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# **A Global Province?**

**The Development of a Movie Culture in a  
Small Provincial City 1919-1945**

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**2012**

# A Global Province?

The Development of a Movie Culture in a Small  
Provincial City 1919-1945

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in History at Massey University

Pauline Knuckey

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## Introduction

*The cinema brings to the Babel of differences, which afflict the world with its diverse illusions of religious and racial intolerances, and to its selfish disharmonies born of ignorance, distance and discordant tongues, a message of world unity and brotherhood, which nothing else can.<sup>1</sup>*

For much of the twentieth century, New Zealand historiography has focused on a search for a national identity and the quest to prove the country's exceptionalism. This approach became popular at a time when many New Zealanders believed their country needed to assert its independence from its imperial 'Motherland' and to show the country had 'grown up' and could stand on its own. Keith Sinclair, who taught at Auckland University from the late 1940s to the late 1980s, has been called 'the chief prophet and poster boy' of the nationalist historiography.<sup>2</sup> He introduced a New Zealand History undergraduate course, arguing that New Zealand's history was 'significant and worth studying' and he succinctly 'delineated the distinctiveness of New Zealand and New Zealanders'.<sup>3</sup> Sinclair's New Zealanders were proud to call themselves New Zealanders, particularly, as he emphasised, on both the battle and the sports fields, where their display of courage, commitment and prowess were legendary.<sup>4</sup> Sinclair encouraged other writers to 'roll their own final chapters' to his history, but although he was happy to leave 'a more searching inquiry to some future

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Hayward, *Here's To Life! The Impressions, Confessions and Garnered Thoughts of a Free-Minded Showman*, Auckland: Wright & Jaques, 1944, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Giselle Byrnes, *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Gibbons, 'The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History', in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37:1, 2003, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Sinclair, see Part IV, "The World of Men", in *A History of New Zealand*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1959, pp. 123-173.

writer', he assumed that discourse would continue its focus on the issue of nationalism as 'the idea of the nation is changing all the time'.<sup>5</sup>

Nationalism and New Zealand identity have continued to be important constructs for New Zealand historians. Jock Phillips argued in 1996 that there was still a case for a nationalist role for academic historians and he outlined some of the responsibilities and challenges in dealing with national identity at the country's 'national' museum, *Te Papa*.<sup>6</sup> James Belich's two national histories emphasise the 'Better British' ideology as a key component of New Zealanders' national identity.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Dominic Alessio discusses the association between utopianism and New Zealand's national identity.<sup>8</sup>

While the legacy of Sinclair and other nationalist historians is considerable, nationalist narratives have come increasingly under fire, with much of the more recent historiography questioning whether national identity is the most useful way of conceptualising developments within New Zealand. This has been explained in part by the rise of social history internationally, focused on tracing 'the experiences of the ordinary people frequently excluded from accounts of national politics or state activity'.<sup>9</sup> As early as 1975, Fairburn disagreed that New Zealanders even had a strong or a distinctive sense of national identity because they had failed to 'discard the essence of their British heritage'.<sup>10</sup> In 2003, Peter Gibbons suggested it was 'time for New Zealand historians to become less parochial and insular and to decentre or even

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin NZ, 1986, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> Jock Phillips, 'Our History, Our Selves: The Historian and National Identity', in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 30:2, 1996, pp. 107-123, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> See James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders From Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*, Auckland: Penguin, 1996 and *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland: Penguin, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Alessio, 'Promoting Paradise: Utopianism and National Identity in New Zealand, 1870-1930' in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 42:1, 2008, pp. 22-41.

<sup>9</sup> Bronwyn Dalley and Bronwyn Labrum, *Fragments: New Zealand Social and Cultural History*, Auckland: Auckland University, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Miles Fairburn, 'The Rural Myth and the New Urban Frontier', in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 9:1, 1975, pp. 3-21, p. 18.

dissolve “New Zealand” as a subject'.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Giselle Byrnes asked whether ‘narratives that rely on the ‘colony-to-nation’ storyline are still appropriate'.<sup>12</sup>

Gibbons suggests a ‘world history perspective’ as an alternative framework to ‘decentre’ New Zealand, and by this Gibbons means the study of ‘world systems’ and the impact on New Zealand and New Zealanders when New Zealand became a part of that ‘system’. Gibbons refers particularly to the economic world system and consumerism but in social and cultural terms, not just in the production, consumption and exchange of goods. Gibbons argues that it is through trade that people meet, whether actually or vicariously, and ‘within and between and through these contacts ideas, values and attitudes are exchanged and adjusted along with the goods’. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, Gibbon claims, it is the linkages New Zealand has with other international urban centres, through trade and consumption of services and goods, which should be the ‘focus for macrohistorical investigation, rather than ideologies and national identities and imperial loyalties'.<sup>14</sup> Gibbons challenges New Zealand historians to pay ‘attention to the world’s place in New Zealand’, rather than ‘asserting national identity and divining New Zealand’s place in the world'.<sup>15</sup>

Other historians to follow Gibbon’s world-history approach include Caroline Daley, who argues that ‘we have become so accustomed to history books telling national stories that we often forget to place those tales in their international context'.<sup>16</sup> Chris Hilliard also believes some narratives are ‘much more effectively interpreted in terms of more general international developments'.<sup>17</sup> Daley warns of the danger of New Zealand

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Gibbons, ‘The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History’, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37:1, 2003, pp. 38-50, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Giselle Byrnes, *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University, 2009, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Gibbons, ‘The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History’, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37:1, 2003, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900-1960*, Auckland: Auckland University, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Hilliard, ‘Colonial Culture and the Province of Cultural History’, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 36:1, 2002, pp. 82-97, p. 85.

historians focusing too much on ‘crack[ing] the code of New Zealand’s uniqueness’ believing if there were fewer obsessions with ‘quests for national identity’, it might be noticed that ‘many of the supposedly particular characteristics of this society are really not so particular after all’.<sup>18</sup>

Histories of the cinema in New Zealand have tended to adopt a national focus and the theme of a movement towards national maturity. Gordon Mirams, in his much quoted *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand* wrote of the love New Zealanders had for the cinema, particularly American films, but he pushed for the production of local films that showed ‘New Zealand’s own way of life – her special ideas, problems, and contributions to knowledge’.<sup>19</sup> Early film pioneer, Rudall Hayward, also advocated for ‘good New Zealand pictures’ as ‘We have plenty of incidents in our island story worthy to rank with any on the pages of British heroism’.<sup>20</sup> Bruce Babington, in *A History of the New Zealand Fiction Feature Film*, stated that while New Zealand’s earliest movies ‘exhibit overarching similarities’ to early movies from other countries, they ‘register the differences of uniquely inflected ways of life.’<sup>21</sup> In *Celluloid Dreams: A Century of Film in New Zealand*, Geoffrey Churchman focuses on New Zealand film, not film in New Zealand, in a nationalist stance furthering the aim of ‘New Zealand productions taking their place alongside the best of what the world has to offer.’<sup>22</sup> Wayne Brittenden’s *The Celluloid Circus: The Heyday of the New Zealand Picture Theatre 1925-1970*, provides a comprehensive account of the nation’s theatres, covering rural and urban localities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900-1960*, Auckland: Auckland University, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul’s Book Arcade, 1946, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> Rudall Hayward, *The New Zealand Film Pioneer: Dedicated to the Interest of our Motion Pictures*, vol. 1, no. 1, Hayward material, New Zealand Film Archive.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Babington, *A History of the New Zealand Fiction Feature Film*, Manchester: Manchester University, 2007, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Churchman, (ed.), *Celluloid Dreams: A Century of Film in New Zealand*, Wellington: IPL Books, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Wayne Brittenden, *The Celluloid Circus: The Heyday of the New Zealand Picture Theatre 1925-1970*, Auckland: Godwit, 2008.

This study of the development of a movie culture in Palmerston North from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War examines the extent to which the city's experience in that regard can be seen as exceptional in comparison with developments in the United States and the United Kingdom. By focusing on 'the world's place' in a relatively small New Zealand provincial city, I will be employing another suggestion of Gibbons, using microhistory to 'tease out from shreds of evidence' what is characteristic in the experiences of a community.<sup>24</sup>

With a population of thirty-two in 1868,<sup>25</sup> Palmerston North was described as a 'hamlet in the bush'.<sup>26</sup> By 1877, when it was given the status of a borough, the population was approximately 800, and Palmerston North ranked thirty-fourth in population out of the fifty-nine boroughs and cities in New Zealand.<sup>27</sup> By the time of its Diamond Jubilee in 1937, the Mayor, A.E. Mansford declared Palmerston North the 'geographical and population centre of the Dominion'<sup>28</sup> and the authors of the official jubilee souvenir publication enthused that it was the 'greatest inland city in the Dominion of New Zealand'.<sup>29</sup> More prosaically, Palmerston North at the time of this study, 1919-1945, could be described as a small, relatively prosperous inland provincial city.

The town's only two theatres, the Royal and the Lyceum, had provided the venue for Palmerston North's first public moving picture screening. This was in October 1896, only ten months after the world's first movie screening, and a matter of days after New Zealand's first public screening in 13 October 1896, at the Auckland Opera House. The *Poverty Bay Herald*<sup>30</sup> reported that the Charles Godfrey Vaudeville Company was

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Gibbons, 'The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History', in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37:1, 2003, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Robert H. Billens and H. Leslie Verry, *From Swamp to City: Commemorating the Diamond Jubilee of the City*, Palmerston North: K. and B. Print, 1937, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Matheson, *Council and Community: 125 Years of Local Government in Palmerston North 1877-2002*, Palmerston North: Palmerston North City Library, 2003, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Robert H. Billens and H. Leslie Verry, *From Swamp to City: Commemorating the Diamond Jubilee of the City*, Palmerston North: K. and B. Print, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Poverty Bay Herald*, 22 October, 1896, p. 2.

expecting large crowds, so the two theatres on either side of the Palmerston North Square were to be used. The same performance was shown in both theatres, with the individual items being arranged in different order so as to allow the performers time to travel between the two theatres in cabs that had been hired specially for the night. The reporter anticipated that while ‘the kinematograph is delighting the people in one hall, Trilby will be in full swing in the other’.<sup>31</sup> By 1919, Palmerston North had three movie theatres operating; the Kosy, the Palace, and Everybody’s. By the end of World War Two, the Palmerston North public were keeping five theatres in business; the Mayfair, Meteor, Regent, State, and the Vogue.

That the young town of Palmerston North was able to share in the magic of the moving pictures so soon after the citizens of major international cities such as New York and Paris is significant and supports Daley’s assertion that ‘New Zealand was born modern’.<sup>32</sup> New Zealanders were experiencing the thrill of the moving pictures at almost the same time as their counterparts in great European and American cities. Daley argues that New Zealanders have not just followed international leisure trends; they have been active participants who have at times led the way.<sup>33</sup>

Palmerston North research for this thesis focused on searching the local newspapers, the *Manawatu Evening Standard* and the *Manawatu Times*, between 1919 and 1945. The advertisements by the respective theatres were a particularly valuable source. Data gathered from them included the names of the theatres and the title of the movie(s) advertised at each, and the date and day of the week they were shown, for the years 1919, 1929, 1933, 1942, 1945. The genre of each movie was also included, being obtained in the first instance from the descriptive words from the advertisement, as this is what informed the audience. Each movie was researched on the Internet

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Trilby’ was one of the Company’s burlesque acts. The *Evening Post*, 26 September, 1896, p. 5 declared the Trilby act was funny though ‘scarcely up to the level of the rest of the entertainment’, at the Wellington show of 25 September 1896.

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Daley, ‘Modernity, Consumption, and Leisure’, in Giselle Byrnes (ed.), *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University, 2009, Chapter 17, p. 423.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

Movie Database website (IMDb) to ascertain its country of origin and the year it was made, as this information was not included in the daily screening advertisements. If the genre of the movie could not be obtained from either the advertisements or the reviews, it was found on the IMDb and added to the data. This enabled statistics to be compiled on how many movies were produced in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, and the most frequent genre of movie shown. This analysis also indicated the pattern of movie turnover, that is, how many days each movie was shown at each theatre, before being replaced with a new film or films. Capturing the year each movie was produced gave an insight into whether Palmerston North audiences were watching recent releases or dated films. An investigation was then carried out for contemporary reviews of the movies, as they provide an insight into the context within which the movies were received. The years 1919, 1929 and 1933 provided an abundance of information with movie reviews often taking up a good part of a column in the *Manawatu Evening Standard* and the *Manawatu Times* dedicating a full page to reviews and news on movies and movie stars. Unfortunately, these reviews ceased in both papers in the war years of 1942 and 1945 to be replaced instead with an abbreviated advertisement listing what was shown at each theatre with no subtext as to what the movie was about and how it might be received by the public.

Further information about the experiences of going to the movies was gained from conversations with residents of Palmerston North who went to the movies during the 1940s. These recollections were invaluable as they illustrated a direct parallel with the published accounts of the childhood experiences of those living in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The New Zealand Film Archive provided valuable contemporary resources in the form of a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, photographs, letters and notes kept by Luke Wilson, manager of the Regent, Palace and Kosy Theatres between 1927 and 1932, the

financial ledger of Palmerston North Pictures Limited from 1928-1952, and the oral recordings of Ted Coubray, an early projectionist and film maker in the Palmerston North region.

The Palmerston North Ian Matheson City Archives provided contemporary ephemera, including Paramount's advertising booklet for 1924, and photographs of theatres were obtained from the Palmerston North City Library through their digital library, *Pātaka Ipurangi: Memory on Line*.<sup>34</sup>

Studies of contemporary movie-going in the United Kingdom have been used for comparative analysis, with Ross McKibbin's *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* providing a useful starting point with his chapter 'The Cinema and the English',<sup>35</sup> which discusses the films the British preferred, the degree of American influence and the state's attempt to limit that influence. A number of studies have focused specifically on contemporary accounts of British movie-going and these include Annette Kuhn's *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, particularly the chapters 'Jam Jars and Cliffhangers' and 'When the Child Looks', which focus on the childhood memories of movie-goers in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> Robert James's studies have focused particularly on working-class tastes in British movie attendance,<sup>37</sup> and Sue Harper has researched admission figures at the Regent Theatre in Portsmouth for the 1930s and 1940s, providing specific theatre-based preferences.<sup>38</sup> British sociologist, J.P. Mayer's study of *British Cinemas and their Audiences*,<sup>39</sup> along with Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy

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<sup>34</sup> *Pātaka Ipurangi* literally translated means Online Storehouse.

<sup>35</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, pp. 419-456.

<sup>36</sup> Annette Kuhn's *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, Chapter 3, 'Jam Jars and Cliffhangers', pp. 38-65, and Chapter 4, 'When the Child Looks', pp. 66-99.

<sup>37</sup> Robert James, 'A Very Profitable Enterprise: South Wales Miners' Institute Cinemas in the 1930s', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1, 2007, pp. 27-61; 'Popular Film-going in Britain in the Early 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46:2, 2011, pp. 271-287 and *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930-1939: A Round of Cheap Diversions?*, Manchester: Manchester University, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Sue Harper, 'A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: Admissions Figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24:4, 2004, pp. 565-587, and 'Fragmentation and Crisis: 1940s Admission Figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 26:3, 2006, pp. 361-394.

<sup>39</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978.

Sheridan's *Mass-Observation at the Movies*,<sup>40</sup> provide detailed interviews and recollections of those who, as children, went to the movies in the 1930s.

Margaret Thorp's appraisal of the sociological impacts of film in *America at the Movies*,<sup>41</sup> Leo Rosten's analysis of Hollywood in *Hollywood: The Movie Colony The Movie Makers*,<sup>42</sup> and Lewis Jacobs' *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*<sup>43</sup> all provide important contemporary accounts of the impact of the movies in America. The sociological and cultural study of the mid-western town of Muncie, re-named 'Middletown' for the study, by Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd in the 1920s and 1930s, provided an invaluable case study of an American town as a point of contrast with Palmerston North. Photographs of Muncie theatres were obtained from the Muncie Public Library, courtesy of Associate Librarian Sara McKinley. Gregory Waller's *Main Street Amusements*<sup>44</sup> discusses the impact of movies on Lexington, Kentucky, and Kathryn Fuller's research on movies and small towns in *At The Picture Show*<sup>45</sup> both provide American provincial comparisons.

Each of the chapters in the main body of this thesis deals with a particular aspect of cinema to facilitate comparison between the industry in Palmerston North, the United States and the United Kingdom. Chapter One focuses on how important the movies were socially by examining attendance statistics, memories of movie-goers, and the impact of movies on patron consumption and behaviour. The focus of Chapter Two is on the buildings the movies were shown in, the 'romantic, foolish and fabulous fantasy of the picture theatre'.<sup>46</sup> Chapter Three examines the control of the film industry and how film distribution was managed in a highly competitive industry in the United

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<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1946.

<sup>42</sup> Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*, New York: Columbia University, 1968.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory A. Waller, *Main Streets Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*, Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1995.

<sup>45</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Tony Kellaway, 'I Remember When it was a Picture Theatre', *New Zealand Architect*, 4, 1984, p. 34.

Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand. Chapter Four analyses the films themselves and looks at what people were watching and their responses to those films in order to determine whether what was popular in the United States and the United Kingdom was popular in Palmerston North. It has frequently been claimed that one of the primary reasons for the popularity of the movies was their ability to take people out of the present moment, and Chapter Five discusses this. Chapter Six extends the comparison to examine the degree of criticism levelled at the movies; what was criticised and by whom, and what was done to stem that criticism.

Going to the movies was without a doubt one of the most popular forms of recreation in the early half of the twentieth-century. New Zealanders have been quick to claim their place as the most avid movie-goers in the world, along with the United Kingdom and the United States, with Gordon Mirams declaring in 1945 that ‘We spend as much time and money at the pictures, per head of population, as any other people in the world, except the Americans – and even they are not very far ahead of us.’<sup>47</sup>

New Zealanders inherent interest in the movies, the country’s colonial heritage and imperial links with the United Kingdom, and the influence of the United States in the movie world, combine to provide context for this research. Can the development of a movie-culture in Palmerston North be explained by a nationalist historiography of ‘exceptionalism’, highlighting the city’s unique developments? Can the imperial links to the United Kingdom claim a stronger British influence in the city than the internationally recognized strength of American movie-culture? Or will both of these nationalist, cultural imperialist historiographies found to be wanting against the world history perspective in which cinema in Palmerston North is found to be part of a wider ‘world system’?

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<sup>47</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul’s Book Arcade, 1945, p. 1.

The evidence throughout this thesis leads to the conclusion that the movie-culture in Palmerston North was influenced to an extremely large extent by both the United States and the United Kingdom, lending itself to a world systems historiography that, to rephrase Gibbon, ‘pays attention to the world’s place in Palmerston North’.

## Chapter One: The Importance of Movies

*May I just say ... that however acute the paper shortage may become, I hope you will always manage to squeeze in a space for your film reviews.<sup>1</sup>*

The importance of the movies and their impact on society in the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand was far more than just as a new form of cheap entertainment; movies were a ‘social force’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Everyone’ went to the movies because, as James Chapman noted, cinema ‘crosses boundaries of nation, gender, class, culture, language and religion. To that extent, cinema is a social institution without frontiers.’<sup>3</sup> The importance of the movies within society was significant. The number of people attending the movies and the regularity with which they went, gave the cinema the distinction of being ‘the first truly mass medium’.<sup>4</sup> The influence of film stars’ fashion and hairstyles on both men and women resulted in women in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States idolising Deanna Durbin and copying her clothing. The story lines and characters of the films themselves had an impact on those who viewed them, with boys across New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States emulating Hopalong Cassidy (William Boyd), and other cowboy heroes. The rapid proliferation of movie theatres and the place the movie theatre held within towns and cities was also significant and this will be examined in Chapter Three. Gilbert Seldes believed the movies ‘appealed to a number so great that it could engulf all the patrons of all the other forms of entertainment’,<sup>5</sup> the cinema not only engulfed vaudeville patrons, it replaced vaudeville, which had been one of the most popular forms of early

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Editor, *New Zealand Listener*, 30 January 1942, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Jacobs, *Rise of American Film, A Critical History*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1968, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p. 419.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Seldes, *An Hour with the Movies and the Talkies*, New York: Arno Press, 1973, p. 34.

entertainment, and which had assisted in the widespread dissemination of the moving pictures.

One of the reasons for the importance of the movies as a social institution was their accessibility; given the money, anyone could attend. Pare Lorentz described the cinema as 'the most convenient form of entertainment in the world'.<sup>6</sup> Admission statistics before 1930 are universally unreliable, but figures for attendance in the United States in 1930, indicate there were eighty million attendances every week, equal to approximately sixty-five per cent of the resident American population. Weekly attendance averaged eighty-five million during the years of World War Two and peaked at just over ninety million in 1946.<sup>7</sup>

In a study of a 'middle-of-the-road' American town, Muncie, Indiana, (called Middletown to preserve its anonymity), it was found that the equivalent of almost three times the city's entire population of thirty-five thousand had attended the nine movie theatres in the month of July 1923. Four and a half times the population attended in the peak month of December.<sup>8</sup> Two thirds of high school students surveyed attended at least once a week or more, with some attending four or more times every week. The advent of the movies also saw a decrease in lodge-attendance and time spent in the saloon as men went to the movies with their wives and children. An ex-proprietor of one of the largest saloons in the city claimed the movies 'killed the saloon. They cut our business in half overnight.'<sup>9</sup>

A study carried out in Montana found that women were more likely to go to the movies than men, as movies provided the only gathering place open to women and children at night. As the only alternative to the 'saloons, poolrooms, and members-

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<sup>6</sup> Pare Lorentz, *Lorentz on Film*, New York, 1975, pp. 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1937, p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 264-265.

only lodge halls<sup>10</sup> that were restricted to men, the movies provided an important function as ‘something to do’ and it was ‘the easiest place to go’. No effort was required to find out whether a film was screening, as there was always something on; the movies were ‘always there’.<sup>11</sup> Women often took their young children to the movies, and children frequently went to the movies with their older siblings, indicating a high degree of family interaction through movie attendance.

