

‘UDDERLY’ HILARIOUS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN NEW ZEALAND  
COMEDY AS SEEN IN HARRY SINCLAIR’S THE PRICE OF MILK

Andrew Horton

*“I wanted to tell a story that was like a dream, a sort of little dream  
about New Zealand.”*

*Harry Sinclair (Personal interview)*

In an old bathtub set on a deeply green North Island farming hillside, a shy young dairy farmer (Karl Urban) puts an engagement ring on his lusty and lovely tub mate (Danielle Cormack), after they have sipped champagne and washed dishes, all while seated opposite each other in their foamy tub. The pure romance, humor, and originality of the moment is typical of so many surprisingly pleasing moments in The Price of Milk. Part fairy tale with elements of magic realism involving a theme of indigenous peoples and land ownership, part screwball farce involving tending to some 117 dairy cows, and definitely romantic farming comedy between Rob, the dairy farmer and Lucinda, his true love, Harry Sinclair’s second feature film not only announces a maturing of his many talents, but it also signals a joyous and carnivalesque departure from mainstream New Zealand cinema traditions.

The Price of Milk builds on Sinclair’s past cinematic efforts but is also a clear departure. This latest effort goes for a “classic” rather than youthful hip Run Lola Run look, and Sinclair moves out of Auckland proper where his previous films have unfolded in favor of rural/pastoral settings (note that it seems one level of playfulness for Sinclair

must be in NOT showing a sheep farm in a country stereotypically recognized as “that small country with sixty million sheep!”).

### **The Price of Milk IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW ZEALAND CINEMA**

Certainly viewed from abroad, New Zealand cinema conjures up “serious” and dramatic images from films such as Roger Donaldson’s Smash Palace (1981), Jane Campion’s The Piano (1993), Lee Tamahouri’s Once Were Warriors (1994), Geoff Murphy’s Utu (1983) and Peter Jackson’s Heavenly Creatures (1994). Comedy has definitely not been a strong suit in New Zealand films. And yet various shades of humor have appeared, ranging from the buddy road pranks of Geoff Murphy’s Goodbye Pork Pie (1981), the sly social comedy and satire of Gaylene Preston’s Ruby and Rata (1990) and the over-the-top farcical romps of Peter Jackson’s Bad Taste (1986) and Braindead (1992) in which Sinclair as actor played a small role. Finally there is the sneaky realm of the mockumentary in Peter Jackson and Costa Botes’ Forgotten Silver (1998).

The Price of Milk playfully and daringly breaks beyond any of these past New Zealand comic efforts. Sinclair’s film is unique and yet also indicative of a younger generation of filmmakers emerging in what we might call “post-Peter Jackson New Zealand film” phase. In this essay I wish to briefly cover both the comic narrative and characterization within the film and Harry Sinclair’s unusual approach to filmmaking that led to The Price of Milk. For Sinclair has quite literally created a film that is “carnavalesque” in the sense of a celebration of freedom, fantasy and festivity as explained by Mikhail Bakhtin when describing the world of carnival in Rabelais and the European Middle Ages. As Bakhtin notes:

They (carnival times) must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction, there can be no festivity (9).

Sinclair himself has “sanctioned” his cast and crew including his fine cinematographer Leon Narby to go beyond the “world of practical conditions” as we shall discover.

No simple plot summary can do justice to this dairy romantic fairy tale.

What is real is the lush green hilly countryside outside of Auckland on the North Island.

And the 117 cows that Rob tends are also real as are our main characters. The simple romance of two young country folk falling in love is also “real”, as is a jealousy subplot involving Lucinda’s friend, Drosophila (Willa O’Neill), who attempts to steal Rob away.

But this realistic basis is infused and, yes, subverted, by a fairy tale like dimension involving an old Maori woman (Rangi Motu) who is something of a cross between a fairy good mother and a benevolent witch. “Auntie”, as she is called, enters the lives of the young lovers when she is accidentally run over by Lucinda. Thereafter, she appears and disappears “magically” along with a bevy of golf club wielding young Maori men.

