held in the hand of the one who loves you’.⁸⁴ Young men felt this way too. In a 1927 letter to his beloved ‘Fluff’ (Mary Smithson), James Robertson recounted an outing to see *The Marriage Clause*, a film so underwhelming that he ‘lay down upon the seats and had a good sound sleep’ until woken by a friend to sing ‘God Save the King’. James playfully suggested that he would not have resorted to a snooze if Mary had been with him: ‘I don’t think I would have, what do you think?’⁸⁵ James’s teasing question encouraged Mary to imagine the possibilities open to the couple on spacious cinema seats.

Some New Zealand men sought different options and invited each other to the movies while ‘cruising’ the streets for sex or as they formed lasting romantic attachments.⁸⁶ For those who did not fit with the idealized heterosexuality of the screen, trips to the cinema may have been fraught with loneliness and exclusion. For others, unsavoury or forcible sexual propositions tarnished the romantic gleam of the cinema, although nostalgic accounts of courtships and cinema-going do not often raise these possibilities.⁸⁷ Picture theatre staff had to keep their eyes and minds open if they wished to police what went on ‘under the cover of darkness and strategically placed coats’.⁸⁸

Cinema advertising and close-ups on screen focused attention on the Hollywood star. Young moviegoers were likely to imitate leading men and women who were projected as ‘symbols of romantic perfection’ and whose success in love was ‘associated with the highest reward of all, true happiness’.⁸⁹ We expect young women to be smitten with handsome heroes of the screen and filmic fashions, but young men were equally inspired. While some New Zealand men dressed like Joan Crawford, others admired their heroines without donning matching false eyelashes.⁹⁰ In a letter to the *New Zealand Picturegoer*, ‘P. G.’ celebrated Greta Garbo as the ‘incomparable breaker of men’s hearts’ who ‘captivates our souls and fills us with a delicious anguish’.⁹¹ A shared romantic culture crystallized in iconic images of Hollywood stars in love.

Stars emerged after 1914 as the private lives of ‘picture personalities’ entered public discourse, and audiences were encouraged to validate their devotion to a particular actor by learning ‘truths’ about their personality; it became vital to know whether ‘your REEL hero’ was ‘a REAL hero’.⁹² By 1919, ‘the content, production and publicity of the movies’ focused on the film star.⁹³ From 1920, a ‘glorious era’ of stars began: their names and faces overpowered all else in film advertising and their popularity determined ‘the very existence and economy’ of the industry.⁹⁴ Moulding an actor into a romantic idol was a hugely successful marketing technique: gossip columns gleefully reaffirmed the myth that certain stars were hopeless romantics and devoted fans penned ardent letters to their crush or (less bravely) to film magazines.

The first film magazine in New Zealand, *New Zealand Theatre and Motion Picture*, published from December 1920, offered information about Hollywood stars and images of their beautiful faces and glamorous fashions.⁹⁵ This periodical was complemented by the many smaller weekly publications that also operated as cinema programmes.⁹⁶ Although early commentary expressed uncertainty about

the real value of stars, fans were supplied with an ever-increasing level of detail about them.⁹⁷ In 1919 a *Strand Picture Mirror* article entitled ‘All About Norma’ offered a discussion of Norma Talmadge’s professional life.⁹⁸ By 1932, magazines like *N.Z. Talkies and Theatre* were publishing regular, detailed columns on actors’ and actresses’ personal lives: one column was entitled ‘Intimately Personal’ and another specifically detailed ‘The Heart Beats and Heart Breaks of the Players’.⁹⁹ In the mainstream press, the *New Zealand Home Journal* featured stories about stars’ lives, shared their beauty and fashion advice and, from April 1936, filled each cover with a film personality’s portrait.¹⁰⁰ From its inception in December 1932, the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* placed photographs of ‘glamorous young stars’ on ‘[v]irtually every page’.¹⁰¹

Stars embodied romantic fantasies that targeted both men and women.¹⁰² Male and female cinemagoers knew that they had different roles in a ‘Deep Bend’ embrace — she swooned while he claimed a kiss — but they visualized the same scene. Exotic romances also had gendered scripts; the hero protected his beloved with his sword or carried her to safety on horseback (Figure 12).¹⁰³ Yet medieval chivalry and Arabian adventure were equally enticing for male and female readers. *The Vagabond King* invited viewers to ‘live the love-life of the world’s most glamorous lover’, but the question of whether a moviegoer would step into the boots of the athletically built ‘king’ or slide on the slippers of the maiden at his side was left up to the viewer to decide.