The importance of the movies in the United Kingdom was as considerable as in the United States. Indeed, McKibbin maintains that the British ‘went to the cinema more than any other people’, making up one-tenth of the world market.<sup>12</sup> By the inter-war period, cinema was ‘by far the most popular form of commercial entertainment’ in Britain,<sup>13</sup> and was ‘one of the most important social institutions of the country’.<sup>14</sup> The British were considered a nation of moviegoers, and they started attending the movies at a young age.

A number of studies have been carried out on British movie attendance during the 1930s and 1940s. A Merseyside study revealed that forty per cent of the total population went to the cinema in any one week; of those about two thirds, twenty-five per cent of the total population, went twice or more.<sup>15</sup> A study of York in 1939 found the number of theatres had increased from seven in 1936 to ten in 1939, with the weekly attendance estimated at fifty thousand, equal to half the population. A large number of people attended more than once a week, with a number of them going

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<sup>10</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of the Movie Fan Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1996, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Man: A Social Study*, London; Nisbet and Co., 1933, p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1952*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, p. 419.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939*, Buckingham: Open University, 1992, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Social Survey of Merseyside’, 1934, quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

three or four times. Half the people who attended the theatre were children and young people, and of the adults, seventy-five per cent were women.<sup>16</sup>

Movies held a particular attraction to children and young people. In Edinburgh, in 1933, seven out of ten children went to the movies at least once a week, with most children spending longer at the pictures than they did on many of their school subjects.<sup>17</sup> In London, in 1939, thirty-nine per cent of the child population went to the cinema at least once a week, with a further seventeen per cent going at least once a month, meaning that half the children of London went to the movies regularly. Furthermore, their movie-going habit started young, with sixty-three per cent of children under five attending cinemas, thirty per cent of them attending once a week. Only thirteen per cent never attended the cinema.<sup>18</sup> Mayer's research found that movie-going was often a family affair: one respondent said, 'I used to go to a penny matinee every Saturday, with my sister, 4 years my senior, and our two friends, also sisters';<sup>19</sup> and another remembered that 'I was first taken to the Cinema [by my parents] at the ripe old age of two'.<sup>20</sup> Yet another said he first went to the movies with his parents when he was six weeks old.<sup>21</sup>

Movies became as instantly popular in Palmerston North as they did in the United States and the United Kingdom. From the very first screening of moving images in 1896, patrons were fascinated. While the variety shows provided by touring companies had always been popular, once moving pictures were included in their repertoire, the movies became audiences' primary focus. Early advertising included both the variety show and movies, describing them as 'two entertainments forming the

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<sup>16</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York*: London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1941, pp. 412-413.

<sup>17</sup> John Mackie (ed.), *The Edinburgh Cinema Enquiry*, Edinburgh, 1933, p. 11, in Richard Jeffrey, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Jeffrey, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, pp. 35-36.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

greatest attraction ever offered to the New Zealand public',<sup>22</sup> but it was not long before billboards and newspaper reports focused entirely on the moving pictures, describing them as 'the rage of London, Paris, and New York', and 'The Sensation of the Century'.<sup>23</sup> The prolonged applause and calls for repeats after almost every picture 'were unmistakable signs of the keen appreciation' of the audience.<sup>24</sup> Audiences showed their appreciation in many ways; they were able to 'rock and surge' to the excitement of *The Deemster* (1917),<sup>25</sup> they 'acclaimed' Hoot Gibson as his picture was flashed on the screen in *Smilin' Guns* (1929)<sup>26</sup>, a 'large and enthusiastic audience greeted' *Palais de Danse* (1928)<sup>27</sup>, and Pat Hanna's *Diggers* (1931) was 'indeed a riot of riots [with] genuine whole-hearted applause from the large audience'.<sup>28</sup>

While records of attendance in Palmerston North are not available for this period, advertisements and reviews frequently reported theatres' full houses, urging patrons to purchase their tickets early to avoid being turned away. Advertisements such as, 'To those hundreds who were unable to gain admission on Saturday night we wish to advise that *Red Hot Speed* [1929] ... will be presented AT THE PALACE again tonight and tomorrow night',<sup>29</sup> were very common. The continuous demand for seats indicates theatres were only just keeping up with their patrons' needs: 'STILL THEY COME! HOUSE FULL SIGN again displayed at THIRD RECORD PERFORMANCE of *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*' [1927]<sup>30</sup>, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had 'crowded the Palace nightly this week, also at matinees' with the final screening expected to 'witness another record demand' for

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<sup>22</sup> Advertisement from *New Zealand Herald*, 14 October 1896, as published in *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Jonathon Dennis and Jan Bieringa editors, Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University, 1992, p. 204.

<sup>23</sup> *Observer*, 17 October 1896, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Manawatu Herald*, 22 July 1899, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 10 January 1919, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 27 May 1929, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 27 May 1929, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 July 1929, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 7 January 1929, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 March 1929, p. 1.

seats.<sup>31</sup> A packed house greeted the ‘Sensational Success’ of *The Last Warning* (1929),<sup>32</sup> with ‘SATURDAY’S GREAT PROGRAMME IMMENSELY ENJOYED BY 1000 PATRONS.’<sup>33</sup>

Attendance at Palmerston North cinemas in the 1940s was so high that those who had not reserved tickets in advance on Friday and Saturday nights found it difficult to gain admittance and there were often large numbers of people hoping for cancellations. Some people held permanent reservations that they paid for whether they used them or not. The Regent had five hundred seats available for permanent reservation.<sup>34</sup> Edward Body, who went to the movies as a child in Palmerston North in the 1940s, recalled that because going to the pictures was the main form of entertainment in the city on Saturday night, it was necessary to reserve a seat. If the film was very popular, the phone call to the box-office had to be made by the preceding Thursday. For less popular films, it was possible to ring on Saturday afternoon and get tickets.<sup>35</sup> Fred Symes, another young movie patron, recalled the movies were where ‘everybody went in the 1940s’.<sup>36</sup>

Children were particularly avid movie-goers in Palmerston North, just as they were in the United States and the United Kingdom. Local movie advertising and promotional material focused on reaching children, and women too, hoping they would bring along their fathers and husbands. There was much hype about the British movie *Wings* (1927) when it screened in Palmerston North in 1929. While it was a documentary-style movie about a World War One air battle, and a movie made primarily for adults, much of the advertising was directed at children, particularly boys. A competition was open for boys to bring along their best model airplane, to be displayed at the theatre, with the prize for the first-place getter being a month’s worth of Palace Theatre movie

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<sup>31</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 March 1929, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 July 1929, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 29 April 1929, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 May 1990, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondence, Edward William (Ted) Body, 12 August 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Fred Symes, 2 December 2010.

tickets. Second and third prizes also consisted of movie tickets.<sup>37</sup> The Palace gave away a free model plane of ‘Wings’ to any child who attended the matinee sessions.<sup>38</sup>

In exhibiting the boys’ entries at the theatre, management hoped to attract proud parents and extended family members to view the display and attend the movie. Competitions were a frequent draw-card for children, with another example being a colouring competition to encourage children to see *Dumb* (1941).<sup>39</sup> Gift giveaways at the matinee sessions were designed to entice children, who often went to matinees with friends or siblings. Gifts were also given out to children at matinees in Britain, as recalled by moviegoers in Annette Kuhn’s study of cinema and cultural memory. One respondent remembered getting a ‘candy egg’ every Easter while another remembered free packets of sweets at the Saturday morning session’. Another respondent recalled receiving out-of-date comics.<sup>40</sup>

Children were not the only recipients of theatre gifts; there were enticements for female patrons, as the primary adult moviegoers. In the United States, during the Depression, incentives such as Bank Night, Bingo, or Dish Night, were provided to adult customers as an inducement to spend scarce money at the pictures. These evenings promised free gifts or the chance to win money, with Dish Night, for example, seeing managers giving away a dish to each customer. One could therefore obtain a set of dishes by going to the movies, at a time when many families could not afford new china.<sup>41</sup> In Munice, Indiana, the Hoosier Theatre advertised a 1940 Chevrolet that was to be given away on ‘Jalopy Night’, sometime in the early 1950s, as seen in Figure 1.1.

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<sup>37</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 January 1929, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 29 January 1929, p.1.

<sup>39</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 5 May 1942, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2002, pp. 50-1.

<sup>41</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, starring S. Charles Lee*, New Haven: Yale University, 1994, p. 9.



Figure 1.1 'Give-away' Chevrolet Car, Hoosier Theatre, Muncie, Indiana.

In Palmerston North, movie enticements included a 'brilliant mannequin parade' which was advertised in conjunction with *The Blue Danube* (1932), showing 'the latest and smartest autumn styles, including a charming Easter bride attended by six bridesmaids'.<sup>43</sup> Free samples of Zo-Glo Beauty Powder were given out to the 'Lady Patron' at screenings of *Jack's The Boy* (1932).<sup>44</sup> At the beginning of the school year in 1934, free tickets to the Kosy, Regent and the Palace Theatres were offered by the Courtier Book Store for all purchases of five shillings or more of school materials, a promotion aimed at enticing parents and their children.<sup>45</sup>

Very occasionally men were included in these inducements, as seen in the Regent Theatre's series of advertisements encouraging men and women to enter the 'Search

<sup>42</sup> John B. Straw, *Dick Greene's Neighbourhood: Muncie, Indiana*; Muncie: G. Bradley Publishing, 2000, p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 March 1933, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 June 1933, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 2 February 1934, p. 1.

for Beauty' contest to find 'the Dominion's most perfect man and woman'.<sup>46</sup> 'HOLLYWOOD! FAME! A GENUINE MOVIE CONTRACT! ENTER for Paramount's SEARCH FOR BEAUTY Screen Talent Contest', the advertisements cried.<sup>47</sup> Beauty competitions were not new, as they had been part of New Zealand, and international, culture since the end of the nineteenth century, fuelled by the global fascination with travelling strongman, Eugen Sandow. The fascination with 'bodily perfection' made an easy transition from 'vaudeville strongman' to the Hollywood film stars of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>48</sup> A change in cultural norms saw the focus of 'improved health and national strength' move toward the association of physical fitness, which was equated with physical attractiveness, with sexual attractiveness.<sup>49</sup> The link with film stars was clear and supported by beauty competitions run by movie theatres. By 1911 this had become commonplace in New Zealand.<sup>50</sup> Men and women could use these competitions as the stepping stone to a new career and the prize was attainable, as was seen when Dale Austen, Miss New Zealand in 1927, went to Hollywood to 'display her talent', and secured a role with Tim McCoy in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie, *The Bushranger* (1928), which screened at the Palace.<sup>51</sup>

The attraction of the opportunity to win fame as a film star was also an important factor in the United States, where contemporary author Leo C. Rosten argued most of the American population hoped 'to be among the blessed whom the magic hand of Hollywood plucks from obscurity'.<sup>52</sup> He explained how easy it was for anyone to hope for stardom.

Let us take an imaginary Fanny Jones in any town in the United States. Her talents may be dismal, her features vegetable, her

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<sup>46</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 15 June 1933, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 14 June 1933, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900-1960*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>51</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 27 March 1929, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony The Movie Makers*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941, p. 13.

intelligence uninspired. Yet how plausible it is for her to muse, “It might happen to me”. And why not? Is Fanny Jones freckled? She knows how easily the Westmores hide the freckles of Joan Crawford or Myrna Loy. Is Fanny Jones astigmatic? She knows that Norma Shearer has a slight squint. Does Fanny Jones lisp? She has read all about the fact that certain words are cut out of Kay Francis’s scripts. Is Fanny Jones buck-toothed? They’ll put enamel caps on her teeth. Is Fanny Jones short? They can photograph her on a box ... Hollywood’s wizards will coach them, dress them, raise their eyebrows, straighten their teeth, lift their bust lines, lower their coiffures.<sup>53</sup>

Women were also the primary movie audience target in the United Kingdom, where McKibbin commented that they ‘always went to the cinema more than men’. One of the reasons for the importance of the movies to women was because apart from caring for their families and homes, the lives of so many of them were ‘necessarily passive’, and the movies, particularly the matinees, fitted well with their domestic routines.<sup>54</sup> Movies also gave women an opportunity for socialising; they could meet a friend, see a movie, and combine that with a cup of tea and a chat before or afterwards, especially given many theatres either provided tearooms or were situated near one. The Kosy Theatre in Palmerston North had the accompanying Kosy Tearooms next door, as seen in Figure 1.2. If tearoom facilities were not available, theatres were often found to be next door to sweetshops, dairies, or in the case of the Liberty Theatre in Muncie, a doughnut shop. Bruce Ladyman of Palmerston North recalled that the Regent and the State theatres had their own milkbars, and while the Mayfair did not have a milkbar or tearooms, it sold ice creams and ‘home-made lollies’. The Meteor did not have its own tearooms, but at interval sold ice creams.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1952*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, p. 421.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Bruce Ladyman, 19 September 2011.



Figure 1.2 Kosy Tearooms c. 1936-7.

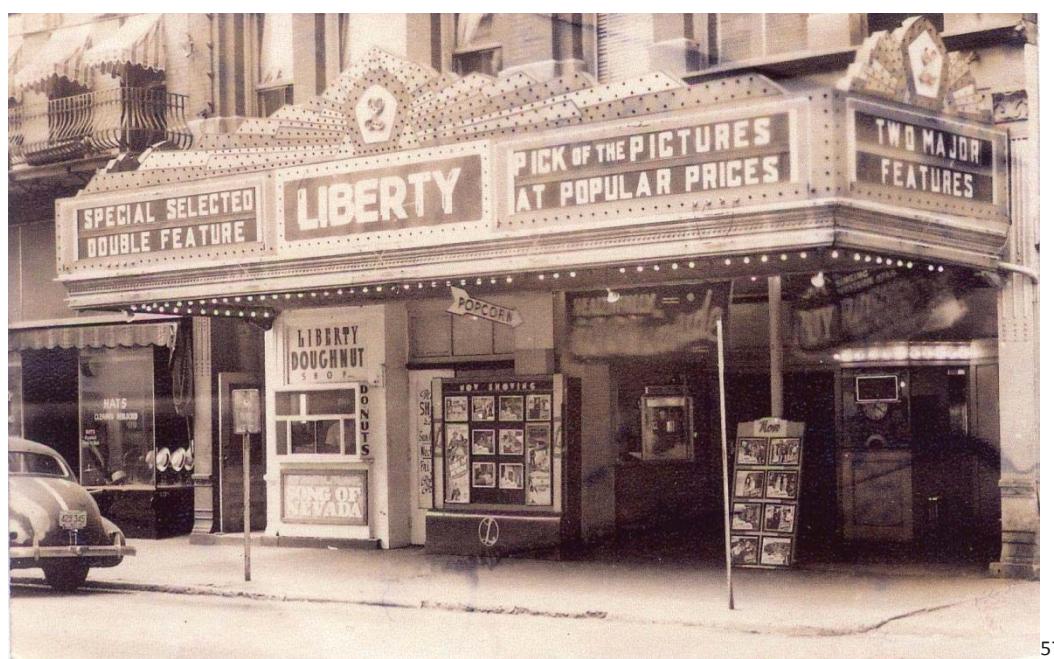


Figure 1.3 Liberty Theatre, Muncie, Indiana, 1944.

<sup>56</sup> Kosy Tearooms, Palmerston North City Library Digital Photograph Collection, 2009N\_Bc356\_BUI\_2462.

<sup>57</sup> Liberty Theatre, Muncie, Postcard, from Muncie Public Library Collection.

Movie fashion was also an important influence of films on women. Nerida Elliot claimed that 'Nowhere was there more evidence of the impact of motion pictures than in the world of women's fashion',<sup>58</sup> and studies support this. British sociologist J. P. Mayer carried out surveys on moviegoers in the 1930s and 1940s and his respondents repeatedly mentioned their favourite actors (invariably American), and how they mimicked their clothing and hairstyles. Fashion was given a lot of thought by female viewers, as is indicated by their detailed replies:

I myself have taken dozens of clothes and hairstyles from films, and will continue to do so, as I believe that this is a sure way of keeping in step with the fashions. It is certainly far better to take a style from a character in a film than that from a picture in a magazine, where only one angle is usually shown. This applies particularly to clothes, as in films we are shown both close-ups and distance shots, and one gets a better impression in this way than by studying fashion magazines. I remember copying a very alluring style from a dress worn by Myrna Loy in one of the 'Thin Man' series, and felt quite 'Hollywood' in it, and incidentally this same style appeared in one of our fashion books, months later. The Americans are so much more in front of us with accessories too, and films give one a good idea of how to put these to good use.<sup>59</sup>

Sometimes this fashion influence lasted a lifetime, as one of Mayer's respondents illustrated:

When I was 17, I saw a star ... about whom the boy I was with said: 'She has the most lovely little feet and her shoes are always beautiful'. I had nice feet and made a vow that the same should always be said of me. I don't know whether it ever was, but I always bought the nicest shoes and stockings I could afford and shoes are still my pet luxury'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Nerida Jeanie Elliot, 'Anzac, Hollywood and Home: 1909-1939', MA Thesis, Auckland: University of Auckland, 1989, p. 130.

<sup>59</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, pp. 43-44.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

Another young woman credited the movies were helping her find the right kind of husband, saying the movies showed her ‘the type of man I needed for a life partner’.<sup>61</sup>

Deanna Durbin was an almost universal favourite with women. One of Mayer’s research respondents said ‘I have always taken a very keen interest in Deanna Durbin’s films and I used to copy her hair styles and note the styles of her clothes ... I nearly always took much more interest in Deanna’s wardrobe than that of any other star.’<sup>62</sup> Another British woman recounted the effect Durbin had on her, saying she had ‘never felt such a surge of admiration and adoration before’ and that her ‘feeling was no passing fancy’ as ‘the love was to last a lifetime’.<sup>63</sup> This sentiment was echoed by New Zealand girls, with ‘every girl in standard six’ adoring Durbin, and replicating her bolero and beanie in sewing classes.<sup>64</sup>

Women in the United States were just as influenced by the stars as their counterparts in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, as seen when Greta Garbo ‘almost precipitated a national crisis’ when she returned to America in 1936 with a new hairstyle that large numbers of women wanted but which few hairdressers could replicate. Jean Harlow’s platinum blonde was easier to copy and Norma Shearer’s fifteenth-century headdress became known as the Juliet cap, which ‘appeared all winter at every party in the country’.<sup>65</sup> Durbin was also popular in the United States where as a ‘youthful heroine’ young women emulated her.<sup>66</sup> Because film stars were universally recognised, they served as a ‘standard of reference’, making it possible for a woman anywhere in the world to explain to her ‘hairdresser, her dressmaker, or her decorator, the ideal that she is striving for’.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 139.

<sup>64</sup> Eve Ebbett, *Victorian’s Daughters: New Zealand Women of the Thirties*: Wellington: Reed, 1981, p. 76.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1946, pp. 71-72.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

Reflecting perhaps the glamorous world into which they were about to venture, patrons used to dress up to go to the movies. When Palmerston North's State Theatre closed on 12 August 1990, a gathering of friends of the State reminisced about the 'grand old days of cinema'. Two of the original staff who worked on opening night on 20 December 1933 remembered the occasion, which saw all the patrons in evening dress. They remembered that back in the 1930s 'everyone got dressed up to go to the cinema' because those were 'really gracious days'.<sup>68</sup> Malcolm Hopwood, in planning a celebration pageant for the Regent Theatre's seventy-fifth anniversary, said the theme of Oscar Night was chosen because the Regent was 'first and foremost a picture palace' and he wanted to recreate 'those magic moments when the great classics came to the Regent, [and] people dressed up for the occasion'.<sup>69</sup> Movies were a social occasion, an event, and people dressed accordingly. Surveys taken in the United States in the 1920s revealed that sixty-eight per cent of the audience went to the movies for the 'event' with only ten per cent going specifically to see the featured movie.<sup>70</sup> In Manchester, Britain, a moviegoer stated 'That was *the* night out, going to the cinema. If we went to the pictures in town, that was an event'.<sup>71</sup>

To enforce this sense of 'event', no matter that it happened quite frequently, the *Dominion* reported in 1931 on the 'cinema dress', the name given to

an afternoon dress which, by the setting aside of one garment becomes a little dinner dress with low neck and no sleeves. This so-called cinema dress is the sort of ensemble which is worn for a tea party or cocktail party, from which the guests may go on to a little dinner party, followed by the cinema or theatre.<sup>72</sup>

A further reason for the importance of movies was that they ensured everyone had affordable access to recreation and entertainment. Admission price comparisons with

<sup>68</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 15 August 1990, p.23.

<sup>69</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 13 September 2005, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939*, Buckingham: Open University, 1992, p. 78.

<sup>72</sup> Eve Ebbett, *Victoria's Daughters: New Zealand Women of the Thirties*: Wellington: Reed, 1981, p. 76.

other entertainment show movies were consistently the cheapest way to spend one's leisure pennies. In the United States prices started at a nickel, hence the name nickelodeon. Thorp claims that admission prices in the United States were as high as two dollars and twenty cents for the best seats for first showings in big urban theatres and were as low as ten cents in country districts and city theatres showing old movies.<sup>73</sup>

In Palmerston North, one of the town's early moving screenings, Banjo Paterson's fifty illuminated pictures in 1900, charged between one and three shillings for admission.<sup>74</sup> In 1905 it cost between one and three shillings for adults, with children half price, to see West's Pictures and the Brescians performers.<sup>75</sup> In January 1919, the Kosy claimed they gave the 'best sixpenny worth of entertainment in the Dominion,'<sup>76</sup> indicating that prices to the moving pictures had reduced since their first screenings. The first showing of the talking pictures in 1929 saw a price increase of between one shilling six pence and two shillings nine pence for adults, with matinees cheaper.<sup>77</sup>

Admission prices to the movies were rarely mentioned in the newspaper advertisements although prices for other entertainments were always advertised. Movie prices were advertised in the theatre foyers and ticket booths just as they are today, and this practice was universal. In the 1940s, admission to Palmerston North theatres was still sixpence for children, which it had been for many years,<sup>78</sup> and a shilling or a shilling and sixpence for adults, depending on whether the seat was in the stalls or the dress circle. Edward Body remembers the upstairs seats in the Regent were more expensive than those downstairs and he enjoyed it when his father went to the movies with the family, as because of his 'sight problems' they sat upstairs in the 'toff's section' where the sightlines were better. Front-row seats were the cheapest, as

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<sup>73</sup> Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1946, p.19.