Comedy, slapstick and pure mayhem follow as a wedding is subverted, as land claims are argued over, and as lover’s misunderstandings are finally worked out. On a narrative basis, therefore, because “magic” is involved, we never really know what will happen next. At one point a truck falls out of the sky. At another the bevy of Maoris appear at the young couple’s shack, and so on. At one moment Auntie is on the road, the next she simply disappears, and Rob’s dog that suffers from acrophobia, wanders through the landscape inside a cardboard box. There is a strong Indian/Asian

dimension too as our couple opts for a wedding that looks more like it is taking place in Calcutta rather than the countryside of New Zealand as Lucinda trails across the landscape in a deeply red sari with a veil that seems a hundred yards long at least. In short, anything can and generally does happen in this New Zealand cinematic roman candle of engaging scenes loosely linked together.

The American distributor of the film, Jeff Lipsky, best describes Sinclair's film when he notes it is a "symphony of magic: a special effects film without special effects, a film whose very eccentric style envelopes you and doesn't fail to pay off" (Aldridge). Put another way, The Price of Milk is not a California studio romantic comedy in either the classical Bringing Up Baby tradition or recent updates including As Good As It Gets and What Women Want. For the Hollywood screenwriting gospel that everything should be cause-and-effect in terms of plot development, and each scene should lead logically to the next does not apply to Sinclair's The Price of Milk. As Sinclair has said, "I want it (the film) to be an experience like listening to music, where you can put your own interpretations on it, where it can wash over you like a dream" (NZ Film #64 p3). Add to this brief summary the considerable pleasure of simply watching in cinemascope the incredibly deep greens of the landscape shot in long sweeping scenes that work against the driving MTV Pulp Fiction and Matrix visual styles of current pop films. As several critics have noted about the "look" of The Price of Milk, we have a film that absolutely cries out to be seen on the big screen and not on a home video or, worse yet, the Internet. As the Auckland Film Festival catalogue comments, Sinclair and cinematographer Narbey "have fashioned a visual rhapsody to the empty loveliness of dairy country." Finally, as if these elements were not enough, Sinclair has washed the

soundtrack with an elegant score with pieces of Rachmaninov, Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov played by the Moscow Symphony Orchestra. Quite simply we have when all of these elements are added up, a film with the look and feel of “an old fashioned movie” as Sinclair has said (Ibid) but with a satirical and pop romantic post modern sensibility. We will take a closer look at Sinclair’s mode of writing and directing this unusual carnival of a film, but it is worth noting here how well cast The Price of Milk is. Sinclair proved in Topless Women that he has a talent for casting and directing women on camera, and this is even more true in his second film.

Danielle Cormack is sensuous, smart and yet vulnerable too as Lucinda, our dairy farmer’s true love. In fact, it was her real life pregnancy that became a major thrust of Topless Women. Cormack clearly enjoyed her new role, for as she has said, “I got to do even crazier things. Giving birth in a vet clinic (in Topless Women) was nothing to swimming in a vat of milk—it took me a week to get rid of the smell” (Sarah Henry).

The scene Cormack refers to is one of the most memorable of the film.

For while the subplot of “the other woman” interested in our protagonist has familiar echoes in romantic comedy, we’ve never seen a shot before of two lovers swimming in a vat of milk! Besides the originality of the moment, however, is the absolute thematic and narrative importance of the scene. For it is Lucinda who first plunges into the vat, horrifying Rob who immediately attacks her for ruining so much milk which costs so much. “Do you know how much milk costs?”

he screams to her, thus the wink to the title of the film, and her answer is her come-hither smile that wins him over. He strips and joins her in the vat and we

smile realizing nothing can now separate such a couple! Such a scene echoes the best of what romantic comedy can say about “acceptance” of differences not only in gender but in attitudes and world views as well. Certainly this scene reminds us, for instance, of the dance floor that becomes a swimming pool scene in Capra’s It Happened One Night and especially the ending of Hawks’s Bringing Up Baby as Cary Grant shrugs and embraces Kathryn Hepburn after she has destroyed the whole dinosaur skeleton, his life’s work. Such acceptance not only draws a laugh and a smile, but an awareness that these seemingly opposite characters are actually “meant for each other”.