Figure 12: Advertisement for *The Vagabond King* (1930), Tracey Huia McKenzie, Scrapbook, Misc-MS-0941, Hocken Library (HL).

Other advertisements used close-up stills to focus on the shared emotions — contentment, passion or betrayal — visible on the faces of heroes and heroines. The images’ tight frames cropped out gendered plots and highlighted the way each lover’s feeling was mirrored in the face of their sweetheart.¹⁰⁴

In line with advertising that appealed to both genders, young men and women judged that they would enjoy the same films. In 1935 Jeanie Stewart ‘loved’ *The Dark Angel* and urged her sweetheart, Cyril Thomas, to ‘see it if you get a

chance'.¹⁰⁵ *Dark Angel's* themes of intense, lasting love and self-sacrifice — acted out by a hero who declared to his beloved, 'if ever you weren't there I'd stop living, I'd stop breathing, I'd stop wanting to breath' (sic) — did not preclude a masculine audience.¹⁰⁶ Instead, Jeanie assumed that Cyril would enjoy such melodrama. Young men and women were also encouraged to nurture parallel desires for Hollywood's legendary lovers. In November 1928 the *New Zealand Picturegoer* introduced the new faces of Madeline Carroll and Ivor Novello accompanied by text that used leading questions to position them as objects of heterosexual attention. The *Picturegoer's* suggestive entreaties reversed the assumption that men's desires were primarily sexual and women's romantic. Male readers were invited to view Carroll as 'LOVELY', and young women coaxed to get 'A THRILL' from gazing on Novello.¹⁰⁷

Advertisements encouraged cinemagoers to imitate onscreen couples through the illusion that cinematic passions were real. For example, in 1932 the established romantic duo of Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell were declared 'partners in love and romance' despite the fact that both were married to other people.¹⁰⁸ The 1934 St James advertising campaign zeroed in on the stars of the film, Joan Crawford and Clark Gable: there was no sense that they were actors playing characters.¹⁰⁹ Instead, it was 'handsome Clark Gable and exciting Joan Crawford' who were brought together and who would fall in love. Crawford and Gable were the 'screen's perfect lovers' and audiences pronounced eager to see them 'In Love Again!'¹¹⁰ A later St James advertising campaign for *Camille* blurred the line between role and reality even further. 'GRETA GARBO loves ROBERT TAYLOR in CAMILLE', one ad averred. Another shortened version was definite: 'GARBO — LOVES ROBERT TAYLOR'.¹¹¹ These two stars had not featured in a romantic film together before and advertisers suggested that *Camille* was the realization of their personal destiny: 'They're together at last — these two great lovers whose paths now cross'.¹¹²

Fans were encouraged by film magazines to contemplate the possibility of real-life romance with their favourite film idol. In 1919 *Motion Picture Magazine* — one of the many American periodicals popular with New Zealand film fans — told the story of Romaine Fielding, the star and director of western-style adventures, and his wife Naomi, who had been brought together by fan mail.¹¹³ The notion that feelings evoked by a star's image on the screen could translate into a real relationship was encouraged in a more playful manner on the letters page of the *New Zealand Picturegoer*. Questions about stars' marital status were answered as though fans were potential romantic partners. In 1928 'Rose Bud's' request about the already married Richard Arlen was 'too late', but luckily she was also interested in Charles Rogers who, it was triumphantly declared, was 'not married!'¹¹⁴

As star-theorists have pointed out, the intimacy implied by these statements and the personal details that were available in film magazines were offset by an accompanying view of stars as impossibly perfect and far-removed from everyday life.¹¹⁵ Studio advertisements extended the metaphor of stars as belonging to a different (brighter and more beautiful) plane by referring to actors who belonged to the 'First National Constellation' or the "'Universal" firmament'.¹¹⁶ Similarly, the title for the *New Zealand Picturegoer's* regular information column about

stars' current film projects showed an earth-bound fan gazing longingly up at the heavens, the realm of her idols (Figure 13). These contradictory characteristics allowed fans to feel both empathy and an idealized devotion for their favourite movie actors.