<sup>74</sup> *Manawatu Standard*, 10 December 1900, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 22 July 1905, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 3 January 1919, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 17 August 1929, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 11 September 1942, p. 2.

you had to crane your neck to see the screen.<sup>79</sup> Merv Hancock believed the theatres to be class-conscious, with the Regent in particular having ‘prize seats’ upstairs and the State Theatre had a ‘prize box’ at the back of the theatre where you paid more for the more comfortable seats.<sup>80</sup>

Comparisons with other entertainments show the Palmerston North Amateur Operatic Society charged between two and six shillings to attend a performance at the Opera House, with the West End School Ball charging one shilling for children and two shillings sixpence for adults, both in September 1929.<sup>81</sup> In 1942 it cost a shilling to watch a Senior B rugby final, with a trip to the races costing men five shillings and women two shillings and sixpence.<sup>82</sup> A single page of the newspaper in October of 1945 offered a number of entertainment options: A gala at the Opera House cost between two and four shillings admission, while an amateur boxing match in Petone was advertised as between three and ten shillings and sixpence. A Returned Servicemen’s dance at Ashhurst was selling tickets for men at two shillings and sixpence and women’s at two shillings. The ANA (Army, Navy, Airforce) Ballroom (formally His Majesty’s and the De Luxe Theatre) were selling tickets for a Citizen’s Grant Victory Ball at seven shillings and sixpence each and tickets to a Chinese Monster Relief Ball were selling at five shillings for men and four shillings for women.<sup>83</sup> The movies were cheaper than these entertainments and they had another price advantage; men and women paid the same amount, with any prices differences being dependent on where your seats were.

While movies were cheap,<sup>84</sup> they offered a priceless experience; escapism, glamour, sophistication, fun, adventure, drama, fashion advice, romantic tips, inspiration and so

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<sup>79</sup> Correspondence, Edward William (Ted) Body, 12 August 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Mervyn (Merv) Hancock, 3 February 2012.

<sup>81</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 August 1929, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 17 September 1942, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 29 September 1945, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> One shilling in 1945 was the equivalent of \$3.86 in December 2011, using the Reserve Bank of New Zealand’s Inflation calculator, at <http://www.rbnz.govt.nz/statistics/0135595.html> retrieved 29 December 2011. This meant

much more. For only a sixpence or a shilling, the world opened up before your eyes and offered patrons a previously unheard of and unimagined experience. Much of the attraction was with Hollywood and its influence was significant to American, British and New Zealander moviegoers alike. The United States dominated the movie business and New Zealanders, Americans and the British almost universally preferred American films (for more on this see Chapters Four, Five and Six). One of the reasons movies were important to patrons was because they gave a sense of identification with a bigger world, particularly one as progressive, glamorous and modern as the United States, or more particularly, Hollywood. This ‘bigger world’ did not necessarily need to be a geographical entity; Hollywood was in fact more of a ‘state of mind’ than anything else.<sup>85</sup> It is hard to find the specific area in Los Angeles, apart from the iconic sign, Hollywoodland, erected by a real estate company in 1923 (‘land’ was removed in 1949). However, Hollywood has always been easily recognised in books, movies, magazines, and images. Lealand describes Hollywood as ‘that generic term used to describe both the American production of strips of celluloid on metal reels and the mythology of flickering images in the minds of men and women’.<sup>86</sup> David Lascelles reminisced that Hollywood actors taught New Zealanders ‘how to dress, how to kiss, and how to light a cigarette; they gave us style and class, elegance and fashion’.<sup>87</sup> ‘Hollywood’ was everywhere.

The attraction to Hollywood was such that Hollywood-endorsed products were an international phenomenon. A favourite slogan of economic expansionists in the 1920s was ‘Trade follows the film’. While there was little hard evidence in support of this, it was widely accepted to be true. Anecdotal comments said Japanese tailors were

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the cost of attending the movies in 1945 was .8% of the average weekly salary of £6.5s (*New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1944-1949*, Wellington: Government Printers, 1950, p. 365), compared with 2.9% of the 2010 median weekly income of \$529, [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/income-and-work](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/income-and-work) retrieved 5 February 2012. Movie price of \$15.50 retrieved from <http://www.dtcinemas.co.nz/page-ticket-prices> retrieved on 29 December 2011.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in our Nest? American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University, 1988, p. 80.

<sup>87</sup> David Lascelles, *Eighty Turbulent Years: The Paramount Theatre, Wellington, 1917-1997*, Wellington: Millwood Press 1997, p. 189.

attending American movies to learn how to make the styles wanted by their Western-minded customers and in Brazil, the sale of a particular American car model was said to have increased by thirty-five per cent after it was seen in a new Hollywood movie.<sup>88</sup> The *New Zealand Listener* reported that when Clarke Gable took off his shirt in *It Happened One Night*, revealing he wore no undershirt (a staple part of the male American's wardrobe), United States men's underwear manufacturers lost between forty and fifty per cent in business within twelve months.<sup>89</sup> Thorp claimed it took years to convince retailers of 'this magic force of the movies', and 'everybody in the trade scoffed at the idea at first.' By 1946, Thorp stated 'the American public to-day is convinced that they [movies] have an influence on practically everything'.<sup>90</sup>

Following parallels in the United States and the United Kingdom, Palmerston North newspapers ran a series of advertisements for beauty soap showing photographs, verbal endorsements and signatures of stars proclaiming the soap's special features and encouraging women to buy it. Priscilla Lane, a star in *Blues in the Night* (1941), claimed 'A daily Lux toilet soap beauty bath gives your whole body gentle complexion care ... makes you sure of daintiness'.<sup>91</sup> Alice Faye, from Twentieth Century Fox, claimed that the 'lovely skin' attained through use of Lux beauty soap, 'wins and holds romance'. The advertisement included comments from women using the soap because they wanted their skin to feel 'smooth and lovely like Alice Faye's'.<sup>92</sup>

Newspaper advertisements in Palmerston North also included 'Hollywood slippers' and lingerie endorsed by female film stars wearing glamorous evening attire, with the phrase, 'To-day's tight-fitting frocks are figure-revealing as never before. Control your curves'.<sup>93</sup> If a woman could not afford to purchase Hollywood-styled garments, advertisements on how to 'Learn the Hollywood Method' of dressmaking offered them

<sup>88</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 216.

<sup>89</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 27 March 1942, p. 6.

<sup>90</sup> Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1946, pp.72-73.

<sup>91</sup> *Manawatu Standard*, 20 August 1942, p. 3 and *Manawatu Daily Times*, 1 July 1942, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Manawatu Standard*, 17 September 1942, p. 3

<sup>93</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 4 March 1933, p. 6.

the opportunity to make their own piece of Hollywood.<sup>94</sup> These advertisements gave a strong message on how a woman should look; slimness, softness, gentleness, and femininity were all expected, and they were found in the 'Hollywood woman'.

Smoking was a very popular pastime and movie stars who advertised brands of cigarettes gave it a glamorous aspect. Each weekly addition of the *New Zealand Listener* in 1942 advertised De Reszke cigarettes with photographs of movie stars such as Gracie Fields and George Formby enticing the reader to have a cigarette.

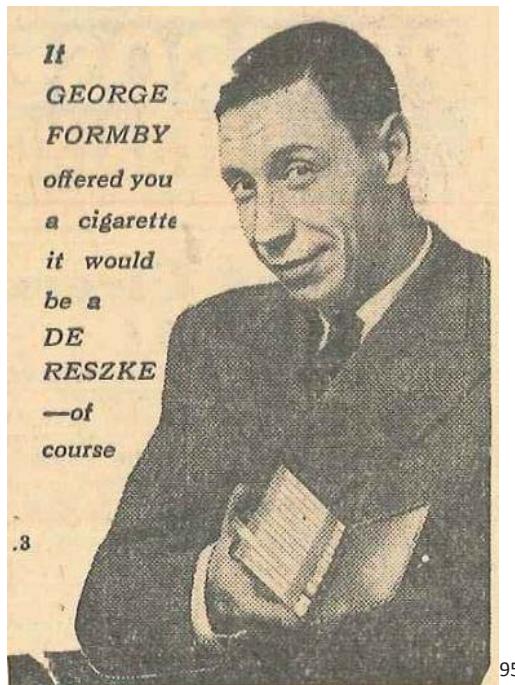
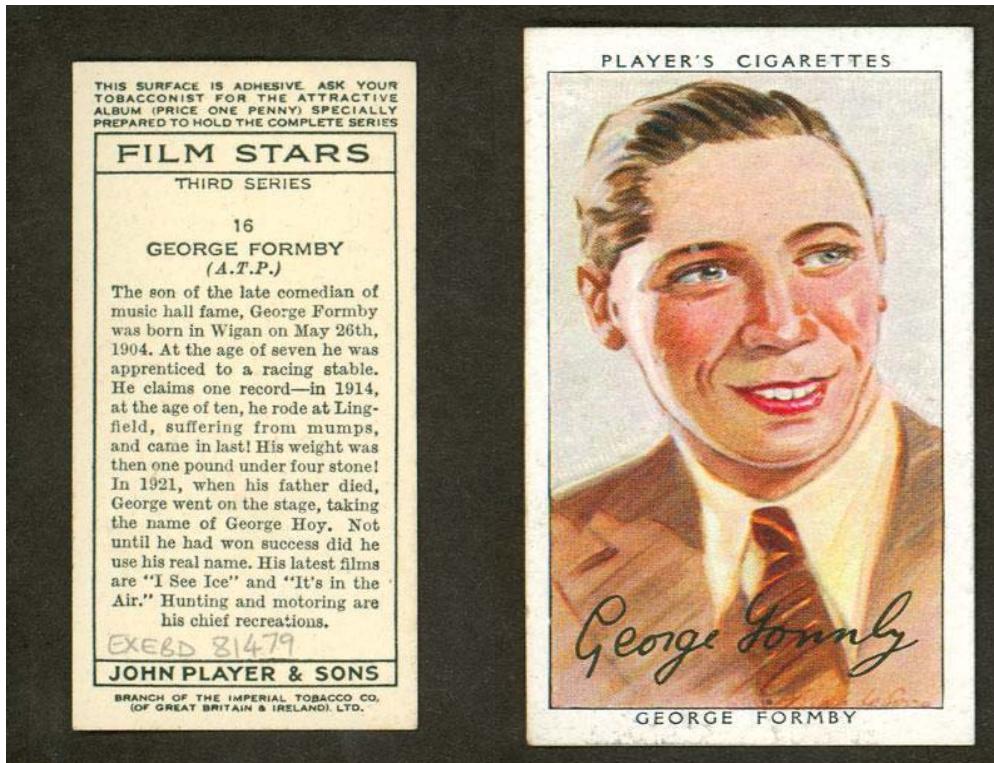


Figure 1.4 George Formby offers *New Zealand Listener* readers De Reszke cigarettes.

George Formby also featured as part of a British series of collectable cards of Film Stars, this time advertising Player's cigarettes, as seen in Figure 1.5.

<sup>94</sup> *Manawatu Standard*, 22 August, 1942, p. 3 and *The Times*, 21 November, 1945, p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 19 June 1942, p. 36.



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Figure 1.5 George Formby in a series of British Collectable Cards.

Using well-known and much loved movie stars for product endorsement was clearly a method of enticing consumers to escape into the glamorous world of the film star, if only for the time it took to smoke a cigarette. The *Listener* claimed the influence of Hollywood was internationally ‘incalculable’.<sup>97</sup>

The movies provided more to talk about than fashion, film stars, and merchandise. They provided an important shared topic of conversation for people, with their influence extending far beyond the time spent in the actual theatre: ‘there is food for conversation, both in anticipation of the next show, and in the thoughts of the ones attended weeks and months ago. Here is a common theme on which one is sure to find ready words in the homes, on the street, in the ‘pub’, or wherever two or more are

<sup>96</sup> Image from the University of Exeter, Everyone’s Virtual Exhibition, The Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture, <http://billdouglas.ex.ac.uk/eve/results.asp?item=81479> retrieved 14 December 2011.

<sup>97</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 27 March 1942, p. 6.

gathered together.<sup>98</sup> Movies provided a strong unifying focal point in community discourse. American author Larry McMurtry, who wrote *The Last Picture Show*,<sup>99</sup> asserts that

Of the several pivot points of small town life (barbershop, high school, feed store, filling station), the picture show was the only one that provided a continuous feed-in of discussable experience that could be balanced against that generated by the town itself. That the experience one absorbed in watching movies was highly romanticized and often blatantly unreal in no way invalidated its importance to the culture of the small town, or for that matter, the city ... movies provided frequent points of comparison, but also the leaven of escape: a chance to be drawn into an experience not generated by the family, the neighborhood, or the town.<sup>100</sup>

McMurtry emphasised the theatre as a focal point of the community. As such, it offered a strong ‘sense of place’ for social connectivity and community engagement. Movie theatres provided moviegoers with a place where they ‘seemed to form a special bond from their shared hopes, dreams, and even fears’.<sup>101</sup> According to Vincent Porter, there are three sources of information that influence what people watch, and the most important of those is a recommendation from someone else, what Lealand calls the ‘unpredictable, but extremely powerful ‘word-of-mouth’ factor<sup>102</sup> (the other two are a review of the film and the commercial for the film).<sup>103</sup> Clearly, movies encouraged conversation and this occasionally led to advertisements in Palmerston North such as: ‘WARNING. So that all may enjoy its terrific surprise climax ... please do not disclose the ending to your friends.’<sup>104</sup> This concern was not purely for the enjoyment of the patron, as seen with the advertisement that read, ‘We will let you

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<sup>98</sup> E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Man, A Social Study*, London: Nisbet and Co, 1933, p. 179.

<sup>99</sup> Larry McMurtry, *The Last Picture Show*, New York: Dial Press, 1966. It was made into a movie in 1971.

<sup>100</sup> Larry McMurtry, *Film Flam: Essays on Hollywood*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 151.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997, p. ix.

<sup>102</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest: American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University, 1988, p. 87.

<sup>103</sup> Vincent Porter, *On Cinema*, London: Pluto Press, 1985, p. 31.

<sup>104</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 September 1945, p. 2.

into A SECRET, We will disclose the identity of THE HOODED TERROR, But only on condition that you do not tell the ‘woman next door’. Let her come and pay sixpence like a lady'.<sup>105</sup> In the United States Thorp declared that ‘a good mystery or intrigue film can keep a whole village talking for days’, with the current movie plot ‘taking the place of local gossip’.<sup>106</sup> She commented that ‘the woman who went last night rings up her friend on the telephone to retail every item of the story. She goes over each significant gesture and movement of the heroine with the same loving care she would lavish on the activities of a giddy neighbour.<sup>107</sup> The cover of McMurtry’s novel, *The Last Picture Show*, showed a photograph of a closed-down movie theatre and the words ‘PLEASE DO NOT REVEAL THE ENDING’ along the external marque of the theatre.

People did not just talk about movies within a movie context. That movies had infiltrated all aspects of life is seen in the way it was used in general everyday conversation. A contributor to the *New Zealand Listener* wrote that a ‘dear old lady once said that she believed one of the pleasures of Heaven would be a picture theatre in which she would see all the past and how it really happened’.<sup>108</sup> A Palmerston North newspaper told the story of the slapstick adventures of a young Parisian who had fallen asleep in his car, under the headline ‘Real Life Film Story’.<sup>109</sup> A moving company put an advertisement in the paper with the caption ‘The Pictures are not the only thing that move for your benefit. We move furniture any distance and enjoyment comes from seeing it skillfully done.’<sup>110</sup> Movies were not confined to the picture theatre; they were incorporated into everyday life.

Part of the attraction of the movies was that the audience experienced a feeling of being a part of something greater than themselves – a part of the wider world. Jill Julius Matthews refers to the ‘transformative power’ that cinematography, and other

<sup>105</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 September 1919, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1946, p. 21.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>108</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 22 May 1942, p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 3 July 1919, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 13 June 1919, p. 7.

new technologies, had through their ‘effect on the mind and the imagination’. They could ‘change the way people perceived their world and understood it and themselves as modern.’<sup>111</sup> Film exhibitors knew this and their advertisements subsequently played up any degree of ‘modernism’. Advertisements were littered with phrases such as ‘A Love Romance as sweet and modern as your own’,<sup>112</sup> ‘this is essentially a modern story’,<sup>113</sup> ‘a story of modern youth’,<sup>114</sup> and the rather ambiguous, ‘You get all the answers ... and all the laughs when you see MGMs ultra-modern streamlined matrimonial convulsion’.<sup>115</sup> When *Wings of the Morning*, a five-year-old movie, was shown in 1942, the advertisement was quick to emphasise that it was a ‘A BRAND NEW PRINT’ and added, ‘of the Most Popular Picture Ever Produced’, for good measure.<sup>116</sup>

The popularity and the importance of the movies were further seen in the rapid increase of theatres provided to meet the demands of their customers. In ‘Middletown’, a population of thirty-five thousand was served by nine movie theatres in 1923, a ratio of almost one theatre for every four thousand residents.<sup>117</sup> For the same period, Palmerston North had four theatres for a population of approximately seventeen thousand,<sup>118</sup> a ratio of one theatre for every 4,250 residents and therefore on a par with Muncie. York, in the United Kingdom, had ten theatres in 1939, servicing a population of 100,000; a ratio of one theatre for every ten thousand residents. In comparison, for the same period, Palmerston North had five theatres for a population of 23,500 residents; a ratio of one theatre for every 4,700 residents.<sup>119</sup> Palmerston North had a higher number of theatres per head of population. While this is examined in detail in the next chapter, the following table indicates just how important movies

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<sup>111</sup> Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Halls and Picture Palaces: Sydney’s Romance with Modernity*, Sydney: Currency Press, 2005, p. 103.

<sup>112</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 4 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 18 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 25 July 1933, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 22 May 1942, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 22 January 1942, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, p. 263.

<sup>118</sup> <http://www.pncc.govt.nz/about/history/Detail.aspx?id=2046> retrieved 12 December 2011.

<sup>119</sup> <http://www.pncc.govt.nz/About/History/Detail.aspx?id=2047> retrieved 12 December 2011.

were to the people of Palmerston North. The first purpose-built theatre was His Majesty's in 1911 and from then a veritable feast of theatres emerged.

Table 1.1 Palmerston North Theatres from 1911-1964.

1911-1915	His Majesty's	Rebuilt 1924 as Paramount	George St 800 seats
1915-1924	Everybody's		Coleman Pl 700 seats
1915-1942	Kosy	Rebuilt 1943 as Vogue	The Square 800 seats
1915-1935	Palace	Rebuilt 1936 as Mayfair	George St 900 seats
1924-1926	Paramount	Was His Majesty's, become De Luxe in 1926	George St 850 seats
1926-1930	De Luxe	Previously His Majesty's and the Paramount, become Ballroom Astoria	George St 850 seats
1930-	Regent		Broadway 1600 seats
1933-1990	State		Broadway 880 seats
1936-1964	Mayfair	Previously the Palace, rebuilt 1965 as Odeon	George St 990 seats
1937-1964	Meteor		The Square 940 seats
1943-1964	Vogue	Previously the Kosy	The Square 700 seats

On a number of occasions the delivery of an advertised night's entertainment was held up and alternatives had to be quickly found to satisfy patrons. When a Charlie Chaplin movie failed to arrive in February 1919, it was described as 'something of a calamity', with the delay being attributed to the 'Railway Department's regulation prohibiting parcels up the Main Trunk line to Palmerston North'.<sup>120</sup> When the movie did arrive, the advertisement on the front page of the paper turned the incident into a light-hearted marketing opportunity, quoting Charlie Chaplin as saying that his delay was due to the need for him to 'meet deputations all the way up the line'.<sup>121</sup>

Given the reliance on railways, it is not surprising that they often had an impact on the movie timetable. The retiring manager of the Regent Theatre, Valmond (Val) Page, reminisced; 'in those days it was common practice to switch the newsreel between

<sup>120</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 February 1919, p.6.

<sup>121</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 February 1919, p.1.

theatres so everyone had a chance to catch up on world news.<sup>122</sup> He explained that the newsreel was shown first at the Regent at 8pm, then re-wound and fast tracked to the Mayfair, on the same side of the railway line that split the central city. It was shown at the Mayfair, rewound and ‘rushed across the tracks to the Meteor where it would be screened before interval’. This system worked well, although Page did recall that one night he leapt onto a goods train, planning to disembark near the theatre of his destination, only to find the train picked up speed and he was obliged to stay on board for a further fifteen kilometres until it stopped at neighbouring Ashhurst. As he put it, ‘the railway ... often occasioned to disappoint theatre patrons and anger managers and projectionists’.<sup>123</sup>

The hazard of getting the right movie to the right cinema on time was not a problem peculiar to Palmerston North. A young British cinema worker regularly cycled to the local train station to collect reels of film, with one particular rush job being to collect the newsreel of a recent sinking of an American gunboat by the Japanese, in Chinese waters. It turned out that the ‘topical newsreel’ he had rushed to pick up was a Three Stooges comedy arriving four hours late for the children’s matinee.<sup>124</sup>

In 1942 Shirley Temple’s latest movie, *Kathleen* (1941), could not be shown due to its ‘non-arrival in New Zealand’. The management of the Meteor, knowing they had to provide something of interest to offset this considerable disappointment, showed *Laugh it Off* (1940), and described Tommy Trindert, scarcely a well-known actor, as one of Britain’s foremost comedians, and furthermore, proclaimed a New Zealand Premiere Screening.

That a missing film could be described as ‘something of a calamity’ and that prominent advertisements would be used to explain their absence, indicated the degree of

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<sup>122</sup> While Val Page does not specify the exact period he is referring to, the Regent, Mayfair and Meteor Theatres were all in operation between 1937 and 1964, so that is the time frame his comments refer to.

<sup>123</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 May 1990, p. 15-16.

<sup>124</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, p. 127.

importance both theatre managers and the audience assigned to their movies. Any screening of Hollywood favourites was looked forward to and theatre managers were well aware of this.