To the role of Rob, the naïve Kiwi dairy farmer, Karl Urban brings a depth of sweetness without being coy. At 28, he has quite a track record of having played roles on Shortland Street as well as parts in the American the series Hercules and Xena and the forthcoming Lord of the Rings. And Urban is proud of his performance as a kind of Kiwi Forrest Gump. In an interview he has stated he feels The Price of Milk “stands up with the lineage of great New Zealand cinema” (Dixon)

## THE SPIRIT OF DOCUMENTARY FAIRY TALES

**“I love the idea of letting the bizarre, or interesting things in life, enter in to the film ,by keeping the door open to that kind of possibility.”**  
**Harry Sinclair (Campbell)**

Yugoslav filmmaker Srdjan Karanovic is fond of saying that “all films are documentary fairy tales” (personal interview). By this he means that all films that are not animation or computer generated graphics “document” actors playing out some form of story in a real location. The fairy tale is the fiction part of filmmaking, for it takes on the “what if”

possibilities of character, chance, conflict and action. “Documentary fairy tale” is actually a useful term to describe two influences that are apparent in The Price of Milk: that is, the mixture of dreams and reality in Peter Jackson’s films especially Jackson’s Heavenly Creatures, and the style of magic realism seen in Balkan films, especially those of Emir Kusturica.

Sinclair’s work is clearly original. But Jackson’s eclectic mixtures of camp, satire, horror and comedy in his films to date suggest certain influences in “spirit” if not in direct borrowings. The Price of Milk never becomes pure over-the-top parody/satire like Jackson’s Bad Taste. And it never borders on the troubling realms of repressed anger among other themes in Heavenly Creatures, which is based on an actual murder case involving two Christchurch friends. Yet the spirit of Peter Jackson opening up this “documentary” tale in Heavenly Creatures by adding dreams and claymation sequences points the way to conceiving “reality” in a much broader sweep than is traditionally represented in film. What Sinclair has done is to keep a sense of magic within daily “reality”, so that there is no separation between dreams and waking reality. And he has drained out any darker sense of danger or serious consequences to actions that so much of New Zealand cinema has explored.

But there is another similarity that can be seen as an influence as well: Balkan social comic magic realism as seen in Emir Kusturica’s Time of the Gypsies (1989).

Kusturica—a Bosnian Muslim/Jewish filmmaker from Sarajevo—uses what has come to be called “Balkan magic realism” throughout his films as characters “walk” through the skies of Sarajevo (When Father Was Away On Business, 1985), as a group of Yugoslavs live underground from World War II until the Bosnian War, unaware that

World War II ended long ago (Underground, 1997) and as whole houses are lifted off their foundation by a single rope attached to a motorcycle (Time of the Gypsies).

Kusturica's comic magic realism works on very much the same level that

The Price of Milk functions. Time of the Gypsies tracks a real character—a young gypsy boy—through his poverty, loves, family problems and finally his involvement with a gypsy mafia ring in Northern Italy. As in Sinclair's film, the cinematography is often sweeping and lush, tracking over a haunting ritual on a river in one scene for instance, much like Sinclair's camera celebrates the South Auckland dairy countryside. And Kusturica's soundtrack composed by Goran Brekovich is a full orchestration built on gypsy tunes.

There are other influences and similarities from Time of the Gypsies. Part of what Kusturica succeeds in doing is pulling us into the world of gypsies where "anything" can happen because they are so outside of any mainstream culture (Horton, "Cinematic Makeovers" 175). The main character, for instance, has the power to will objects to move, a talent that becomes a key plot element by film's end as he murders the "godfather" by willing a fork to fly through the air at a wedding banquet and lodge in the godfather's neck. In a lighter vein, Sinclair has woven the Maori element of Auntie and her young warriors with golf clubs as possessing powers including those of being able to appear and disappear seemingly at will. As in Kusturica's work, our sense in The Price of Milk is that we "white folk" are just not privy to a full understanding of what powers these people have.

Two direct borrowings also appear whether intentional or not. Kusturica has some of the young gypsy children wander through the village and countryside inside of

cardboard boxes as part of their sense of play. Visually the image of boxes simply drifting along the street or hillside is both funny and somehow surreal. Similarly, Sinclair's acrophobic dog who drifts in and out of the frame inside a cardboard box provides a playfully surreal motif. And finally Lucinda's seemingly endless wedding train that drapes and drifts over the landscape as she walks through it echoes the wedding train of Kusturica's young hero's dead gypsy mother. In Time of the Gypsies, the train hovers in the sky above our protagonist at critical moments in his life as a ghostly presence of the absent mother he so desperately misses.