Figure 13: Before reading about the current projects of their favourite film personalities, fans were reminded that stars were so far removed from ordinary life that, like stars in the sky, they operated in an entirely separate 'Starry Kingdom'. *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 13 July 1928, p.6.

Magazines encouraged fans to emulate stars' appearance and behaviour to achieve romantic success. Confidantes, role models and teacher figures were important throughout 1920s advertising, providing personalized help for consumers to navigate the exacting demands of modern life.¹¹⁷ While advertising personalities advised readers which products were required to meet modern courtship's standards of cleanliness and style, stars gave 'lessons in the techniques and exact rites of amorous communication'.¹¹⁸ Advertising cautioned both young men and women to pay attention to the sages of the silver screen: girls who wanted to subtly inform an acquaintance of romantic affection were told to see Marion Davies in *The Patsy*; boys who wanted to 'learn how to be a successful Romeo, and win the hearts of beautiful damsels' were assured that Al Mack would give them 'excellent advice'.¹¹⁹ In a modern world with new rules of romance, New Zealanders were warned that they should not make any decisions about their romantic lives without cinematic counsel: 'Don't get married! Don't get divorced! Don't fall in love! Don't do anything till you have seen "IF I WERE SINGLE"'.¹²⁰

Cinemagoers applied what they learned in the dark as they attempted to turn romantic daydreams into reality. As David Lascelles reminisced, Hollywood heroes taught New Zealanders 'how to dress, how to kiss, and how to light a cigarette; they gave us style and class, elegance and fashion'.¹²¹ Marjorie Nesbitt, for example, emulated her favourite actresses' hairstyles and mimicked their mannerisms as she chatted and danced with young men in the 1920s. Betty Watson concentrated on smiling like Mary Pickford.¹²² In 1932, a *N.Z. Talkies and Theatre* poem poked fun at this impulse as it followed one man's efforts to assimilate the charms of his wife's favourite romantic heroes. He successfully grew a moustache, learned to sing and to 'drawl', and dyed his hair blonde in imitation of various screen heroes, only to find himself defeated by Clark Gable's dimples.¹²³

Historians of twentieth-century courtship have often focused on how the new venues, technologies and public conventions of dating left 'love to lovers in private'.¹²⁴ However, clues to inner experiences can be found in public sites. As

Claire Langhamer has explained, love is ‘shaped, deployed, invoked, and ultimately subjectively “felt” by individuals in dialogue with their material and discursive worlds’.¹²⁵ Cinema advertising, theatre architecture and the films themselves were cultural ‘frames’ for the experience of romantic love, specifying the ‘norms and values attached to it’ and providing the ‘symbols and cultural scenarios’ to express it.¹²⁶ For example, Edna Carrie found deep parallels between her love affair and the features showing at her local picture theatre, and a sequence of movies helped her to describe her feelings. *Rio Rita* gave Edna the words to tell Frederick Baker that she wished to ‘find a way, to take you out of dreams, and wake to find you in my arms’.¹²⁷ She quoted lyrics from ‘I’m following you’ from *It’s a Great Life* to tell Fred that she missed him, and she used the title of *Looking on the Bright Side* to express her determination that their relationship would work out.¹²⁸ Hollywood’s version of romance influenced Edna’s understanding of love and provided her with ‘cognitive maps’ to navigate romance’s exciting but uncertain terrain.¹²⁹