The movies were important for many reasons. They were the first mass-entertainment that provided a ‘broader-based popular appeal than other forms of communal entertainment’.<sup>125</sup> Chapman states there is no coincidence in the mass appeal of the movies emerging at the same time as society was undergoing a massive change with population growth, urbanisation, industrialisation, consumerism, and increased leisure time.<sup>126</sup> These changes were happening in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Palmerston North. The movies flourished in Palmerston North, as they did in the United States and the United Kingdom, because of the important role they played in the lives of so many individuals.

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<sup>125</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p. 421.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two: Buildings

*Movie theatres are symbols of time and place that incorporate a sense of wonder and personal involvement<sup>1</sup>*

The development of cinema buildings and associated infrastructure in Palmerston North from its beginnings to 1945 followed closely the same trajectory as that in the United States and the United Kingdom. This went from the use of existing theatres and some decidedly ad hoc arrangements, through to purpose-built cinemas, to ‘picture palaces’, initially very ornate and then on simpler art deco lines. In terms of technical changes, the talkies arrived very rapidly in Palmerston North. There were, however, differences between developments in the United States and the United Kingdom that reflected their different experiences of the First World War and the Depression. In that regard, the development of cinema facilities in Palmerston North followed the American pattern rather than the British during the First World War, but the reverse was the case during the Depression. Developments in cinema infrastructure in Palmerston North appear to have originated largely from the United States, albeit typically mediated through Australia and the United Kingdom.

The initial attraction of the movies was the images themselves and where they were shown was not important. In the early years, businessmen and showmen in the United States and the United Kingdom used hastily converted halls or shops in towns in which to screen their shows. American travelling exhibitors were able to reach small-town populations, with some doing a circuit that included ‘one-night bookings in small-town opera houses or other permanent venues that often doubled as the town hall or county courthouse’. In rural areas in the United States performances were occurring in

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee*, New Haven: Yale University, 1994, p. 11.

farmers' fields and rural churches.<sup>2</sup> Most showmen, however, put on their shows 'under the stars or under a temporary canvas theatre'.<sup>3</sup> These showmen often had to travel considerable distances to reach their relatively small audiences.

Some of the first cinema spaces in the United States were created out of arcades which had featured 'peepshows' from the earliest days of moving images. David Robinson claims it was a 'logical step to enclose the arcade, or to screen off one end of it to make a small cinema'.<sup>4</sup> The first such auditorium in the United States was the Electric Theatre in Los Angeles, which opened in 1902 and led to the 'large-scale conversion of arcades and small stores to five-cent film theatres',<sup>5</sup> the famous nickelodeons.

Movie attendance in the United States grew phenomenally with the introduction of the first nickelodeon, which opened in Pittsburgh in 1905. This 'invention' came about by two men who added furniture and fittings to their converted empty store and emphasised the theatre's affordability. Their marketing worked, with the theatre's one hundred seats continuously in demand from the time they opened at eight o'clock in the morning through to their mid-night closure.<sup>6</sup> The name (a nickel is five cents in the United States and *Odeon* is a roofed theatre in Greek) and the concept, 'evoking both the socio-economic level and the aspirations of the theatre', quickly caught on as a generic name for movie theatres and within a year Pittsburgh alone had one hundred nickelodeons and by 1908 there were between eight and ten thousand throughout America.<sup>7</sup> Screenings lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and pictures had to be changed as often as possible to keep the audiences coming back.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn, H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Exhibition in America*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1992, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*, New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1968, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973, pp. 26-7.

Similarly, in the early days of cinema in the United Kingdom, films were ‘shown anywhere that would give them house room, in village halls, in church halls, as part of the variety programme in music-halls, in schools, in empty shops with the front windows knocked out and replaced by porticos, in tents, and by travelling showmen in magnificent portable theatres specially designed for the purpose.’<sup>8</sup> The converted shops and other makeshift theatres were nicknamed the ‘penny gaffs’.<sup>9</sup> The *Kine Weekly* stated in April of 1916 that ‘rural depopulation [as a result of the First World War] would have been far more complete than it is but for the entertainment provided by the travelling kinema, which has provided an efficient substitute for the pleasures and attractions of town life.’<sup>10</sup> Field remarked that showmen did not usually consider themselves as ‘purveyors of high art, but rather of signs and portents, of two-headed monsters and bearded ladies and other phenomena outside the common run of nature.’<sup>11</sup> As such, the movies fitted well, in the early years, with variety shows and vaudeville.

In American and British towns with existing theatres or music halls, those buildings were adapted to accommodate the showing of moving pictures while continuing to host live entertainment. Vast chains of vaudeville theatres had been built in the 1890s in the United States. Moving pictures came to be shown as just another part of the visual spectacle of the vaudeville show, along with puppetry, shadowgraphy, magic illusions, living pictures (famous scenes recreated by live actors), and magic lantern presentations.<sup>12</sup> For those towns that did not have vaudeville theatres, such as Lexington, Kentucky, the town’s Opera House was an important venue, not just for the showing of moving pictures in the pre-nickelodeon period, but as a ‘multipurpose venue acting as a sort of cultural forum, giving voice to many (never “all”) tastes and

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<sup>8</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 14.

discourses, which were legitimated by and circumscribed within a refined, respectable, safe environment.<sup>13</sup> Performances included musicals, poetry readings, political speeches and debates, as well as moving pictures. Referring to theatre developments in the United Kingdom, Field asserts that the ‘whole history of entertainment indicates that large buildings must be versatile – ready to accommodate *Messiah* and Henry Lauder, *Quo Vadis* and bingo and roller-skating and bowling and the Mozart Players and *Carry on Henry* and the parish operatic society and the Royal Shakespeare Company on tour.’<sup>14</sup>

In New Zealand the earliest moving pictures were exhibited by travelling showmen in much the same fashion as in the United States and the United Kingdom. Henry Hayward, one of New Zealand’s earliest showmen, admitted that ‘in the early days we had great difficulties to find halls in which to present out “Picture Shows”. Our first picture theatres were empty shops, old warehouses, schoolrooms and deserted churches.’<sup>15</sup> While the term ‘nickelodeon’ was never used in New Zealand or Britain due to the differing currencies, the concept of converting convenient empty spaces into theatres was.

The structures in which people in and around Palmerston North viewed the first movies generally had the same characteristics as their fellow moviegoers in both the United States and the United Kingdom. The first makeshift arrangement for showing moving pictures in the town itself was the use of the Theatre Royal, originally built in 1875 as a lodge room and a public hall. When the Royal was used as a picture theatre, its projectors were powered by electric generators, which were in turn powered by an eight-horsepower steam engine placed outside the theatre, with wires strung through the window and into the dress circle where the projector was located.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*, Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1995, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, pp. 25-6.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Hayward, *Here's To Life*, Auckland: Wright & Jaques Ltd, 1944, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> From notes by Ian Matheson in file A175/148 Research Topic, Ian Matheson City Archives, Palmerston North.

The opening of the new Opera House on 12 July 1905 was a significant milestone in the development of a movie culture in Palmerston North. While not designed specifically for moving pictures, it was well used as a movie theatre in its early years. The Opera House was plush in comparison with the town's other movie screening venues. The dress circle, which provided seating for 413 people, was furnished with the latest opera chairs, upholstered in red leather with the reserved stalls upholstered in green leather. The Opera House, on the ground floor, could accommodate thirteen hundred people, while the Municipal Hall upstairs could accommodate seven-hundred. The number of different entrances and exits, and the large space, meant five functions could be carried out at the same time yet remain quite independent of each other.<sup>17</sup> As in the United States and the United Kingdom, the link between 'the pictures' and variety shows was close in the early years, as theatres provided the venue for many functions, including political speeches, fashion shows, bands and a range of other entertainment. As with Lexington's Opera House, the Opera House in Palmerston North provided this required functionality, which made it the preferred site of touring companies.



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Figure 2.1 Opera House, Palmerston North, 1905.

<sup>17</sup> Cyclopaedia Company Limited, *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand (Taranaki, Hawke's Bay and Wellington Provincial Districts)*, Christchurch: The Cyclopaedia Company Limited, 1908, found at <http://www.nzetc.org> retrieved 28 March 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Postcard 2009P\_Bm7\_B1\_U\_2704 from <http://digitallibrary.palmerstonnorth.com> retrieved 7 July 2011.

The building of the Opera House was also significant in that Palmerston North was a very modest town in 1905 and the building was conspicuously grand, a building which sat in ‘solitary splendor, the pride of the townspeople and to the astonishment of visitors, who little expected to find such an impressive and well equipped opera house in the less imposing town’.<sup>19</sup> Kathryn Fuller noted that American settlers called their purpose-built entertainment centres ‘opera’ houses, because *opera* was considered more ‘genteel’ than the ‘disreputable’ *theatre*.<sup>20</sup> This could well have been a factor in the naming decision of the early Palmerstonians, given that *opera* itself was not a frequent form of entertainment for the town.

As in the United States and the United Kingdom, make-shift arrangements continued to be used during the interwar period by travelling showmen wishing to screen pictures in rural areas around Palmerston North. Edwin (Ted) Coubray described how, after World War One, he and his brother bought an old car in Palmerston North for ninety pounds and drove it home to Rongotea, a small rural township nearby, where they converted it into a mobile picture projector.

We cleaned it up, put a box on the back and arranged a projector and a chain off a Harley Davidson motorbike. Ran for about five years with no problem ... The constant vibration of road travel was hard on things. Our circuit was all of the Manawatu. Didn’t have power for many years so the truck had to generate its own. Went up as far as Rata, they already had a picture show operating in Hunterville. Audiences used to fill the halls; would only seat about 130-140, but they had lots of people standing and they’d bring their own boxes to stand on. Some people used to ride their horses to the movies, tie them to the fences, and put their nose bags on. During the changing of a spool, they’d race out and change the nose bag. The American Ford was starting to come out then too.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> G.C. Petersen, *Palmerston North: A Centennial History*, Wellington: A.H & A.W Reed, 1973, p. 203.

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996, pp. 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Coubray, ‘Mouth Wide Open’, New Zealand Film Archive, Oral Tape, 0472a, 1995.

These temporary arrangements were still prevalent when Bob White was a child living near Palmerston North in the 1930s and 1940s. Bob recalled a man who ‘rigged up a truck with a movie projector and used to travel around a lot of the country halls once a fortnight and show movies’. This was often a child’s first experience of movies, as it was Bob’s, and he remembered the hole cut into the wall of the local country hall’s cloakroom through which the projector screened the movies onto the wall at the front of the hall. Bob recalled he was ten when he saw his first movie, *Pinocchio* (1940).<sup>22</sup> Merv Hancock also recalled going to see *Pinocchio*, because it was considered a ‘phenomenon’, but he did not particularly enjoy it, believing it to be ‘too girly’.<sup>23</sup>

In the early days of cinema internationally, fire was a real hazard, partly because of these make-shift theatres that were set up with no permits, controls or regulations. Anyone could show a movie anywhere. The film itself was also a danger in that it was highly inflammable cellulose nitrate, which frequently jammed in the projector and burst into flame. A quick-witted projectionist could usually put the fire out before too much damage was done, but fire was still a frequent disruption and hazard. Fire had been a hazard in theatres for centuries: The Ring Theatre in Vienna burnt down in 1881 with the loss of 450 lives, and 186 people died when the Theatre Royal in Essex caught fire in 1887.<sup>24</sup> Of significance to the history of cinema, in 1897, a small cinema sideshow caught fire at the ‘Bazar de la Charité’, a grand annual social event where Parisian aristocracy gathered to raise money for charity. Buildings were destroying and 140 people killed, including members of the French aristocracy. Contemporary writer Terry Ramsaye reported that ‘prejudicial feeling arose to impair seriously the status of the screen’ with it becoming ‘unfashionable to patronize the films, and it was the height of proper emotion to shudder at so much the mention of them.’<sup>25</sup> David Robinson believed such events ‘discouraged some more timid sections of the audience’, but their primary influence was to increase both police and local authority

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Bob White, 11 July 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mervyn (Merv) Hancock, 3 February 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1975, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture*, London: Frank Cass, 1926, pp. 356-7.

control of cinema shows, ‘not only in France, but also in England and America, where the event was spectacularly reported’.<sup>26</sup> In 1908 the Mayor of New York temporarily closed down the city’s nickelodeons, on the grounds that they represented a safety hazard (although many believed he was objecting to the ‘poor moral condition of the darkened rooms’).<sup>27</sup> By 1909 Britain had introduced a Cinematograph Act which required local councils to licence cinemas to ensure fire safety regulations were met. These regulations included the need for fire-proof projection boxes and buckets of sand in the auditorium.

Palmerston North was not exempt from what was an international problem. In recalling his days as a co-owner of the Theatre Royal, Fred Mowlem spoke of a fire of 14 March, 1895, when the Pollard Opera Company was performing. Unfortunately, resources were limited, with the best in fire-fighting appliances being a manual engine, and twenty-foot wells at each corner of the Square. While good use of the wells was made by organizing ‘bucket parties’, little could be done to prevent the damage that was caused.<sup>28</sup> The spate of fires and the damage done led to petitions to the borough council pointing out ‘the absolute necessity for a by-law compelling persons building in The Square to erect brick party walls between each building of sufficient thickness to prevent a large conflagration’. It was also stressed to the council that all fireplugs be properly cleaned and clearly marked. Insurance companies threatened that unless something was done to ‘check the continuance of fires’, measures would be taken by the companies that would prove ‘detrimental to the mercantile community of Palmerston North’.<sup>29</sup> The first purpose-built theatre in Palmerston North, His Majesty’s, made considerable concessions to fire safety.

As movie-going became mainstream entertainment, the second decade of the twentieth century saw a significant increase in purpose-built cinemas to cope with

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<sup>26</sup> David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World*, London: Reakton Books, 2003, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> A.G.S Bradfield, *Forgotten Days*, Levin: Kerslake, Billens and Humphrey, 1956, p.50.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp.52-3.

increased attendances. Picture theatres were seen as an indicator of a modern progressive city and Palmerston North's theatres were among a list of modern technologies, including road, rail and air travel, lighting and the radio, cited in the town's Fiftieth Jubilee Anniversary publication in 1937 that spoke of the 'enormous advantages' the current residents of Manawatu had compared with their predecessors.<sup>30</sup> Not only were theatres a sign of a successful town or city, they were important symbolic buildings. While European townspeople looked to their cathedral, hotel or railway station as the definitive building that inspired their population, in New Zealand that building was the picture theatre, New Zealanders' 'cathedrals of the movies',<sup>31</sup> a term that had its origins in the United States with the advent of picture-palaces.

The second decade of the twentieth century saw some exhibitors in the United States building particularly large, grand, purpose-built theatres, intent on capitalising on the phenomenal success of the nickelodeon, which had been described as 'a mass enterprise that swept across the United States in the years 1905 to 1910'.<sup>32</sup> As movie patronage increased, so too did patrons' awareness of the theatre as an important cultural and social facility that provided both a sense of place and a collective experience for movie-goers. Grandiose theatres were built to facilitate this and to accommodate the increasing numbers of movie-goers. The first 'deluxe' purpose-built theatre in the United States, The Regent, opened in New York in 1913 with a seating capacity of 2,460. In 1914, two more theatres opened in New York: the Vitagraph and the Strand, the latter seating 3,000 and covering two floors. These theatres, which were often called picture- or dream-palaces, spread throughout America and were notable because of their elaborate frontages and lobbies, plush carpets and surrounds, ornamental plaster relief work, and rich furnishings which all contributed to the

<sup>30</sup> Billens, Robert H and H. Leslie Verry, *From Swamp to City: Diamond Jubilee Celebration, Palmerston North*, Palmerston North, K and B Print, 1937, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Wayne Brittenden, *Celluloid Circus: The Heyday of the New Zealand Picture Theatre*, Auckland: Random House, 2008, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Exhibition in America*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1992, p. 29.

upgraded image of the movie theatre. Movie palaces boasted palatial décors that ranged from the classical to the exotic. Ramsaye declared that the ‘difference between the typical nickelodeon of a decade and a half ago and the modern motion picture theatre is approximately the difference between a hot dog stand and the Ritz-Carlton.<sup>33</sup> Contemporary interior decorator, Harold Rambusch, declared in 1929 that ‘theatres are social safety valves in that the [general] public can partake of the same luxuries as the rich’.<sup>34</sup> Gomery provided a useful criteria for determining what constitutes a picture palace: a theatre built specifically for showing movies that had seating for over 1,500, a fan-shaped auditorium, quantities of non-functional decoration, massive lighting, and often a stage show.<sup>35</sup>

Waller claims that while the picture-palace was a prominent aspect of the motion picture industry’s self-promotion and as ‘evocative as it is now as a nostalgic icon [and] architectural marvel’ it was certainly not the only style of theatre in existence throughout this period. Robert Sklar comments that in the United States in the late 1930s, nearly forty per cent of all theatres were in towns with a population of less than 2,500, with the theatre having seating capacity that was less than the national average.<sup>36</sup> These towns would not have had the numbers of movie-going clientele to have supported a large, costly picture-palace.

Purpose-built theatres were also quick to develop in the United Kingdom, although there is some uncertainty as to where the first movie-specific theatre was built, with one author stating ‘in those days it was quite possible for one corner of this small country to not know what another corner was doing’.<sup>37</sup> Dennis Sharp believed it to be

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<sup>33</sup> Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture*, London: Frank Cass, 1926, p. 620.

<sup>34</sup> John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, New York: McGraw Inc., 1994, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Exhibition in America*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1992, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Sklar, ‘Introduction’ in Michael Putnam, *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theatre*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2000, pp. 7-8.

<sup>37</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, p. 16.

Central Hall, Colne, Lancashire, (1907),<sup>38</sup> while David Atwell argued it was the Haven in Stourport, (1904).<sup>39</sup> Wherever the first theatre was built, the early permanent British theatres were ‘small, neat, unpretentious … plain rectangular boxes’.<sup>40</sup>

The First World War had a significant impact on theatre development in the United Kingdom, according to Field, who reported that ‘luxury building’ was no longer permitted and a ‘Futurist Cinema in Birmingham … which was to be the eighth wonder of the world, had to languish half-finished until 1919.’<sup>41</sup> This indicates that, but for the war, the picture-palace would have developed as quickly in the United Kingdom, as it did in the United States. While there may have been a moratorium on the building of ‘luxury’ theatres, cinema developers adapted existing buildings to their cinematic needs until the deprivations of wartime were over. The British were ‘going to the pictures in greater numbers than ever before’ and with annual attendance ‘greatly overtow[ing] the billion mark’<sup>42</sup> in 1916, exhibition had to keep pace with demand.

Freed from the restrictions of the First World War, the 1920s saw the beginning of the ‘great age of cinema-building in the United Kingdom’.<sup>43</sup> Mimicking the style of the new theatres in the United States, British cinemas became lavish and ornately decorated, ‘their décor and accoutrements – glittering chandeliers – providing a real-life extension of the dream world of the screen.’<sup>44</sup> Just like their American counterparts, British theatres in the 1920s and 1930s were based on a myriad of international themes such as the Chinese pagoda seen at the Palace in Southall, the Egyptian temple seen in the Pyramid at Sale, the Jacobean manor-house at the Beaufort in Meriden, the Italian palazzo in the Regent Street Plaza in London and the Spanish hacienda in Ealing, ‘fit

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<sup>38</sup> Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace and other Buildings for the Movies*, London: H. Evelyn, 1969, p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> David Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies*, London: Architectural Press, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, pp. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

settings in which to watch Garbo romancing, Doug Fairbanks swashbuckling or Valentino sheikning [sic].'<sup>45</sup> As Sharp commented, while the picture-palaces were partly about size, ‘the “super” cinema was a direct result of the attempt of exhibitors and designers to provide the cinema-goer with greater “illusion”, elegance and comfort in their buildings.’<sup>46</sup>

In Palmerston North, the first theatre built primarily to show films, His Majesty’s, was leased by well-known theatre proprietors, John Fuller and Sons, of Wellington. The Fullers were ‘associated with what is best in the theatrical world’<sup>47</sup> and their arrival in Palmerston North would have been viewed by both those in the business, and local residents, as a significant endorsement of the movie theatre business. Their new theatre opened on 6 February 1911 and was situated in George Street; an ‘immense building ... licensed to seat 1750 ... and beautifully finished throughout’. Its floor size of one hundred and thirty feet long by seventy feet wide was the ‘largest in the Dominion’ and the nine fire escapes were ‘unrivalled in the Dominion’. While it included a fire and sound-proof projection room, it was not just built for the ease of projectionists and to minimise fire-hazards, as patron comfort had become a focus too. The builders of His Majesty’s were determined to contradict Elliot’s description of the typical theatre built throughout New Zealand in this period; ‘unremarkable buildings which placed a heavy emphasis on the cinema’s ability to withstand fire, to provide ventilation and a degree of comfort’.<sup>48</sup> His Majesty’s theatre included well-appointed dressing and attendants’ rooms, a manager’s office, the engine, electrical plant, and lighting room, tea and dining room, and a confectionary shop along with a veranda and a prominent portico over the main entrance way, with the exterior of the theatre enhanced by twelve concrete and timber buttresses.<sup>49</sup> The following figure, showing

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<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace and other Buildings for the Movies*, London: H. Evelyn, 1969, p. 104.

<sup>47</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 31 December 1910, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Nerida Jeanie Elliot, ‘Anzac, Hollywood and Home: 1909-1939’, MA Thesis, Auckland: University of Auckland, 1989, p. 55.

<sup>49</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 31 December 1910, p. 5.

the rear and east side of the theatre, shows how large it was, relative to the buildings surrounding it.



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Figure 2.2 His Majesty's Theatre (centre of photograph), c. 1937.