Again, I emphasize that Sinclair has opened the horizons of New Zealand film comedy through such influences. In no way am I suggesting that he is somehow trying to simply "remake" a Kusturica or Peter Jackson film in his own style. In fact, in terms of Time of the Gypsies, Sinclair has written that, "I saw Time of the Gypsies a few years ago and totally loved it. I saw it again recently and noticed some little connections with The Price of Milk - Maybe it's a kind of subconscious homage to Kusturica" (personal interview).

The Price of Milk, finally, also impresses because of Sinclair's "carnavalesque" approach to filmmaking itself. He has said in interviews that there was no full script—only a long treatment--, but what was eventually filmed was not a series of improv pieces. He worked with the actors, rehearsed and then wrote scenes each evening which were acted as written. Sinclair did script what actors finally said and did on camera. But we do have to acknowledge the "free play" he allowed all in reaching the point that he did his writing. As he comments:

"One of the things that I really like is not being in full control

of everything. In 'normal' film making you have this blueprint that you are trying desperately to stick too, things inevitably go wrong and it's very hard to adjust, it affects everything else. I try and work in a way that the un-expected developments are the most exciting thing. I want to capitalize on the events that are usually regarded as problems. It makes you free to go with what's exciting at the moment. Film tends to be 'stiff'. I'm trying to find ways to make it flaccid (Campbell)

Thus if we had to use one term to describe Sinclair's approach, it would be a "performance based" vision of the whole filmmaking process. Sinclair elaborates on this point:

" I like what naturally occurs between actors. The most important thing for me is trying to put the actors in a position where they are going to do their best work. Trying to find characters that suit the actors, so it doesn't feel pushed. If you want to portray a love relationship it's important to cast the actors so that the relationship could be true. Try to create a form of acting that doesn't feel pushed. It's very performance based, my entire methodology is based on the performance. I guess it comes from being an actor in the old days.

There we have it: Sinclair is that crossroads between acting, writing, and directing. For many such a blend would be either pretentiousness or an exercise in spreading oneself far too thinly. In the case of The Price of Milk, however, we have a rare example of each part of Sinclair's talent helping to inspire the other elements.

### **FINAL TAKE: THE PRICE OF MILK IS LAUGHTER**

Sinclair has said that in The Price of Milk, he wanted the audience to “be disarmed by silliness” (personal interview). It is a tribute to his maturing comic talent that his wishes are being fulfilled. Preston Sturges, one of Hollywood's most luminous writers of comedy put it this way when asked about the carnivalesque chances he took with stories, characters and themes: “It was actually the enormous risks I took with my pictures, skating right up to the edge of non-acceptance, that paid off so handsomely” (Horton Three More Screenplays by Preston Sturges 11).

It is one of those ironies of international film distribution and reception that when The Price Of Milk opened in New York on Valentine's Day, 2001, that it received generally favorable reviews except from The New York Times. Stephen Holden apparently missed or failed to appreciate all the levels of novelty and originality I have outlined above as he wrote, “For all its fairy tale frills and intimations of the supernatural, The Price of Milk is utterly devoid of magic.”

So did such damnation condemn Sinclair's Down Under romantic comedy to a one week run and then a return to New Zealand? Absolutely not! The New York based distributor, Lot 47, replied with true carnivalesque humor and the spirit of one-

upsmanship with a large 11” by 7” ad you would usually expect would only feature Hollywood mainline productions, actually quoting some of the negative Times review! In what I feel is the most original movie ad I’ve ever seen in The Times, Lot 47 quotes negative Times reviews for other proven hits—Bonnie and Clyde, Cinema Paradiso and Forrest Gump, concluding with The Price of Milk Review, “The Price of Milk is utterly devoid of magic and the chemistry between Cormack and Urban is too tenuous to qualify the film as a date movie.” Fighting fire with fire, or rather should we say, fire with milk and also honey, Lot 47 ended the add with an invitation for readers to enter a “win a trip to New Zealand contest by clicking on Lot47.com! Udderly hilarious and, like the film, the ad breaks new comic ground that deserves to be observed and celebrated.

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### **Film Credits:**

The Price Of Milk Production company: John Swimmer Ltd. Executive producer: Tim Sanders; Producer: Fiona Copland. Director: Harry Sinclair. Screenplay: Harry Sinclair; Cinematography: Leon Narbey; Editor: Cushia Dillon. Production design: Kristy Cameron. Music: The Moscow Symphony Orchestra. Cast: Danielle Cormack, Karl Urban, Willa O'Neill, Rangī Motu, Michael Lawrence.

87 minutes. Color.