Histories that characterize the inter-war years as dull, conformist and hard do not give a full picture of people’s lives, especially the lives of the young. Even in times of economic depression, young people accepted the cinema’s invitation to glamour. Movie dates made the most of the sexual and romantic opportunities of the back row. Any notion that all our predecessors were practical people averse to the fluttering of eyelashes and the thrill of love’s embrace is quashed by young people’s enthusiastic embrace of romance (and each other) at the pictures. Commercial leisure activities like the movies offered young people new courtship experiences and the latest role models. However, as cinema advertising acknowledged, while films gave audiences the ‘UP-TO-DATE LOW-DOWN’ on love, in many ways they retold ‘THE OLDEST STORY IN THE WORLD’ as they re-presented the romantic sentiments of past generations in jazzy new settings.¹³⁰ Although the experience of courtship changed over time, there were also deep continuities that linked nineteenth- and twentieth-century emotional culture.¹³¹

Young cinemagoers’ shared romantic culture has been obscured by arguments that New Zealand men and women have had separate emotional histories and did not turn to each other for intimacy or understanding.¹³² We need to remind ourselves that young men and women eagerly sought out and took pleasure in each other’s company. Exciting Hollywood plots and glamorous stars that embodied ideals of romance resonated with both men and women, and united them across gender lines. Further, hot stuff was not always imported from Hollywood. New Zealand love stories like *The Bush Cinderella* capitalized on young cinemagoers’ fascination with romance and taught them how to win each other’s hearts. As the final curtain fell, handsome New Zealand heroes kissed their sweethearts — on the screen and in the stalls.

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NOTES

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- 3 Deborah Montgomerie, 'Sweethearts, Soldiers, Happy Families: Gender and the Second World War', in Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie, eds, *The Gendered Kiwi*, Auckland, 1999, p.185.
- 4 Danielle Sprecher, 'The Right Appearance: Representations of Fashion, Gender and Modernity in Inter-war New Zealand, 1918–1939', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 1997, pp.115–117; Coney, p.153; Sandra Coney, *I Do: 125 Years of Weddings in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1995, p.56; Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington, D.C., 1996, pp.186–9.
- 5 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 9 December 1927, p.1.
- 6 Nerida Jeanie Elliott, 'Anzac, Hollywood and Home: Cinemas and Film-Going in Auckland, 1909–1939', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 1989, p.93; Caroline Daley, *Leisure & Pleasure: Reshaping & Revealing the New Zealand Body, 1900–1960*, Auckland, 2003, p.100.
- 7 Elliott, p.93; Diane Pivac, 'Rudall Hayward: Filming the Pages of New Zealand History', Research Essay, Victoria University of Wellington, 2002, pp.5–6, 9–10, 19.
- 8 Sprecher, p.97; Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, New York, 1994, pp.54–56.
- 9 Colin Hogg, *Cinema*, Auckland, 1998, p.10.
- 10 'Talkies' were first screened in New Zealand on 18 April 1929 at both the Regent and Strand theatres in Auckland. Geoffrey B. Churchman, *Celluloid Dreams: A Century of Film in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1997, p.25; Advertisement for *Happy Days* (1929), Treacey Huia McKenzie: Scrapbook, Misc-MS-0941, Hocken Library, Dunedin (HL).
- 11 Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male □ A History*, revised edn, Auckland, 1996, p.228.
- 12 Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance*, Princeton, 1993, p.3.
- 13 Peter Adrian Harrison, 'The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand, 1896–1930: A History of the Commercial Distribution and Exhibition of Films', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 1974, p.109; Graham Owen, 'Expectations, Panic and Change: The Early Years of Motion Pictures in New Zealand', in Margot Fry, ed., *A Century of Film in New Zealand: Papers from the Conference 'Cinema, Film & Society', Wellington, October 1996*, Wellington, 1998, p.25. For a discussion of people who did not have access to the movies at this time see Owen, pp.25–26.
- 14 *Strand Picture Mirror*, 13 December 1919, n.p., Ephemera-A-Cinema-1916/1919, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington (ATL).
- 15 Elliott, pp.94–95.
- 16 A 1929 United States report found that New Zealand programmes were very similar to those in America and that there was no time lag: Elliott, p.89; Harrison, pp.102–103.
- 17 Sprecher, p.94; Owen, p.25; Elliott, p.9; Churchman, p.25.
- 18 Elliott, p.95.
- 19 Caroline Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale, 1886–1930*, Auckland, 1999, pp.67–68, 162.
- 20 Advertisement for *My Lucky Star*, *N.Z. Talkies and Theatre*, November 1938, back cover.
- 21 Sarah J. Fyfe, 'The Topsy-Turvy Twenties: Urban Society 1921–1928', BA (Hons) dissertation, University of Otago, 1984, p.117.
- 22 For example, in letters from Edna Carrie to Frederick Baker, 18 June 1930, 18 September 1930, 8 December 1930, 3 May 1931, July 1931, August 1931, Thursday, Sunday, 25 January 1933, April 1933, October 1933. Frederick Baker, Inward correspondence from his wife, MS-papers-4299, ATL. See also: Mary Tomsic, 'Women's Memories of Cinema-Going: More than "the Only Thing Left to Do" in Victoria's Western District', *History Australia*, 2, 1, 2004, p.3.
- 23 Ina Rae Hark, 'General Introduction', in Ina Rae Hark, ed., *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, London and New York, 2002, p.14. This is evident in both historical and prose works, for example: Elliott, pp.91, 93; Peter Wells, *On Going to the Movies*, Wellington, 2005, pp.10–11, 15.
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32 Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys*, p.131.