Rather than being delayed by the First World War, as in Britain, the construction of theatres primarily to show films was a feature of wartime in Palmerston North. Everybody's Theatre in Coleman Place, just around the corner from His Majesty's, opened on 6 September 1915. Also opening in 1915, and situated a few paces from His Majesty's and Everybody's, was the Palace Theatre, built on the former Manawatu Stables site. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 illustrate the changing times of this period, as the stables, indicative of one era, are replaced with a movie theatre, a significant symbol of the new century. This was not just happening in Palmerston North. Kathryn Fuller noted that in the town of Amherst in Massachusetts, America, movies were so popular that local exhibitors dug out a sloping floor in an old horse stable to create a second theatre.<sup>51</sup>

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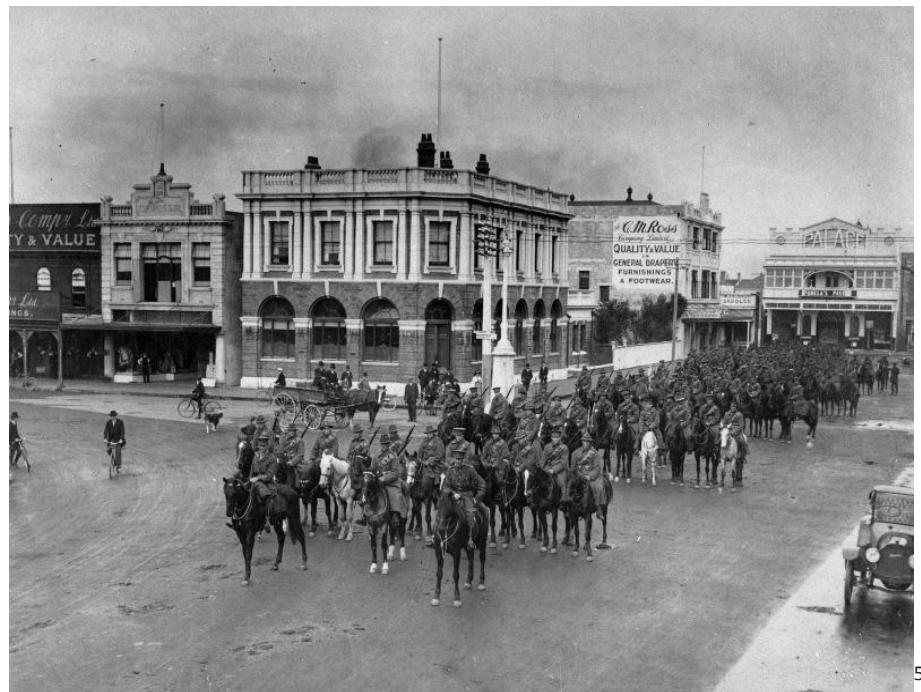
<sup>50</sup> Palmerston North City Library Photograph Collection, His Majesty's Theatre, ST 108.

<sup>51</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1996, p. 43.



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Figure 2.3 The Manawatu Stables (right hand side of photograph) on George Street, c 1912.



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Figure 2.4 Palace Theatre (right hand side of photograph) c. 1915

<sup>52</sup> Photograph 2007N\_ST10\_STR\_0036 from <http://digitallibrary.palmerstonnorth.com> retrieved 7 July 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Photograph 2007N\_A20\_WAR\_0003 from <http://digitallibrary.palmerstonnorth.com> retrieved 7 July 2011.

Yet another theatre, the Kosy, opened in 1915, owned and operated by local business Palmerston Pictures' Limited and situated on the eastern side of the Square. In his role as a projectionist for the Kosy Theatre, Ted Coubray recalled there was always the chance of fire, as you had to manually turn the handle of the projector for long periods of time, and mistakes could easily be made, particularly when fatigue set in. He believed part of the skill of being a projectionist was 'attention to your job ... and knowing how to focus'.<sup>54</sup> One of the key features of the first purpose-built movie theatres was to include a fireproof projection room that allowed both more room for the projectionist and if a fire did break out, it was contained within the projection room.

Palmerston North's only cinema grand enough to be called a picture-palace was the Regent, built by J.C. Williamson Limited and opened in 1930, almost two decades after the first picture-palaces of the United States and the United Kingdom. J.C. Williamson Limited, an Australian company, had expanded its operations to New Zealand in 1925 and began constructing a chain of cinemas, building eight theatres in total; four in the main centres, with the other four in Invercargill, Masterton, Wanganui, and Palmerston North. These, and Williamson's movie theatres in Australia, traded under the name Regent Theatre. The Palmerston North Regent was the first of Williamson's cinemas built outside New Zealand's four main cities, and the confidence in its success was reflected in its ornate and costly interior, a trend that followed the elaborate fit outs of theatres in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The Regent was designed by Melbourne architect, Charles Hollinshed, who also designed the Regent Theatres in Fitzroy in 1928, Brisbane in 1929, and Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne in 1933. The Regent theatres in Australia were specifically modeled on theatre architecture from the United States, particularly that of the 'great

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<sup>54</sup> Ted Coubray, 'Mouth Wide Open', New Zealand Film Archive, Oral Tape, 0472a, 1995.

'white way', New York's Broadway. The Melbourne Regent was based on the New York Capitol theatre which at the time of its building in 1919 was the largest and grandest theatre in the world. Given that Palmerston North's Regent was 'faithfully reproduced' from its Australian counterparts,<sup>55</sup> it had direct links to picture-palaces in the United States.

The Regent was designed as a dual-purpose facility for cinema and live theatre, and Hollinshed characterised the interior as a modern adaptation of a 'fifteenth century Florentine manor house'.<sup>56</sup> The same combination of Classical Roman and French Renaissance found in the Palmerston North Regent was used in its counterparts in both New Zealand and Australia, and the painted ceiling, which is in fact dyed, appeared in the Regent in Melbourne.<sup>57</sup> The following figures illustrate the replicated architecture and interior design by Charles Hollinshed in the Brisbane Regent and its counterpart in Palmerston North.



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Figure 2.5 The Regent Theatre in Brisbane, c 1955.

<sup>55</sup> Ian Hanson, *The Regent Theatre: Melbourne's Cathedral to the Motion Picture*, Carlton, Victoria: The Cinema and Theatre Historical Society Victoria Inc., 1993, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> [http://www.regent.co.nz/about\\_history.php](http://www.regent.co.nz/about_history.php) retrieved 14 August 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Regent Action Group, *Submission to the Palmerston North City Council on the Regent Theatre Broadway, Palmerston North*, Palmerston North, N.Z: Regent Action Group, 1991, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Photograph from Wikimedia Commons, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Hoyts\\_Regent\\_Theatre\\_ca1955.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Hoyts_Regent_Theatre_ca1955.jpg) retrieved 4 August 2011.



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Figure 2.6 The Regent Theatre, Palmerston North.

The Regent was the first theatre built in Palmerston North after the introduction of the talkies at the Palace Theatre on Saturday 17 August 1929, and Palmerston North capitalised on the talkie sensation by continuing to build theatres throughout the 1930s. This followed the trend in Britain, where interest in building new theatres has been described as 'frenetic' during this period, despite warnings that cinema patronage was risky given the Depression and high unemployment.<sup>60</sup> In stark contrast to Palmerston North, the rest of New Zealand and Britain, the United States were closing theatres because of the Depression: in 1933 one third of American theatres closed down.<sup>61</sup> Gomery claims there were relatively few large theatres (those seating two thousand or more) in the United States after the Depression. Movie palaces were found only in higher-income, outlying shopping districts or in the centre of the largest cities.<sup>62</sup> This almost certainly reflected the much deeper impact of the Depression on the United States than on the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

A smaller theatre than the Regent, but still grand in its own way, was the State, which opened in Broadway Avenue on 20 December in 1933. Its premiere included toasting and celebration in honour of what was deemed 'one of the most up-to-date theatres in

<sup>59</sup> Photograph from [http://www.regent.co.nz/about\\_history.php](http://www.regent.co.nz/about_history.php) retrieved 29 November 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema*, London: Gentry Books, 1974, p. 107.

<sup>61</sup> David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973, p. 179.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Exhibition in America*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin , 1992, p. 59.

the Dominion', boasting the very latest film production sound system. The full patronage given to the event, with patrons in full evening dress, was seen as a practical endorsement of the public's good will toward Amalgamated Theatres (New Zealand) Limited, who owned the new theatre. Reconstruction of the building, which had once been a garage, was seen as an indication of the 'steady progress' Palmerston North was making in the difficult financial times of the Depression. The owners of the new theatre emphasised their commitment to Palmerston North, stating they had come to the town to take a 'full part in the business life of the community'.<sup>63</sup> Amalgamated Theatres had the reputation of rebuilding existing properties into theatres; their Wellington theatre, which also opened in 1933, was similarly an ex-garage.<sup>64</sup> Amalgamated's favourite theatre name was 'State', which has been suggested as having a 'more republican frame of mind' than the names which the Kerridge-Odeon circuit disproportionately favoured: Regent, Majestic, Kings, His Majesty's, Princess, Victoria, Royal, Palace, and St James.<sup>65</sup>

Renovations and new buildings continued in Palmerston North, with the Mayfair, previously the Palace Theatre, opening in 1936 in George Street, seating 990 patrons. Shortly after, a new theatre, the Meteor, opened on the eastern side of the Square, in 1937, owned by local businessman Maurice Millar of Millar and Giorgi. At the time of its building, it was claimed the new theatre would be 'modern in every way', including the latest in air-conditioning in summer and heating in winter. The seating was 'of the maximum in size complying with comfort' with the 'space between the rows such as to preclude any undue inconvenience to patrons'. The comfort of patrons was not the only feature of the new theatre; the latest equipment was to be installed, eliminating all ground noises and reproducing sound without distortion. The interior was to be

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<sup>63</sup> *The Manawatu Evening Standard*, December 21, 1933, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Tony Froude, *Where To Go On Saturday Night: Wellington Cinemas and Movie Halls 1896-2000*, Wellington: Tony Froude, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Wayne Brittenden, *The Celluloid Circus: The Heyday of the New Zealand Picture Theatre*, Auckland: Random House, 2008, p. 99.

modeled on ‘the latest scientific lines to give the best of hearing’.<sup>66</sup> In remembering the Meteor, Val Page said it was a ‘new concept in cinema’; it was ‘compact, warm and featured a display of neon lighting which made it unique in New Zealand cinema history’. People would come from far and wide to enjoy the ‘colourful and intricate light changes’ but unfortunately these were short-lived as the war brought blackouts and power savings so the ‘big switch was pulled and the neons were never lit again’.<sup>67</sup> Neon lighting was commonplace, however, in the United Kingdom and the United States. The Meteor enjoyed almost three decades of business until it closed in 1964, a casualty of declining numbers due to the popularity of television and the change in leisure pursuits the increased wealth of the 1960s brought.

The following two photographs show the similarity in style between the Meteor of Palmerston North and a typical American theatre of the period, the Wake Theatre in Raleigh, North Carolina. Both display the distinctive Art Deco style, with their tall, streamlined buildings, which is a distinctive change from the square or rectangular look of earlier theatres. Maggie Valentine called this new trend the ‘Streamline Moderne’: gone was the flashy look of the picture-palaces and instead the focus during this era was on function rather than fantasy. By the 1930s, ‘the idea of architecture as an escape was redirected into architecture that did not distract from the escape of the movie.’<sup>68</sup> In describing the British Odeon theatres of the 1930s, Richards claims the ‘streamlined curves, clean lines, fin towers, cream faience tiling, Art Deco embellishments and night-time floodlighting became so distinctive a feature of the decade and so much a part of people’s lives that the concepts of the “The Thirties” and “The Odeon” are almost inseparable.’<sup>69</sup> Clearly this style was not unique to the new Palmerston North Meteor.

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<sup>66</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 12, 1937, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, May 1, 1990, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee*, New Haven: Yale University, 1994, p. 95.

<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London; Routledge, 1984, p. 21.

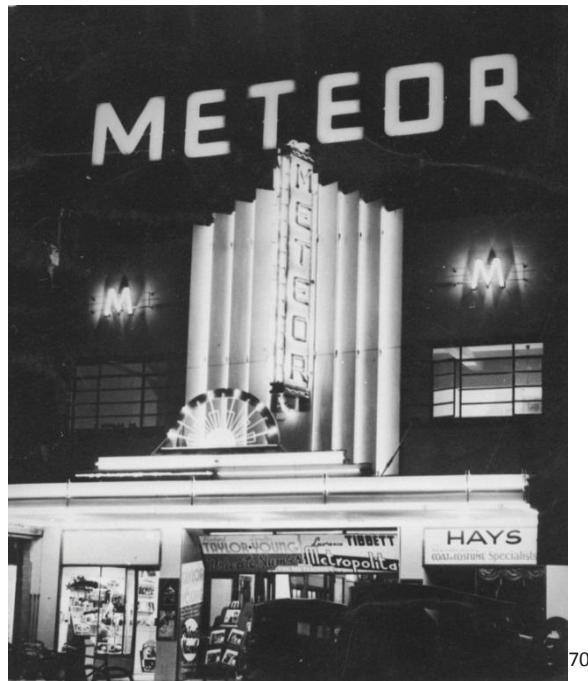


Figure 2.7 The Meteor, Palmerston North, c 1937.



Figure 2.8 The Wake, Raleigh, North Carolina, c 1940.

<sup>70</sup> Photograph 2009N\_Bc216\_BUI\_2443 from <http://digitallibrary.palmerstonnorth.com> retrieved 30 June 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Photograph from <http://www.raleighcitymuseum.org/images.shtml> retrieved 30 September 2011.

The building of the palatial Regent had an impact on the De Luxe Theatre (previously His Majesty's from 1911-1916, and the Paramount Theatre from 1924-1926), which closed when the Regent opened, showing its last film in December 1930.<sup>72</sup> The facility's decades of operating as an entertainment centre met a rather ignominious end when it was demolished in 1984 to make way for a car park, ironically meeting the needs of the next generation's primary form of recreation, shopping.<sup>73</sup> What had been the twentieth century's 'distinctive contribution to building types, just as the railway station was the nineteenth century's' was facing demolition or conversion.<sup>74</sup>

By 1945, Palmerston North had five theatres in operation as outlined in Table 2.1. The State was run by Amalgamated; The Regent, Vogue and the Mayfair were part of the J.C. Williamson Ltd. Company; and the Meteor was owned and operated by local businessmen.

Table 2.1 Palmerston North Theatres Operating In Sample Years

1919	1929	1933	1942	1945
	De Luxe			
Kosy	Kosy	Kosy		Vogue*
Palace	Palace	Palace	Mayfair**	Mayfair
Everybody's				
		Regent	Regent	Regent
		State (Dec)	State	State
			Meteor	Meteor

\*The Kosy was rebuilt as the Vogue in 1943

\*\*The Palace was gutted by fire in February 1935 and was rebuilt as the Mayfair, opening in July 1936

<sup>72</sup> The De Luxe reopened as a skating rink and then as the ANA (Army, Navy and Air Force) recreation centre, before becoming the Ballroom Astoria.

<sup>73</sup> Demolition of theatres in the 1980s was an international trend as old theatres made way for shopping malls, parking spaces, parks, or even left as empty sections. Michael Putnam (*Silent Screens: the Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theatre*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000, pp. 42-62) listed seven hundred and fifty six demolished theatres in his 1980s tour of American theatres, stating he had no trouble finding closed theatres as they were everywhere. Double that number were converted into buildings providing services required to meet the needs of contemporary society; office buildings, malls, churches, banks, day care centres, novelty stores, beauty salons and more. What had been the twentieth century's 'distinctive contribution to building types, just as the railway station was the nineteenth century's' was facing demolition or conversion.

<sup>74</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London; Routledge, 1984, p. 18.

The number of movie theatres operating in Palmerston North in 1945 reflected the public's demand for movies, as the mid-1940s saw movie attendance in Palmerston North, the United Kingdom and the United States, reach levels that would never be repeated.

The addition of sound to films transformed the movie-going experience internationally. Palmerston North's first talking picture show screened at the Palace Theatre on Saturday 17 August 1929. It took less than a week to refit and refurbish the theatre to accommodate the new technology and the theatre reopened with 'increased attractiveness', including 'vestibule stairways, stage and orchestral well resplendent in their new attire'. The operating box was completely transformed and 'two big new machines for picture projection and sound production', Western Electric equipment, were the 'most up-to-date installation in the Dominion'.<sup>75</sup> The local Member of Parliament, John Nash, spoke to a full house at the opening ceremony, formally welcoming the talkies to Palmerston North. He noted the directors of the theatre had gone to considerable expense to bring the talking pictures to the 'second inland city in the Dominion to have the talkies installed', but he was sure the results would outweigh their costs. The ledgers of Palmerston Pictures Limited indicate the cost of installing the talkies at the Palace was two thousand and fifty eight pounds.<sup>76</sup> The opening feature film, *On Trial* (1928), 'fulfilling a long-felt want',<sup>77</sup> ran for six nights and three matinees and was a sell-out at each session.

A study of cinema in Nottingham, United Kingdom, found that while sixty-five cinemas in Britain had installed the Western Electric sound equipment by June 1929, Nottingham did not have the equipment installed until 13 August,<sup>78</sup> only days before Palmerston North residents were enjoying talking pictures. Kemball Theatres,

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<sup>75</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, August 19, 1929, p.3.

<sup>76</sup> Financial Ledger: Palmerston North Pictures Limited (MA 1673), National Film Archives, Wellington.

<sup>77</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, August 20, 1929, p.3.

<sup>78</sup> Jancovich, Mark and Lucy Faire with Sarah Stubbings, *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption*, London: British Film Institute, 2003, p. 94.

managers of the Palace, were clearly as up-to-date in managing their theatres, and providing what their patrons wanted, as the biggest cities in the United Kingdom were. The equipment had to be ordered from Western Electric Company (NZ) Limited, who purchased it from the United States and hired it out to exhibitors in New Zealand, so foresight and planning was required. The equipment arrived in New Zealand in pieces and was assembled and installed in the respective theatres. Palmerston North theatres were truly competing and competitive in an international enterprise.

By 1929 three-quarters of the feature films made in Hollywood included some sound and ‘practically every sizeable cinema in the United States had installed sound equipment’.<sup>79</sup> Improved sound technology was a marketable feature that exhibitors used to encourage increased patronage. Palmerston North’s Mayfair Theatre, which opened in 1936, boasted ‘sound equipment of the latest type available’, from the United States.<sup>80</sup> When the Meteor was built in 1937, superior sound was to be a highlight of the new building. The Meteor’s manager, Sydney Tombs, a veteran of thirty-five years in the theatre business, reported that

faithful reproduction of sound to all parts of the theatre is to be given special consideration ... the latest “wide-range” equipment is to be installed, which entirely eliminates all ground noises and reproduces sound without distortion both in the higher and lower tones. The interior is to be modeled on the latest scientific lines to give the best of hearing, and no draperies of any kind will be employed.<sup>81</sup>

The men who owned or managed New Zealand’s early movie theatres all had theatrical backgrounds and had been exposed to a variety of international experiences. The head of the Williamson family, James Cassius Williamson, was an American actor who later became one of Australia’s foremost theatrical managers. The Fuller family came from

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<sup>79</sup> David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973, pp. 162-3.

<sup>80</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 20 April 1935, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 12 February 1937, p. 7.

a theatre background in England. Henry Hayward, also from England, served his showman apprenticeship touring Scotland and England before coming to New Zealand. It is only natural that these international men would bring international styles and influences with them. New Zealand theatres were therefore exposed to Australian, British, American and European influences, with the result being theatres that often took the form of a combination of architectural influences. Sydney's State Theatre, built in the 1920s, was described as a mix of the 'Tudor booking hall, Florentine bronze doors, Renaissance marble stairs, Bohemian glass electroliers, Georgian toilets, Japanese garden, Victorian red plush – embraced within an overall rococo effect'.<sup>82</sup> To a lesser, but still significant, degree, Palmerston North theatre builders and refurbishers embraced a 'pick-and-mix' style of architecture and design that is more eloquently described as interpreting 'local adaptations of cosmopolitan possibilities which coursed ceaselessly through the networks of western and imperial communications, carried by magazines, travellers and immigrants, nurtured by the craving for profit by international capital'.<sup>83</sup>

From the first public screening of the 'flickers' at the turn of the twentieth century, through to the end of the Second World War, Palmerston North's cinematic history was characterised by increasing competition between operators and a rapidly changing environment as old theatres were refurbished and new theatres built. Palmerston North's first theatres, like the first theatres emerging around the world, were not architecturally distinctive. They were practical buildings built to facilitate moving picture screenings, with an emphasis on basic health and safety, with a modicum of comfort. His Majesty's may have boasted the largest single floor in the Dominion along with 'unrivalled' fire escapes, the Regent may have extolled its distinctive painted mural above the proscenium arch, and the Meteor's interior may have been modeled

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<sup>82</sup> Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Halls and Picture Palaces: Sydney's Romance with Modernity*, Sydney: Currency Press, 2005, p. 59.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-8.

on the ‘latest scientific lines’. However, such designs were not original and were directly influenced by international styles.

The varied influences on the design of Palmerston North theatres supports Byrne’s ‘transnational’ approach to historiography which looks to ‘make connections between people and places’.<sup>84</sup> Given that the movie business was, from the perspective of the men running it, first and foremost an exercise in making money, any refurbishments and building of new theatres were always based on a perceived return on investment, or ‘nurtured by the craving for profit by international capital’. This reflects Gibbons’ ‘world systems’ theory where he argues it is through trade that people meet, whether actually or vicariously, and ‘within and between and through these contacts, ideas, values and attitudes are exchanged and adjusted along with the goods’.<sup>85</sup> This perfectly reflects the changing styles and influences in the development of picture theatres in Palmerston North, in this time of ‘optimism and emergency’.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Giselle Byrnes (ed.), *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University, 2009, p. 14.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Gibbons, ‘The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History’, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37:1, 2003, p. 41.

<sup>86</sup> Tony Kellaway, ‘I remember when it was a picture theatre’, *New Zealand Journal of Architecture*, 4, 1984, pp. 30-4, p. 34.

## Chapter Three: Cinema Control and Film Distribution

*I have found it impossible to travel any great historical distance without eventually returning to Hollywood.<sup>1</sup>*

The pattern of control over film distribution and ownership of cinemas in New Zealand, including Palmerston North, was quite similar to that in the United States and the United Kingdom. After an initial period in which exhibitors obtained films from wherever they could, a system developed in which distributors effectively leased films to cinemas. Similarly, in all three countries, much of the ownership of cinemas became concentrated in chains, although some continued to be independently run. New Zealand followed the United Kingdom in imposing a ‘British quota’ on the wholesaling and exhibiting of films, although in both countries problems with obtaining quality material from the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth meant that film-watching in Palmerston North, as in the United Kingdom, continued to be dominated by American productions.

During the early years of cinema in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, anyone could set themselves up in the movie exhibition business. Films were easily purchased, a projector easily transported and a hall or any facility to set up a makeshift theatre easily obtained. However, the extraordinary popularity of films meant competition amongst exhibitors became fierce and the national cinema circuit in New Zealand, as in the United States and the United Kingdom, soon became centralised as individuals and companies sought domination and control. In the United States and the United Kingdom there were three central facets of the movie business:

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color*, Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 3.

production, distribution, and exhibition. In New Zealand there were essentially two,<sup>2</sup> as the

wholesale importation of American film ... has simply made the production of feature-length films in New Zealand commercially unviable. The polish of the best American production, combined with innate cynicism of native artistic achievement, has further induced a somewhat condescending and depreciating view of local production.<sup>3</sup>

In the early years of New Zealand cinema, the circuit was dominated by two companies, Hayward Picture Enterprises Limited, and Fullers' Limited. Henry Hayward, from Britain, came from a theatrical background and with his six siblings had been 'cradled in music from babyhood'.<sup>4</sup> Hayward had been a part of the travelling show, The Brescians, who for fifteen years 'were a household word in entertainment in hundreds of cities and towns throughout Britain'.<sup>5</sup> Hayward, with his family, moved to Australia and then on to New Zealand. They toured with The Brescians, and with Hayward's friend Thomas James (T.J) West, who exhibited moving pictures, and performed in Palmerston North for a week from the end of July 1905. The moving pictures were advertised as coming 'direct from Great Britain to New Zealand', with the performers, 'the finest in the world ... from the Royal Albert Hall, London'. Overall, the show was billed as 'all that is beautiful in art and music, and all that is novel and new in Science'.<sup>6</sup> They toured Australasia and booked the larger cities for a number of weeks, at a time when shows generally stayed only a few days at each venue. This paid

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<sup>2</sup> New Zealand did produce feature films but in very small numbers. George Tarr produced the first New Zealand feature film, *Hinemoa*, in 1914 on a budget of fifty pounds, in eight days. Rudall Hayward, New Zealand's foremost film pioneer, began his career in the early 1920s making short films. See Ian Conrich and Sarah Davy, *Views from the Edge of the World: New Zealand Film*, London: Kakapo Books, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> P. A. Harrison, 'The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930, PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, p. iv.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Hayward, *Here's To Life! The Impressions, Confessions and Garnered Thoughts of a Free-Minded Showman*, Auckland: Wright & Jaques Ltd, 1944, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Manawatu Standard*, 22 July 1905, p. 1.

off for the company, as the tour was a big success, netting thirteen thousand pounds for the New Zealand leg, and a further twenty two thousand from Australia.<sup>7</sup>

By 1908, West and Hayward realised movies were a viable business proposition and they became involved in the burgeoning business; Hayward stayed in New Zealand while West moved to Australia. They continued their partnership through the joint purchase of film and in 1910 formed Hayward's Picture Enterprises Limited. By 1912 the company had established a national circuit of thirty theatres or halls throughout New Zealand, including Palmerston North, where they were operating out of the Zealandia Hall, which was leased from the Catholic Church. Hayward's strategy was to lease halls from local companies and to cover the cost of fit out, furnishings and projection.<sup>8</sup>

The Fullers, also from Britain, were a family business comprising of Benjamin (Ben) Fuller and John Fuller, Junior, theatrical entrepreneurs, who were sons of John Fuller, compositor and later theatrical entrepreneur. They too briefly settled in Australia, before moving on to Auckland in 1894. John Fuller, Senior, started waxworks displays and lantern shows, interspersed with vaudeville, with Ben and John Junior assisting him. They built up their vaudeville circuit, and began to buy the theatres in which to present their show. The Fuller family went into the moving picture business in New Zealand in 1907, while continuing their vaudeville circuit, and in 1910, they built the first purpose-built movie theatre in Auckland, the King's. In 1914, Ben and John became joint governing directors of John Fuller and Sons Limited.<sup>9</sup>

Both the Hayward and Fuller families came from a background of vaudeville and this paralleled the development of the movie industry in Europe and the United States.

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Hayward, *Here's To Life! The Impressions, Confessions and Garnered Thoughts of a Free-Minded Showman*, Auckland: Wright & Jaques Ltd, 1944, pp. 83-6.

<sup>8</sup> P. A. Harrison, 'The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930, PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Rutledge, 'Fuller, Sir Benjamin John (Ben)(1875-1952)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fuller-sir-benjamin-john-ben-6245/text/10771> retrieved 29 July 2011.

The movie business metamorphosed naturally from the variety shows and showmen that were their predecessors. Rhode claims the ‘gold rush to invent the cinema’ came from ‘the tricksters, the fast talkers, the cranks, [and] the defeated’, with the cinema, in its early years, ‘hover[ing] between life and death in the nether world of the fairground, the second-class music hall, the beer garden, the penny arcades and the church social.’<sup>10</sup> Edgar Morin wrote that the early years of cinema went through an ‘extraordinary metamorphosis … for it was not the artists or educated men who brought about this transformation but rag merchants, autodidacts, conjurors and clowns.’<sup>11</sup> Georges Méliès one of the very earliest film producers, was also a theatre owner, scene designer, conjuror, and cartoonist’,<sup>12</sup> and according to Gaudreault, should be regarded as a man of the theatre and a magician, not a cineaste.<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1926, Terry Ramsaye declared that the moguls of the cinema industry, what he called the ‘screen chieftains’, were the ‘industry’s own elections from the store show and arcade exhibitors’ of the early era.<sup>14</sup> Frank Howard, credited with introducing motion pictures to New England in the United States, was a shooting-gallery owner.<sup>15</sup>

From an early stage, competition between exhibitors was strong, especially in the acquisition of films. Before film exchanges were developed, exhibitors purchased their own films, usually by mail order, with the prices in the United States ranging from ten to twenty-five cents a foot.<sup>16</sup> Once bought, the films were not returnable or refundable, and if the film was properly maintained, it could be projected at least 300 times.<sup>17</sup> Every time exhibitors wished to change their programme, a new film had to be purchased, and this resulted in their accumulation of large collections of old film reels. In New Zealand, as in the United States and Britain, exhibitors were their own

<sup>10</sup> Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema: From its Origins to 1970*, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar Morin, *Le Cinema ou l'homme imaginaire*, Paris, 1958, p. 43, cited in Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema: From its Origins to 1970*, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema: From its Origins to 1970*, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Andre Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema*, Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 2011, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Terry Ramsaye, *A Thousand and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture*, London: Frank Cass, 1926, p. 823.

<sup>15</sup> Max Alvarez, ‘The origins of the film exchange’, *Film History*, 17: 4, 2005, p.431.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Jacob, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1968, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Life of a Cinematograph Film’, *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, VIII, No. 102, 1897, p. 177, cited by Max Alvarez, ‘The origins of the film exchange’, *Film History*, 17:4, 2005, p.435.

distributors in the early years of the movie business. Many exhibitors were independent of a governing body – they were small businessmen working a manageable circuit of a few towns and theatres.

As the number of films accumulated by exhibitors grew, it became logical for exchanges to be set up and these started as early as 1896 in the United States.<sup>18</sup> By 1907 between 125 and 150 exchanges were operating in that country.<sup>19</sup> Film exchanges facilitated the process of exhibitors 'exchanging' (hiring or renting) their films between each other; exhibitors no longer needed to invest in the purchase of films, and the exchanges were assured of continued profits long after the films had paid for themselves.<sup>20</sup> Exchanges accumulated large inventories of films which they rented to exhibitors at reduced rates. One exchange, Alfred L. Harstyn and Company, boasted an inventory of 100,000,000 feet of 'Slightly Used Films of all Makes', with 10,000 feet of film available for rental at three cents per foot, greatly undercutting their competitors. At the same time, Pathé Cinematograph Company (the United States subsidiary of Pathé Frères) was marketing its latest productions to buyers for twelve cents per foot.<sup>21</sup>

One of the earliest distribution operators in the United States was a 'discontented San Francisco exchange operator', W.W. Hodkinson, who came up with the idea of a national distribution company, Paramount Pictures.<sup>22</sup> The aim was to secure a supply of feature films by contracting with producers and therefore guaranteeing exhibitors a regular flow of movies. Producers liked the idea of dealing with only a small number of distributors, rather than a plethora of exhibitors, and their market had increased as exhibitors, paying less for the movies, could change their programmes more frequently. This was seen in Palmerston North in July 1919, when Paramount Pictures

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<sup>18</sup> Max Alvarez, 'The origins of the film exchange', *Film History*, 17:4, 2005, p.431.

<sup>19</sup> John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office 1895-1986*, New York: Columbia University, 1988, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> P.A. Harrison, 'The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930', PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Max Alvarez, 'The origins of the film exchange', *Film History*, 17:4, 2005, p.433.

<sup>22</sup> A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn*, New York: Knopf, 1989, p. 49

rented the Empire Hall for use as a picture theatre,<sup>23</sup> and unlike other theatres which changed their movies either once or twice a week, Paramount promised '3 Changes Weekly', with a 'strong programme' every evening.<sup>24</sup> The opening programme screened Douglas Fairbanks who, it was advertised, was 'still in the land of the living (and is not dead as reported a little while ago).'<sup>25</sup>

The process of vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition started later in the United Kingdom than it did in the United States. Before the First World War, the only British example was Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, the largest of the pre-World War One circuits, which incorporated the London Films Company. American distributors had set up offices in Britain before the War began with Vitagraph (which became Warner Brothers) in 1912, Fox in 1916, and in 1919 the Famous Lasky Film Service (subsequently Paramount).<sup>26</sup>

In 1924, eighty-four per cent of all films distributed in Britain were handled by only fourteen companies: forty-four per cent of these films came from United States. Several companies handled no British films at all. The three largest distributors (Warner Brothers, Fox and Famous Lasky) were American owned and handled thirty-three per cent of the total number of films distributed in the United Kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

An important difference between the British distributors and their American competitors was that the British did not have the strength of production the Americans had, and therefore lacked the necessary pull towards vertical integration which existed in the United States. The Americans took advantage of their strength as the largest national market in the world to secure funding from British banks; an example of this was seen when the Fox Film Corporation invested eighty million pounds in Gaumont-

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<sup>23</sup> This venture did not last long, beginning on 7 July and finishing on 9 August 1919, according to the *Manawatu Evening Standard* advertisements.

<sup>24</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 26 June 1919, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 30 June 1919, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds.), *British Cinema History*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

British, borrowed from British banks.<sup>28</sup> Thus the ‘cornerstone in the domination of the British market by the big American distributors was simply that the additional profit they drew from overseas operations gave the American film industry the surplus profits with which to attract increasing investment funds.’<sup>29</sup>

The first major British company after World War One to combine all three aspects of the film business, was the Gaumont-British Picture Company (GBPC) that was made up of the Gaumont Company, the Ideal, and the W&F Film Distribution Company and Biocolour cinemas, and was formed in March 1927, by merchant bankers, the Ostrer Brothers.<sup>30</sup> By 1929, GBPC controlled 296 theatres, which was twice as many as its rival, British International Pictures (1928), owned by Scottish businessman John Maxwell. GBPC had secured its lead position in the industry by a production agreement with Gainsborough Pictures in 1928 and by the acquisition of the Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Company, Britain’s largest cinema circuit, in 1929.<sup>31</sup>

Despite this apparent strength, Nick Roddick states that the British film industry has ‘rarely been under totally British control’.<sup>32</sup> Roddick claims that British International Pictures (John Maxwell) and the Rank Organisation (J. Arthur Rank) have, ‘after a more or less long run, failed to survive on the open cinematic market.’ In much the same way, British distribution offices are ‘little more than outposts of the Hollywood majors, not radically different in policy and organisation from similar outposts firmly planted in almost every country in the world.’<sup>33</sup>

In New Zealand, the development of the exhibition of moving pictures had strong parallels to those in the United Kingdom. New Zealand Picture Supplies Limited (NZPS) was formed through the amalgamation of Hayward’s Picture Enterprises Limited and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> Allen Eyles, *Gaumont British Cinemas*, Burgess Hill, West Sussex: Cinema Theatre Association, 1996, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Film*, London: I.B Tauris, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Martyn Auty and Nick Roddick (eds.), *British Cinema Now*, London: British Film Institute, 1985, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Fullers Limited, who had come to realise they had more to be gained from working together rather than competing. NZPS was incorporated in April 1913, and its primary aim was to import films, usually booked a year in advance, and to distribute those films throughout the Fuller-Hayward circuit. NZPS was the first of the large companies in the New Zealand film distribution business, as prior to World War One there were no American or British distribution agencies in New Zealand. At this time the United States operated a ‘closed market’ system of distribution with standing orders and contracts tying theatres to whichever film service they operated under, resulting in each producer selling about the same number of prints of each film. In contrast, the United Kingdom operated under an open market system whereby producers sold their films to renters, who then leased them out to as many exhibitors as they could, with exhibitors competing with each other to get the newest and most popular movies before their rivals did.<sup>34</sup>

The merging of Fuller and Hayward saw New Zealand Picture Supplies controlling forty-six picture theatres by 1922,<sup>35</sup> including His Majesty’s in Palmerston North. They dominated the industry, keeping competition to a minimum. Harrison claims New Zealand Picture Supplies were the nearest the New Zealand motion picture industry ever came to achieving a virtual monopoly.<sup>36</sup> They did not, however, have a ‘virtual monopoly’ for long, as there were six other distribution companies in operation by 1917: Co-operative Film Service Ltd., Dominion Pictures Ltd., Fraser Film Release and Photographic Co. Ltd., Universal Film Supply, Fox Film (Australasia), and Paramount Film Services. Three of these companies, Paramount, Fox, and Universal, represented American producers and only imported movies produced by their parent companies.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the 1920s, United Artists, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), RKO Radio Pictures and First National (who later became Warner Brothers First National) all

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<sup>34</sup> Kristen Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, London: British Film Institute, 1985, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> P.A. Harrison, ‘The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930’, PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, p. 97.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

opened outlets. Harrison claims the fate of New Zealand Picture Supplies was 'sealed' by the increase in the number of movies being produced by the United States, and that country's complete domination of the movie business during World War One.<sup>38</sup> As American companies opened their own distribution centres worldwide, the practice of buying on the open market declined. By the end of the 1920s, NZPS was forced out of the market.<sup>39</sup>

The 1930s saw significant developments in the movie business, both in New Zealand and in the United Kingdom and the United States. Making an impact on the New Zealand movie business scene was Robert Kerridge. Born in Christchurch in 1901, his first interest in the world of pictures began at age five, when his parents gave him a magic lantern and he staged shows for local children, charging a penny each. The family moved to Gisborne and it was there Kerridge saw a box office report from a Gisborne cinema suggesting there was money to be made from exhibiting films. In 1926, he started to buy theatres, with H. B. Williams, of the pioneering missionary and farming family, as his partner and adviser. Kerridge's first cinema was in Gisborne – the Palace Picture Theatre – which he renovated and renamed the Regent. He acquired a second within a year, and by the time talking pictures arrived in 1929, he was operating sixteen cinemas in neighbouring Wairoa, Opotiki, Tauranga and Whakatane. A decade later, profiting from the failure of other cinema owners during the depression, he controlled twenty-six. The fastest expansion came in the 1940s: he took over New Zealand Theatres in 1943, the Fuller-Hayward theatre chain in 1945, and the J. C. Williamson Picture Corporation in 1947. By that time, Kerridge and his Williams family associates owned or controlled 133 cinemas, the biggest exhibition chain in New Zealand or Australia. Virtually every sizeable town and city in New Zealand had at least one Kerridge cinema, with many of them bearing the name Regent. In Palmerston North, the Kerridge cinemas were the Regent Theatre, the Vogue and the Mayfair.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

In 1946, Robert Kerridge sold fifty per cent of his cinema chain to the J. Arthur Rank Organisation, just as Rank was expanding his British production company. The deal provided the renamed Kerridge Odeon circuit with a guaranteed flow of British movies, to add to agreements with American studios (including Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,) which already guaranteed their first-release films to the Kerridge chain.<sup>40</sup> J. Arthur Rank, the son of a rich industrialist, was the leading figure in the British movie industry from the 1930s, having begun by financing short religious subjects in line with his Methodist beliefs. From these humble beginnings, the most powerful British film company emerged in 1937. By the end of the 1940s, the Rank Organisation, as it became known, owned 650 United Kingdom cinemas (the Odeon, Gaumont and Paramount Chains), five major British film studio complexes, and General Film Distributors, including the United Kingdom distribution rights to Universal Pictures. It was the largest and most vertically integrated film company in Britain, owning production, distribution and exhibition facilities. The power of the Rank Organisation led to popular contemporary British actor James Mason claiming Rank to be the ‘worst thing that has happened to the British picture industry. Rank has so much money from his flour-milling business that he has been able to move in and absorb the whole industry ... he has no apparent talent for cinema or showmanship.’<sup>41</sup>

While Robert Kerridge was developing his business in New Zealand in the 1930s, American companies were also consolidating their influence in New Zealand. An arrangement was made in 1936 between Paramount Pictures in New Zealand and the J.C. Williamson circuit, to supply

Paramount’s silver jubilee product of 1936 ... to the whole of the Kemball Theatre circuit, which is closely associated with the Williamson chain, and also embraces those theatres covered by existing partnership arrangements with the Fuller-Hayward

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<sup>40</sup> L. R. Shelton, 'Kerridge, Robert James - Biography', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1 September 2010, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/4k10/1> retrieved 20 May 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Quentin Falk, *The Golden Gong: Fifty Years of the Rank Organisation, Its Films and Its Stars*, London: Columbus Books, 1987, p. 49.

Theatre Corporate, Ltd ... and will embrace thirty-nine theatres throughout the capital cities and key centres of the Dominion.<sup>42</sup>

In Palmerston North, the participant theatres were the Regent and the Kosy.

Paramount films had been shown at the De Luxe Theatre in 1924, when a page boy who worked there obtained a Paramount Date Book for that year. This publication claimed to supply 'a complete account of the new Paramount Pictures for the early months of 1924'. It not only provided a full record of upcoming movies, but included advertisements and phrases that could be used by exhibitors to advertise the movies, as well as a booking guide that allowed space for information to be recorded about the titles of the features shown, the number of reels, the costs of advertising and the movie itself, and the monies received. Referring to a common practice of the time, and one strongly disliked by exhibitors, the advertising of movies that had not yet been made (known as 'blind-booking'), Paramount stressed that the movies in the book were 'productions which are completed, in the process of making, or just about to commence. In no sense are they pictures which MIGHT be made.' The international influence of the movie business, and the central position held by the United States, was illustrated by the front cover of the book, displaying the American Paramount logo in its centre, and a map of Australia and New Zealand positioned top and bottom respectively. The book was addressed 'To the Exhibitors of Australia, New Zealand and the Far East'.<sup>43</sup>

Elliot found that the distribution of movies to the larger Auckland theatres was for a period of a week or more, with the Auckland suburbs obtaining movies for the shorter period of three days.<sup>44</sup> Palmerston North theatres followed a similar pattern, with the larger and better appointed theatres, the Regent and State, often showing films for a six-day run, and the smaller theatres having a three-day turnaround. Studies of the

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<sup>42</sup> *Evening Post*, 29 November 1935, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> *Paramount Date Book 1924*, Barrett Papers, Community Archive, Series 6, Folder 1, 1929-1938, Ian Matheson City Archives, Palmerston North.

<sup>44</sup> Nerida Jeanie Elliot, 'Anzac, Hollywood and Home: 1909-1939', MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1989, p. 111.

movies shown for the five sample years show a surprisingly uniform pattern of exhibition for all years except 1919. In that year, two theatres screened regular programmes from Monday through until Saturday, but one theatre only showed movies intermittently, usually on a Saturday. The Paramount screenings in the Empire Hall were short-lived. There were also still a large number of vaudeville shows being performed either in conjunction with, or instead of, movies, paralleling the practice in the United Kingdom, where the combining of the two entertainments continued through till the end of the 1920s. In the United States, the pairing of vaudeville with movie screenings had been disbanded much earlier.

An analysis of the movies shown in Palmerston North indicates they were anything from a few months to a few years old by the time they reached the city, mirroring the situation in the United States where ‘Under standard distribution practice, a new film took from six months to a year to wend its way from picture palace to Podunk (the prints getting more and more frayed and scratched along the route)’.<sup>45</sup>

Another factor regarding the distribution of movies was that there was very limited opportunity for managers of theatres to select the titles they wanted for their patrons. In Palmerston North, the selection of a programme was made by the manager or director of the company that owned the theatre. Mirams said ‘in discussing what films New Zealanders like or should like, it should never be forgotten that we haven’t much say in the matter’.<sup>46</sup> An article from the British magazine, *Film Weekly*, entitled ‘Give Him a Chance’, appears in the scrapbook of Luke Wilson, manager of the Kosy, Palace and Regent Theatres in Palmerston North in the 1930s. The article calls on directors and senior managers to ‘give your manager a chance ... a real chance; find out from him what his patrons like, get the pictures for him; make him feel that he has more than a “walking” interest in the firm.’ The article asks rhetorically

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Putnam, *Silent Screens: the Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theatre*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul’s Book Arcade, 1945, pp. 13-4.

How often is a film booked at head office for a circuit of theatres in which it may prove popular in some towns and the reverse in others. The man on the spot knows well enough that the particular picture wouldn't draw enough in this theatre to provide a kitten with a square meal, but because it was booked for the whole circuit he has to take it: result, 'rotten' business.