33 Chris Brickell, *Mates & Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand*, Auckland, 2008.

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35 *ibid.*, p.230.

36 *ibid.*, pp.230, 231.

37 *ibid.*, p.231.

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41 Helen Martin and Sam Edwards, *New Zealand Film, 1912–1996*, Auckland, 1997, pp.27–49.

42 Austen's surname was often incorrectly written as 'Austin'.

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44 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 27 July 1928, p.11.

45 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 17 August 1928, p.6; 7 September 1928, p.2.

46 For a film still of this moment see: still 12, *The Bush Cinderella*, NZ1928, New Zealand Film Archives, Wellington (NZFA).

47 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 17 August 1928, pp.4, 7.

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62 Photograph of the St James foyer, St James Scrapbook, MS 91/20, AWMM.

63 *Majestic-Strand Mirror*, 20 August 1926, p.3.

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67 Advertisement for *If Winter Comes*, 1923, Ephemera-A-Cinema-1920/1924, ATL. Emphasis in original.

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69 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 3 August 1928, p.13. Emphasis in original.

70 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 21 September 1928, p.4.

71 *Regent and Octagon Review*, 23 March 1934, p.2.

72 *New Zealand Picturegoer*, 30 May 1930, p.12. 'Flivver' was slang for a small, inexpensive car, often a Model T Ford.

73 Regent programme, 7 December 1929, back cover, D4939, NZFA; Regent programme, 27 September 1929, back cover, D0658, NZFA; advertisement for *Dishonour Bright* (1936), St James scrapbook, MS 91/20, AWMM; advertisement for *Ankles Preferred, Majestic-Strand Mirror*, 19 August 1927, n.p.; advertisement for *In Search of a Sinner*, King's programme, 17 December 1920, Ephemera-A-Cinema, ATL.

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87 Stubbings, pp.67, 79 in a footnote.

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89 Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997, pp.43, 45–46.

90 Brickell, p.170.

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98 *Strand Picture Mirror*, 12 April 1919, p.3.

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100 See, for example, in the *New Zealand Home Journal*: ‘How the Stars Twinkle off the Screen!’, July 1934, p.4; ‘Greta Garbo’, 1 September 1935, p.14; ‘Garbo!’, 2 March 1936, pp.26–27; ‘Garbo talks at Last!’, 10 November, 1936, pp.6–8, 45; ‘“I’ve Been in Love!” Says Robert Montgomery’, 10 February 1927, pp.18–19; ‘Beauty hints from the Hollywood Stars’, 10 October 1939, pp.28–29.

101 Sprecher, pp.94–118; Phillips, p.231.

102 Illouz, pp.86–87.

103 Advertisement for *The Desert Song* (1929), Treacey Huia McKenzie: Scrapbook, Misc-MS-0941, HL.

104 Illouz, pp.86–87. See, for example, advertisement for *The First Year*, *N.Z. Talkies and Theatre*, August 1932, p.4.

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