Luke Wilson noted underneath the article, 'Very TRUE'.<sup>47</sup>

British exhibitors also had little control in selecting items specifically for their clientele. A Manchester manager 'came a cropper' when *Looking on the Bright Side* (1932) was screened in a 'noted Jewish house in Yom Kipper [sic] week'.<sup>48</sup> Harper has found, however, that the management of the Regent Theatre in Portsmouth was able to exercise their 'autonomy in the selection of first features from those available to it, nuancing them for their target audience'.<sup>49</sup> They also screened 'any old tosh at Yuletide', knowing that their patrons 'would never turn out at Christmas'.<sup>50</sup> Contemporary film critic Richard Lambert wrote in 1934, that the movie industry had to resist the temptation to provide its customers with the 'line of least resistance' and offering them 'fare which is hackneyed, conventional, and retrograde', just because the 'picture houses are owned by "chains" and their programmes are therefore standardized, and determined from headquarters without reference to local tastes'.<sup>51</sup>

One impact on the distribution of movies in New Zealand came about as a result of the problems being experienced by the British movie industry; a subject that was discussed at the Imperial Conference in 1926. A paper entitled 'Exhibition within the Empire of Empire Films' was submitted, arguing that the American domination of the film market throughout the Empire was the cause for the British movie industry's problem. The report dismissed any strengths the United States had, including the 'aspects of the American national character and ethos infusing United States films with a spirit of

<sup>47</sup> Luke Wilson Scrapbook, National Film Archives, Wellington.

<sup>48</sup> Sue Harper, 'A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: admissions figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24:4, 2004, p. 569.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 567.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Rotha, Paul, Andrew Buchanan, Mary Field, R.S. Lambert, C.A. Lejeune, edited by R.S. Lambert, *For Filmgoers Only: The Intelligent Filmgoer's Guide to the Film*, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 70.

optimism, egalitarianism, and energy that was a great part of their appeal'.<sup>52</sup> The Conference called for more support of the British film industry and the British led the way with the Cinematograph Act of 1927, which came into force on 1 April 1928 for distributors and 1 October 1928 for exhibitors. It stipulated that a certain per cent of films shown in Britain should be British. The pressure for this came from the Federation of British Industries; neither the film distributors nor exhibitors wanted legislative change that might threaten the profits they made from showing American movies. The film producers themselves were too weak to be politically effective. Also against the legislation was the British Labour Party, which saw the cinema as the primary form of working-class entertainment and suspected the Conservative government of wanting to replace 'popular and classless Hollywood films with British films saturated with class snobbery and Tory values'.<sup>53</sup> At the time, only twelve British films were being made, or were in the production pipeline. From the twelve months from 1 August 1925 to 31 July 1926, seven hundred and sixty one movies were shown in Britain; six hundred and sixty four (eight-seven per cent) were from America and twenty-eight (four per cent) were British.<sup>54</sup> Trade figures for New Zealand for the corresponding period indicate New Zealanders watched a similar, although slightly higher, percentage of British films, as seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Cinematograph, Bioscope, and Kinetoscope Film Imports to New Zealand<sup>55</sup>

	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929
Country of Origin	%	%	%	%	%
United Kingdom	4.6	7.1	6.2	7.6	10
United States	92.5	88.9	91	88.5	86.5
Australia	1.5	2.2	1.5	1.7	1.9
Other	1.4	1.8	1.3	2.2	1.6

<sup>52</sup> Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992, p. 59.

<sup>53</sup> Vincent Porter, *On Cinema*, London: Pluto Press, 1985, p. 77.

<sup>54</sup> Kerry Segrave, *American Films Abroad: Hollywood's Domination of the World's Movie Screens from the 1890s to the Present*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1997, p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> *New Zealand Statistical Report on Trade and Shipping in the Dominion of New Zealand 1927 Part 1*, Wellington: Government Printer, 1928 , p.456 and *New Zealand Statistical Report on Trade and Shipping in the Dominion of New Zealand 1928 Part 1*, Wellington: Government Printer, 1929, p. 280.

From 1929, there was a noticeable increase in movies from the United Kingdom entering the country, perhaps as a result of the quota system and the pro-British stance being taken by the Government and some distributors. This is reflected in the movies shown in Palmerston North, as seen in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Percentage of Feature Films Exhibited in Palmerston North According to Country of Production<sup>56</sup>

	<b>UK</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>Aust</b>	<b>Other</b>
1919	3	95	1.5	1.5
1929	15	80	.5	4.5
1933	18	80	1.5	.5
1942	13	86	1	
1945	12	87.5	.5	

The British exhibitors' quota was scheduled to rise from five per cent in 1929 to twenty per cent for the period 1936-1939, with the renters' quota to rise from seven and a half per cent to twenty per cent in the same period. Quotas to encourage the production of British movie making favoured quantity over quality, leading to a large output of what were nicknamed 'quota-quickies': low-cost, poor-quality films commissioned purely to satisfy the quota requirements. These were almost universally maligned, described by British commentators as 'a truly awful flood of cinematic rubbish',<sup>57</sup> and 'shoddy, tawdry things of little lasting substance'.<sup>58</sup> A New Zealand writer agreed, calling the Quota System 'pernicious', resulting in 'a rush of low-grade quickies (particularly those awful musical-comedies)'.<sup>59</sup> The phrase 'quota-quickie' came to be viewed not so much as 'a description [but] as a term of abuse'.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Movie titles obtained from the *Manawatu Evening Standard* and country of origin for the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com> for the five sample years of this research.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984 p.3.

<sup>58</sup> Steve Chibnall, *Quota Quickies: The Birth of the British 'B' Film*, London; British Film Institute, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 15 May 1942, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> Steve Chibnall, *Quota Quickies: The Birth of the British 'B' Film*, London; British Film Institute, 2007, p. 5.

Of the one hundred and seventy-eight British films shown to those in the British trade in 1935, seventy-three were rated by the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association as good first features, forty-one as second features, thirty-one as inferior and thirty-three as unwatchable. As no theatre would show movies from the last two groups, if possible, this left ninety-four 'good' British movies in circulation for the year.<sup>61</sup> This limited supply obviously created problems for local and international distributors and theatres wanting to obtain quality British movies. The British movie industry took a long time to recover from its poor movie-making reputation and had to suffer jokes such as was heard in a stage show in 1946, when the lead character angrily said to his recalcitrant maid: 'All right, go the pictures. I hope it's a British film.'<sup>62</sup> A writer to the *Evening Post*, calling himself 'Dyed in the Wool British', wrote that from his experience from living in England, the British where 'great supporters of foreign goods.'<sup>63</sup> The indications are that despite legislation and positive agitation, British moviegoers were happy to watch American movies.

After the call for help at the Imperial Conference, the Empire rallied to assist Britain's ailing movie industry. Australia admitted all British-made films duty-free while the Canadian government charged only half-duty on British films.<sup>64</sup> New Zealand had already shown an interest in imposing a quota on the number of British films before this period. In August 1920, the New Zealand Government wanted to impose legislation that would result in every movie programme screening fifty per cent of British films. This was not implemented due to the shortage of British films. The following year British film representatives attempted to have the fifty per cent quota enforced, but American representatives pointed out that British production was not even able to meet twenty-five per cent of New Zealand's film needs, despite an estimated fifty per cent of the total British output coming to New Zealand. In other

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p.31.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>63</sup> *Evening Post*, 17 January 1931, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> P.A. Harrison, 'The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930', PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, p. 137.

words, British movies were often not of a good enough standard to be shown.<sup>65</sup> As Harrison commented, ‘The Government’s position was proving to be more awkward than had previously been suspected’, with their only answer being to impose a customs duty of one penny per foot on all foreign films.<sup>66</sup> Even the Government admitted the ‘technique and artistry of American pictures is considered to be on the whole superior to the average British film’.<sup>67</sup>

Despite this inauspicious beginning, the New Zealand government was quick to respond to the 1926 plea from Britain, and to attempt once again to increase the number of British films shown in the country. The New Zealand Cinematograph Films Act of 1928 was introduced by the conservative Reform government, under Joseph Gordon Coates, and came into effect in January 1929. It introduced the same quota as Britain’s Act had done: seven and a half per cent of a distributor’s movies had to be quota films in 1929, and that increased through to twenty per cent by 1939. Exhibitors had to show five per cent of quota films in 1930 through to twenty per cent by 1939. The aim of this was to ‘give our people ... a clearer idea of British history, of British countries and British customs and ideals ... films for example presenting certain outstanding facts which are inseparably associated with the history of our Empire’.<sup>68</sup>

Two provisions of the Act aided its general lack of influence in bringing about the aims Coates had outlined. Firstly, a provision allowed renters to modify the quota requirements if it was not ‘commercially practicable by reason of the character of the British films available’ (Part IV, 29, (2)). Secondly, the quota was not a percentage of all films coming into New Zealand; it was a percentage of the number of registered quota films. A number of provisions allowed for films to be excluded from the quota, including movies primarily of news and current events, advertisements, educational movies, including natural history and science topics, British movies made two years or

<sup>65</sup> P.A. Harrison, ‘The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930, PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, pp. 138-9.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1934-5, (3), H-44a, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, 219, (1928), p. 324, (Prime Minister Coates).

more before their date of registration into New Zealand, and films of ‘insufficient artistic or photographic merit’ (Part IV, 27, 1-4)).

There was also strong opposition to the Act from the New Zealand Motion Picture Exhibitors’ Association (MPEA), which called it ‘an exceedingly clumsy, laborious, and costly method of attaining the Government’s objectives ... we feel the effect of a compulsory quota in New Zealand will be to compel us to show British films of a poor quality and they defeat the object your Government has in view’. The MPEA suggested the Government set up a Film Board of Trade (with a mix of members), who would be empowered to draw up legislation. Stating that the important point for the Government should be that film was shown [their emphasis], not that the film was imported, the MPEA argued that the Board of Trade should be made the judges as to whether the film would do credit to the British producers or not.<sup>69</sup>

The Motion Pictures Distributors’ Association (MPDA) was united with the Exhibitors in their opposition to the Bill. In their publication, *The Case for ‘The Renters’ (Importers and Distributors of Film) against Some of the Provisions of the Cinematograph Films Bill 1928*, they maintained that the MPDA of Australia and New Zealand was not ‘a combine’ but a purely protective organisation. They claimed that

in no industry do the members compete more keenly among themselves than do the nine picture distributing companies who seek business from among the 468 picture theatres in New Zealand. At various places in the Dominion ‘buying pools’ have been formed by exhibitors, but no ‘selling pool’ has been formed by distributors. The adequate supply of film, the rivalry of the parent companies, and the keenness of trade competition form an effective barrier against a ‘Picture Combine’. But the Renters find common ground in their opposition to certain features of the Cinematograph Films Bill.

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<sup>69</sup> Response to Draft Cinematograph Bill, Signed by J. Robertson on behalf of New Zealand MPEA July 27 1928. MS-Papers-1850, Alexander Turnbull Library.

They claimed to ‘heartily support’ the idea of encouraging the production of British film, stating that it was one of the objects of their Association, but they believed the quota was not necessary as

no good British picture yet has failed to find a market. More British pictures have been screened in New Zealand during the past few years than are required by the Bill to be imported and exhibited in future. **Why seek to compel the doing of what is already being done voluntarily?** [their emphasis]. If British pictures are imported and screened now because of their inherent merits, what added advantage to British enterprise can be achieved by these compulsory provisions with their attendant ‘licenses’, ‘records’, ‘inspectors’ ‘fines’, and ‘regulations’?<sup>70</sup>

For all of these reasons, it is not surprising that ‘the quota schedule never succeeded in reducing the number of American films into New Zealand, nor did it reduce their popularity’.<sup>71</sup> The quota remained in place until it was ‘quietly’<sup>72</sup> dropped in 1976.

There was much debate in Britain as to the responsibilities of those in the ‘Dominions’ to support British films. Some acknowledged that lack of supply of British film was the key problem.

The continuous supply of pictures which can be maintained under the new conditions would be a valuable source of income that no British company can at present procure, simply because in the absence of a continuous supply, exhibitors in most countries are obliged to deal with only a few American firms. Exhibitors overseas are at present in the position which threatens exhibitors here [Britain]. They have to do what they are told, show what they are given and pay what is demanded, or alternatively close down.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *The Case for ‘The Renters’ (Importers and Distributors of Film) against Some of the Provisions of the Cinematograph Films Bill 1928*, Booklet in Alexander Turnbull Library Manuscripts collection, MP-Papers-1850.

<sup>71</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in our Nest? American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988, p 92.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *The Times*, 28 July 1925, p. 21.

Others blamed the poor health of the British industry on other factors. One of those people was Sir Oswald Stoll, chairman of the Stoll Film Company, who claimed that the ‘odds against British pictures are almost overwhelming ... the Combines in America, legal enactments on the Continent, underselling in the British Dominions, and in many other places, tend to limit purely British pictures to the comparatively small market of the British Isles’. He also claimed there were ‘remarkable efforts to prejudice British pictures’.<sup>74</sup> Another British commentator also cited prejudice against British films. In speaking of the thirty per cent of British films shown in South Africa, where British films were ‘winning their way more quickly than in other parts of the Dominions’, he noted that in ‘Australia and New Zealand there is still practically an American monopoly. Occasionally British productions make their way down there, but there is still much prejudice to be broken down’.<sup>75</sup> This is a significant contrast to the words of the Chief of Commonwealth Film Censorship who claimed that the improvement in British films ‘leads to the distinct possibility of their dominating the Australian market within the next few years ... the average time of showing British pictures in 1933 was nearly double that of American’.<sup>76</sup> He provided no evidence to support his claim.

The Secretary of the Australia and New Zealand Pictures Limited disagreed with the accusation of prejudice against British movies, writing that ‘the percentage of British pictures shown in New Zealand has always been, roughly, double the percentage shown in England itself’. He stated that the ‘only circumstance that mitigates against early release of British pictures is the fact that they still consistently decline to modernise their export methods’. The Secretary believed Britain was ‘making the best product in the world’, but their problem lay in the fact that they ‘took months to get the necessary printing and accessories ready’. He believed that British producers were

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<sup>74</sup> *The Times*, 31 December 1924, p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> *The Times*, 24 May 1923, p. xii.

<sup>76</sup> *Evening Post*, 1 May 1934, p. 7.

making an effort to modernise their processes and he hoped that the near future would see regular weekly releases of British pictures made for Wellington'.<sup>77</sup>

While Britain and New Zealand were wrangling with the buy-British issue, the United States had their own movie industry issues in the early years, although their domination of the silver screen never wavered after World War One. American film exports fell shortly after they entered the First World War, due partially to a slowdown in production, but primarily because government regulation increased. Film was among a number of items that needed a licence to be exported. American troop transports began in June 1917 and the government wanted control of shipping space. As with British regulation, the control also ensured films did not go through neutral countries to Germany. A further American control came into effect on 15 July 1918 when film was added to the Export Conservation list, making film an essential item for war purposes. Exported film dropped to their lowest level since 1915. However, film production continued in the United States, whereas it all but ceased in other countries, particularly France and Germany, which had been strong producers before the First World War began.

A film critic for the *Daily Telegraph* stated that one of the 'outstanding features' of 1930 was a 'film famine' which came out of an American change in emphasis from focusing on many 'foreign markets ... and concentrating on increasing revenue from America and British theatres'.<sup>78</sup> The focus shifted from quantity to quality, with the aim of securing larger returns from the best theatres rather than catering to all theatres. This resulted in a yearly American output of 400 films rather than the 700 films per year in the silent era. The United States still greatly out-produced any other country and this dominance continued through until the end of World War Two.

During the 1920s, Australia was consistently among the top five world purchasers in numbers of American films and for 1922, 1923, 1926 and 1927 it was the top market in

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<sup>77</sup> *Evening Post*, 15 January 1931, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> *Evening Post*, 13 November 1931, p. 7.

terms of quantity. In terms of revenue, Britain was always the best foreign market.<sup>79</sup> New Zealand had approximately two hundred theatres immediately after World War One, with an average seating capacity of seven hundred and fifty. American consuls estimated that in the post-war years between ninety and ninety-five per cent of movies screened in New Zealand were American.<sup>80</sup> Lealand suggests the figure was not quite that high, as seen in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Feature Films Released in NZ Showing Country of Origin<sup>81</sup>  
(as submitted to the Film Censor)

	<b>USA%</b>	<b>UK%</b>	<b>Other%</b>
1929	81	14	5
1933	76	22	2
1939	86	12.5	1.5
1940	83.5	14	2.5
1949	82	18	0

The notable increase in British films arriving in New Zealand in 1933 stems from the 'British-Only Policy' adopted by some theatres, including the Palace Theatre in Palmerston North. This initiative came from the J.C. Williamson Picture Corporation, whose managing director, Beaumont Smith, had secured the purchase of the 'bulk of the British film available for exhibition in New Zealand'. These included the entire output of British Dominion Films, a large number of the best films from British Gaumont-Gainsborough, British Lion Attractions, Twickenham Films, and Stirling Productions. The Paramount Theatre in Wellington was an all-British theatre and the Majestic in Auckland was to be converted in the biggest all-British theatre in New Zealand. The arrangement covered theatres of J.C. Williamson Pictures, John Fuller and Sons, Kemball Theatres, and the Fuller-Hayward Theatre Corporation.<sup>82</sup> In

<sup>79</sup> Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, London: British Film Institute, 1985, p. 137.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>81</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in our Nest? American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988, p. 84.

<sup>82</sup> *Evening Post*, 19 June 1933, p. 3.

Palmerston North, this resulted in the Palace Theatre adopting an all-British policy from the end of July 1933, as was advertised in the local newspaper: ‘the Palace will Inaugurate Its New Policy and Become an Exclusively All-British Theatre’.<sup>83</sup> With the exception of *Diggers in Blighty* (1933), an Australian film (and therefore part of the British quota) which ran for three days from 5-8 August, the remainder of 1933 saw the Palace screening only British movies. This policy continued throughout until the end of 1934 when the ‘Palace --- All British’ advertising header was dropped. Despite this proactive British support, American movies still clearly dominated New Zealanders’ viewing. Australian theatres also ran ‘All-British’ screenings, with the Lyceum Theatre in Sydney holding a British-only week as early as 24 May 1924.<sup>84</sup> While theatres throughout Australia ran regular screenings of British-only movies, one newspaper reported the policy was unsuccessful, with ‘so little encouragement ... given by film patrons to the policy of presenting all British programmes’ that the Majestic in Sydney was reverting to ‘American films’.<sup>85</sup>

Thus in New Zealand, as in Australia and the United Kingdom itself, attempts by governments, some owners, distributors and exhibitors to overturn the American dominance in favour of British movies had very limited success. The proliferation of American movies shown in New Zealand led Gordon Mirams to write in 1945, that ‘If ever a national post-mortem is performed on us, I think they will find there are three words written on New Zealanders hearts – Anzac, Hollywood, and Home. But only a very rash prophet would venture to suggest which word will be carved the deepest’.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 27 July 1933, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1924, p. 21.

<sup>85</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1937, p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Candidly Speaking: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul’s Arcade, 1945, p. 125.

## Chapter Four: The Films

*Frankly, the most reliable way to get people to go to movies is to put people in the movie that people already know they want to see: Charlie Chaplin might be the perfect example.<sup>1</sup>*

The films that people in Palmerston North watched were very similar to those watched in the United Kingdom and the United States, reflecting in large part the dominance of the American film industry. Likewise, the preferences and reactions of patrons in Palmerston North were remarkably similar to those of their counterparts in those two countries. This could be seen in the preferences of both children and adults.

Reminiscences of childhood movie viewing in Palmerston North consistently illustrate the importance to children of the western and the serial. While westerns need no explanation, the movie serial was particular to this period, and has long since gone out of existence. Fred Symes, a child in Palmerston North in the 1940s, remembers his weekly visits to the Mayfair Theatre, where he went to see the 'Cowboys and Indians 'B' movies' and the serials. While the westerns were his cinema highlight, he particularly enjoyed the serials, which he likened to present-day television shows. They were comprised of 'about ten or twelve episodes', with each episode leaving you 'hanging' so that you had to return to the theatre the following week to see the next instalment. Each serial episode, or chapter, as they were advertised, was only about fifteen minutes long. As well as the western and the serial, he recalled that the movie programme was made up of a mixture of newsreels, comedies and travelogues.<sup>2</sup>

Ted Body also remembered his Palmerston North Saturday morning matinee experience, where the films were of the

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<sup>1</sup> Larry McMurtry, *Hollywood: A Third Memoir*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Fred Symes, 2 December 2010.

hero/villain type – cowboys and Indians (with always the cowboys winning). My hero was Gene Autry – the singing cowboy, with his horse Champion. Other hero/villain types were the American pioneers in wagon trains going toward the West, being attacked by marauding bands of Red Indians – the settlers putting their wagons into a circle and from its safety shooting the Indians as they circled past. There would be suspense ... Eventually the cavalry would arrive.<sup>3</sup>

In Palmerston North, the Kosy Theatre screened serials on a weekly basis throughout 1919, 1929, and 1933, with the latest chapter screening every Saturday. In 1942, with the Kosy no longer in operation, the Mayfair screened serials. Ted Body recalled that ‘The Mayfair was the place for young people at the Saturday matinee. Some of my friends attended every Saturday – for me it was an occasional visit, but it was all right to go there’.<sup>4</sup>

A New Zealand survey of secondary school children, taken in 1934, showed the majority liked ‘blood and thunder’ or the ‘Wild West’ and found films about love not popular as they were ‘too sloppy’.<sup>5</sup> Ted Body remembered ‘there might be a bit of sloppy romance as the hero and one of the young women melted into each other’s arms. But only for a moment because that sort of audience [the children’s matinee attendees] wouldn’t take too much of that sort of stuff’.<sup>6</sup>

A study carried out in the 1930s on what movies British children liked found that westerns scored the highest preference (21%), followed closing by Adventure (19%), Animal Stories (18%) and Comedy (17%). Other genres such as historical stories, musicals and movies featuring child stars followed, with romance scoring poorly.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Correspondence, Ted Body, 9 August 2011, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence, Ted Body, 9 August 2011, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 238, (1934), p. 274, (John Lee).

<sup>6</sup> Correspondence, Ted Body, 9 August 2011, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939, p. 109.

Mayer's British research also found that westerns and serials featured prominently in almost all the memories of people who had attended cinemas as children before the Second World War. One woman recalled that every Saturday she went to the movies with her sister and friends, and there was always 'a serial and a travelogue ... [the latter] the only part of the programme that bored us. The serial was popular, and the films we liked the best were the open air type, with plenty of cowboys, Indians, and shooting.'<sup>8</sup> Another recalled that as a boy, 'mostly we went to see cowboy pictures and when the programme was ended we would dash up the road and pretend we were cowboys ... I used to be mad on cowboy pictures.'<sup>9</sup> Another man recalled he also loved 'the cowboy pictures and the serials ... How exciting it seemed to be when one episode ended with a terrific climax and the notice "To be continued next week" flashed on. How I waited impatiently, for that next week, to know the solution.'<sup>10</sup> One woman was easily able to articulate who she admired and why: 'Hoot Gibson, Tom Mix, Tom Tyler and His Pals were my delight', a woman recalled. 'How I admired these "he-men" of the great open spaces! They were strong and brave, I was weak and cowardly ... but in these film stories the strong protected the weak, jeering villains were given good hidings, and noble deeds were done in defense of the weak and helpless.'<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary British commentator, Richard Ford, believed the

identification of the child with the character he is watching is of primary importance. When, for instance, he sees Buck Jones chasing the miscreants, he is not merely admiring Buck Jones, but he *is* Buck Jones, and he is performing these deeds. This process of identification is often mistaken for suggestion. People who still believe that the films make child criminals, insist that the shootings 'suggest' to the child that he should do likewise. Nothing is further from the truth. The child, by *being* Buck Jones is not stimulated to copy him, but is satisfied by his success in

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<sup>8</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

overcoming wrong from right – one of the most powerful incentives in the whole range of the child’s outlook on life.<sup>12</sup>

Ford claimed the child identified himself or herself with the cowboy hero, suffered with him (it was almost invariably a male) in his predicaments and won every battle with him. Ford believed the child’s ability to identify with the hero broke down only when the hero claimed the woman he loved and kissed her or performed any other amorous routine.<sup>13</sup> The basic premise of a western, good versus evil, allowed children to follow the plot easily. Some British adult viewers thought westerns were best suited for child audiences: ‘Westerns are alright for Children’s Matinee only’, and ‘Western films are an attraction to children’ were two comments made in the Mass-Observation Study of 1938.<sup>14</sup>

Serials provided what Kuhn calls ‘cliffhanger memories’, which are about the ‘cultural resonance of serial narrative forms and the suspense they generate’. This encouraged ‘continuity with the habitual quality of cinema going’ for British children in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>15</sup> Just as television series operate today, those children returned to the picture theatre on a weekly basis under the ‘compulsion to repeat this pleasurable but incomplete experience’.<sup>16</sup> As one British moviegoer said, ‘That meant we had to go to the cinema thirteen weeks in succession. But you know, it couldn’t come quick enough! When you come out of the cinema, on a Saturday afternoon you’d say to yourself, “I wonder what’ll happen next week? I wonder how he’ll get out of that mess that he’s in?”’<sup>17</sup>

An American moviegoer had very similar memories to those of his Palmerston North and British counterparts, with a typical Saturday screening consisting of a B western, a

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1939, pp. 113-4.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, pp. 61-2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

'chapter' of a serial, a two-reel comedy, and perhaps a 'short subject' [often a didactic film on an 'unusual occupation' or a travelogue].<sup>18</sup> While the 'feature' was always important, particularly if it was a western, the serials were just as important, with the predictable 'cliff-hanger' storyline always ensuring the return of its young audience the following week.<sup>19</sup>

Another American remembered his first 'taste of a real thriller', a western, and its impact on him.

The cowboy hero rode a horse with the ease of the saddle and did unheard of things in escaping the claws of the desperado band. He received only a few beatings ... and I [saw] him pay them back three fold after a desperate hand to hand fight with the main villain ... I enjoyed his calm braggadocio, his easy handling of his six-shooters. I believe that was my first introduction to firearms. I had always played with a bow and arrow and had a vague unanswered urge in my being. The sight of the guns aroused that slumbering emotion and gave voice to another desire. I thrilled to see them shoot the spots out of playing cards and light their trusty partners' cigarettes with their guns.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1937 study of 'Middletown' in the United States, children's Saturday matinees had become a marked feature of children's movie attendance. The local paper stated that

Yesterday's children played at home on Saturdays in the family kitchen to be out of the way while mother cleaned the rest of the house. Today's attend the children's matinees at the local theatres [while] mother ... is shopping, visiting, or playing bridge ... Middletown is faced with the fact that the children's matinee draws more than 1,000 children every Saturday even on the

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996, p. 252.

coldest of winter days, and the summer attendance is by far larger.<sup>21</sup>

The Middletown theatre specialising in ‘thrill stuff for the farmers and working class ... draws mostly children’, according to one local exhibitor.<sup>22</sup>

The next most popular genre for children in Palmerston North attending the cinema was comedy, often in the form of cartoons. Bruce Ladyman recalled that while his friends all loved westerns, he much preferred comedy, particularly that of Charlie Chaplin, who he said was popular with everyone. Bruce claimed that ‘funny was number one’.<sup>23</sup> Mervyn (Merv) Hancock also remembered the enjoyment of Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy, stating their movies gave you the opportunity to ‘belly-laugh’ at their antics in ‘taking the mickey out of the big boys’, even though as children they did not really understand who the big boys were.<sup>24</sup> Disney movies also featured strongly in children’s preferences and Bruce recalled that ‘Occasionally the State would have a special matinee on the Saturday morning – to do with Walt Disney. You’d see Pluto or Mickey Mouse. Disney took off in a big way. All the kids wanted to go to the Disney movies.’<sup>25</sup> Disney movies were always popular, as attested by the local newspaper, which declared that ‘the release of any new Walt Disney feature production is always a real cinematic event and *Dumbo* is especially anticipated.’<sup>26</sup> The contemporary New Zealand commentator Gordon Mirams, believed Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) showed that ‘a cartoon could be a great deal more than just a six-minute time-pass on the supporting programme’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study of Cultural Conflicts*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1937, p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Bruce Ladyman, 19 September 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Mervyn Hancock, 3 February 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Bruce Ladyman, 19 September 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 8 May 1942, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 13 February 1942, p. 15.

One of Mayer's respondents in the United Kingdom said that from the age of six she preferred 'exciting serial films and "comics", especially Charlie Chaplin'. Laurel and Hardy caused one young female audience member to 'scream with laughter at their antics'.<sup>28</sup> Disney was also extremely popular with British audiences. Looking at ticket sales at the Regent Theatre in Portsmouth during the 1930s, Harper found *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to be the 'greatest hit in the entire decade'.<sup>29</sup> The reasons for the 'phenomenal success', Harper suggests, was the 'non-sexual paradigm'. Because it was a cartoon and in colour, it could 'evoke primal narratives about sexual awakening and virtue rewarded ... [offering] a mythical resolution for anxieties about profane love'.<sup>30</sup> It could also be, however, that this 'simple story of a charming little princess saved from the evil deeds of her wicked step-mother, the queen, by a group of seven adorable dwarfs'<sup>31</sup> was popular because it was the first full-length animation movie produced by Disney. A theatre manager in Beaver City, Nebraska, in the United States, wrote of the success of *Snow White*, saying 'Hats off to Walt Disney. Here is positively the grandest thing ever offered to the public for entertainment. It appeals to every living person from the ages of 2 to 102.'<sup>32</sup> The following newspaper article shows that Mickey Mouse was as popular in Palmerston North as he was in the United States and the United Kingdom.

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<sup>28</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Sue Harper, 'A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: admissions figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24:4, 2004, p. 571.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0029583/> retrieved on 19 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1946, p. 16.

# They're A Riot !

FIRST BATCH OF WALT DISNEY'S  
NEW MICKEY MOUSE AND SILLY  
SYMPHONIES ARE ON THEIR WAY.

There is always a stir in Palmerston North theatres when a Mickey Mouse cartoon flashes on the screen, but soon there will be a much bigger stir—for the new series of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphonies are on their way and will soon be on the silver sheet of the local theatres!

Since the inception of "Mickey Mouse," its popularity with the world's movie masses has increased to such an extent that the little rodent's creator, Walt Disney, has now become associated with United Artists, which organisation will release them during the current season.

To mark such an important association, Disney has announced an enormous budget, incorporating some thousands of pounds for the production of his new series, consisting of 18 Mickey Mouse and 13 Silly Symphonies. Ten of the



MICKEY MOUSE

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Figure 4.1 Mickey Mouse – section of article in Palmerston North newspaper, 1933.

In the United States, comedy, and Charlie Chaplin in particular, was a universal favourite with both children and adults. During a surprise visit to a Chicago school with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin was the highlight. The school principal reported that he had never seen 'the electrical, wonderful grasp that those people had over a school ... Their power was marvelous ... Everybody was as light as though they had inhaled some laughing gas', including the teachers. He went on to say that before the arrival of the stars, the children's faces 'were dull ... But I had the pleasure of introducing Charlie Chaplin. From that time on everything was out of our hands at once.'<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times* 29 April 1933, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, New York: Random House, 1994, pp. 130-31.

In a series of case studies of American's childhood movie-memories, one recalled slap-stick comedy: 'What pie-throwing! ... What rolling-pin throws and bathing beauties! Snub Pollard with his drooping mustache, Bebe Daniels with her Al Christie personality, Larry Semon with his wide pantaloons, and Ben Turpin with his "east is west" eyes'.<sup>35</sup> Another recalled that his mother, who was cautious about what movies her children saw, approved of Charlie Chaplin comedies, with the result being he saw all of Chaplin's movies and 'after the show I used to go home and imitate him, as every child probably has done'.<sup>36</sup> Charlie Chaplin featured again as a favourite with another child-viewer, along with Fatty Arbuckle,<sup>37</sup> and yet another commented that serials and comedies were their favourite movies, particularly 'funny pictures with simple plots', with Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle and Douglas Fairbanks mentioned as favourite actors.<sup>38</sup> Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Harold Lloyd and Marguerite Clark were some actors one young girl was "confined" [allowed] to see by her parents and she remembered 'I never conceived any great fondness for any of them except Charlie Chaplin, and to this day he has been a constant source of delight to my weary heart'.<sup>39</sup>

The results of a National High School Students' Poll in 1923, which surveyed 37,000 high-school students across America, found that both boys and girls rated comedies as their second favourite genre at twenty-seven and nineteen per cent respectively. Boys' favourite films were westerns at thirty per cent, and girls' favourites were romances, at twenty-seven per cent.<sup>40</sup> A smaller study in 1928 still found that comedies were consistently among the favourite movies watched by both children and high school students and by both boys and girls.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996, p. 246.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*, Berkeley: University of California, 1990, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

Comedy was also extremely popular more generally, not just amongst children, in Palmerston North. Comic movies occupied either first or second place as the most shown genre during the sample years between the world wars, as seen in Table 4.1. Comedy was especially popular in times of hardship such as the Depression and war, as seen in the post-1929 years. In 1919 one local cinema acknowledged the popularity of Charlie Chaplin's comedies by advertising their screening of *The Spy System* (1917) as a consolation programme for those who 'are shut out of the Palace this week',<sup>42</sup> where Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918) was showing. Stead has commented that one of the 'most striking features of Chaplin's film career ... was the rapidity with which he became popular outside America'.<sup>43</sup> As the Palmerston North newspaper stated, 'The art of comedy is international; it knows no country and boundaries'.<sup>44</sup>

Table 4.1 Top Movie Genres in Palmerston North<sup>45</sup>

Year	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
1919	Drama 84%	Comedy 39%	Romance 17%	Western 10%	War 7%
1929	Drama 44%	Comedy 28%	Romance 24%	Western 11%	War 5%
1933	Comedy 27%	Romance 17%	Drama 14%	Western 11%	Musical 8%
1942	Comedy 44%	Drama 31%	Romance 21%	Musical 16%	Western 12%
1945	Comedy 45%	Drama 35%	Musical 29%	Romance 19%	War 16%

British moviegoers also loved comedy, to the extent that McKibbin has maintained that 'Film audiences always insisted they could never get enough of 'humour' in the cinema'.<sup>46</sup> The Mass-Observation study of 1938 found that both male and female moviegoers replied 'more humour' when asked what they wanted to see more of in

<sup>42</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 14 October 1919, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: the Feature Film in British and American Society*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 28 April 1933, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> These statistics were arrived at from a combination of analysing the newspaper advertisements for the movies, and the Internet Movie Database, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) for classifications. Movies were often given more than one genre classification, which is why the totals for each year equal more than 100 per cent.

<sup>46</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, p. 438.

films.<sup>47</sup> One respondent suggested cinemas should take requests from patrons, with his preferences being for what he called, the ‘Marx Bros. classics of fun, *Coconuts*, [and] *Monkey Business*.<sup>48</sup> Disney movies were another popular form of comedy, with one respondent claiming that ‘Walt Disney cartoons are always welcomed by young and old. Those are really first-class humour understood by all.’<sup>49</sup> Popular British actor George Formby was singled out by another respondent, who said that ‘As far as humour goes in the British films, I think the George Formby, the Famous Lancashire Comedian, just about tops the bill for his comedy is really exhilarating’.<sup>50</sup> One regular moviegoer believed ‘A good, clean comedy is worth any-one’s money’.<sup>51</sup>

Robert James’s study of the relationship between movies and class in the United Kingdom during the 1930s found that, while there were usually differences in preference between working-class and middle-class patrons, these differences lessened with the genre of comedy. Charlie Chaplin had universal appeal, for, while he explored ‘the plight of the disenfranchised’, he used humour to soften his social critique.<sup>52</sup> This resulted in middle-class audiences being able to laugh without feeling uncomfortable. Chaplin’s everyman persona illustrated that anyone, whatever his or her setbacks, could achieve something.<sup>53</sup> Sklar claims British soldiers sang ‘The moon shines bright on Charlie Chaplin’ as they marched off to World War One, and the song was popular with British children until the 1950s. Children in both the United States and the United Kingdom also played games to the chant of ‘Charlie Chaplin went to France/to teach the ladies how to dance.’<sup>54</sup> Chaplin’s influence was deemed significant enough for one commentator to state that ‘Chaplin doesn’t simply belong to the

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<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Robert James, ‘Popular Film-going in Britain in the Early 1930s’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46:2, 2011, p. 281.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, New York: Random House, 1994, p. 116.

history of cinema; he belongs to history.<sup>55</sup> Another has said ‘There have been many gods and goddesses, but never the same deity for the whole world. Charlie Chaplin had made people the entire globe over *one* in their laughter and tears for him’.<sup>56</sup>

The Lynds’ study of ‘Middletown’ in the United States found that Harold Lloyd comedies drew the largest crowds, leading to a newspaper editorial stating that ‘Middletown is amusement hungry ... at the comedies, Middletown lives for an hour in a happy sophisticated make-believe world that leaves it ... happily convinced that Life is very well worth living’.<sup>57</sup> When the Lynds returned to ‘Middletown’ in 1935, they noted that the effects of the Depression had left the town with an even greater appetite for more movies ‘on the happy side’, as one exhibitor described it.

They have wanted the movies more than ever to supply the lacks in their existence. The ‘fairyland’ type of picture has been more popular than ever – the type of picture that lifts people into a happy world of gaiety and evening clothes: and both our business people and working class people have shied off serious and sad pictures – they have too much of that at home.<sup>58</sup>

Many films shown in Palmerston North could not be readily placed in a single genre in the way that the western, for example, could be. Indeed, there was a strong tendency to categorise films in more than one genre. The first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), was described as a drama, musical, and a romance. The Palace advertised *Mickey* (1918) by covering all tastes: ‘It’s Comedy, It’s Melodrama, It’s Romance, It’s Western, It’s Human, It’s Just Mickey, It’s an 8-course Banquet of Entertainment’.<sup>59</sup>

The advertisement for *Pay as You Enter* (1928) described the film as

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<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Goodbye Cinema Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 88.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Hell’s In It*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 360.

<sup>57</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, p. 266.

<sup>58</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown In Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1937, p. 261.

<sup>59</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 28 October 1919, p. 1.

Scintillating and Sparkling, Rippling with Romance, Agitating with Action, Convulsing with Comedy Amid scenes of Spectacular Splendour, Unclouded, Untroubled, Unalloyed, Hilarious Happiness for Everybody. Radiant, Riotous, Rough and Ready Comedy.<sup>60</sup>

One of the reasons for the ‘cocktail’ of genres was to capture as wide an audience as possible. A moviegoer might not like action thrillers, but might be more inclined to attend a horror thriller. Exhibitors in Palmerston North often told their audiences what they would like in a film: ‘*Warming Up* (1928) contains all the elements that make first class entertainment. It has a sporting atmosphere, a charming romance, and plenty of humour, also a really popular star [Richard Dix] playing a role for which he is eminently suited.’<sup>61</sup> *Trelawney of the Wells* (1928) was described as a ‘new picture replete with humour, pathos, romance, drama and all the essential qualities that go toward the making of a delightful motion picture’.<sup>62</sup>

Another reason for Palmerston North cinemas presenting films as belonging to different genres simultaneously was to attract both male and female. Advertisements for movies that were believed to be generally more favoured by men also included enticements for the female viewer. *The Spy System* was described as a ‘revelation of the most complete system of espionage that ever existed’, with the addendum, ‘IT ALSO HAS A PRETTY ROMANCE’.<sup>63</sup> *Lend me your Name* was advertised with Harold Lockward in the ‘dual role of an Earl and a Burglar’ in a movie that was ‘A Lively Comedy Drama of Laughs and Thrills’.<sup>64</sup> The mystery drama *Jack O’Lantern* was described as a movie that ‘holds the imagination of every member of the family’<sup>65</sup> and *Salomy Jane’s Kiss*, based on a novel by the western author Bret Harte, was described as ‘highly dramatic, intensely exciting, and of tremendous appeal to men who like

<sup>60</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 12 January 1929, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 15 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, January 10, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 14 October 1919, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 4 July 1919, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 10 March 1933, p. 3.

plenty of action and to women who prefer romance'.<sup>66</sup> The popular Judy Garland stared in *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), which was described as 'A PICTURE ALL WOMEN WILL SEE! A PICTURE NO MAN WILL MISS!' Male attendance was encouraged by the movie boasting 'a bevy of the most beautiful girls in America'.<sup>67</sup>

War romance movies became common in the 1940s and the advertising for *A Yank in the R.A.F* (1941) described the film as the 'Gay, Loveable, Human Romance of the men who fly and fight for glory for the thrill of it'.<sup>68</sup> The *New Zealand Listener* described the protagonist, Tyrone Power, as 'A Demon in a Dogfight, A Devil with the Women', with the advertising poster showing Power and Betty Grable, both in uniform, gazing into each other's eyes while seven fighter planes soared in the skies above them.

British women enjoyed romance films and this attraction often started young. A middle-aged woman recalled that from the age of twelve she used to 'love seeing movies with a strong love interest and I enjoyed being made to cry ... It was the romantic atmosphere I enjoyed. I fell in love with Ronald Colman at this early age and he is the only film actor who has ever stirred me to romantic speculations. I think, possibly, because he was a "gentleman"'.<sup>69</sup>

In 'Middletown' in 1929, the movie programmes usually consisted of a 'Wild West' feature and a comedy, although occasionally a 'society' film was screened.<sup>70</sup> The Lynds' contemporary study found that the town's movie preferences were

comedy, heart interest, and adventure ... [and] its heroes were ... Harold Lloyd, comedian; Gloria Swanson, heroine in modern society films; Thomas Meighan, hero in modern society films; Colleen Moore, ingenue; Douglas Fairbanks, comedian and

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<sup>66</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 March 1933, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 22 January 1942, p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 September 1945, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 24.

<sup>70</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, p. 265.

adventurer; Mary Pickford, ingenue; and Norma Talmadge, heroine in modern society films.<sup>71</sup>

A 1942 survey by the American Motion Picture Research bureau found audiences' generic preferences fell into eighteen types, with five different comedy types (sophisticated, slapstick, family life, musical, and 'just comedy').<sup>72</sup> The study found women generally expressed a strong dislike for mystery, horror, gangster, war and Western movies. Men expressed a strong dislike for love stories, which were the preference for female audiences, while the male preference was for war movies. Different preferences encouraged the combining of genres, as distributors and exhibitors added extra descriptors to encourage bigger audiences.

The 'drama' classification was one that could easily be assigned to a wide variety of movies along with other genres; war, romance, comedy, or adventure, for example. It is not surprising therefore, that it featured regularly in Palmerston North, particularly in the pre-talkie era when there were fewer genre categorisations. Drama included a wide variety of story lines, but a common theme was stories 'derived from the realities of urban life'.<sup>73</sup> These were not fantasy or escapist stories, but instead featured people overcoming obstacles common in everyday life. Maltby and Craven have described Hollywood movies as 'a two-hour story in which a sympathetic character overcomes a series of obstacles to achieve his or her desire', and they believed this to be the basis of Hollywood's appeal to its audience.<sup>74</sup>

*The River Pirate* (1928) revolved around the story of a youth who 'does a stretch' in a reform school where he learns more bad than good, but he is 'regenerated' once he falls in love.<sup>75</sup> Norma Shearer's movie *Trelawney of the Wells* (1928) was prefaced with 'perhaps the most true-to-life story that can be told on the screen is the story of the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973, p. 46.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 23 January 1929, p. 3.

woman who tries to change her station in life, to find that she can be happy only in her own sphere'.<sup>76</sup> *The Silver Lining* (1927) had a protagonist who was imprisoned for 'Shielding his brother's misdeeds ... but lived for the time to regain his freedom'.<sup>77</sup> *Forgotten Faces* (1928) was the 'story of a woman whose sins found her out' and *Road House* (1928) was 'A Daring Exposure of the Lures and Dangers of Reckless Youth and Jazz Mad Morals. The sins of the father become the vices of the son'.<sup>78</sup> *None but the Brave* (1928) was described as ending in a 'thrilling scene in which Tommy takes the villain singlehanded and lifts the family out of disgrace'.<sup>79</sup>

A new style of drama, what McKibbin called The Hollywood-idea-of-England film,<sup>80</sup> was usually about England, Scotland or Wales, and usually starred British actors, but it was developed from and catered to American stereotypes of England.<sup>81</sup> The most famous of these films was *Mrs Miniver* (1942) which starred the Irish-born actress Greer Garson and dealt with the activities of a fictional upper-middle-class Englishwoman. It was one of the most popular and most remembered movies of the war period in New Zealand, drawing one hundred thousand people to Auckland's forty-three cinemas every week and becoming New Zealand's favourite film in 1943.<sup>82</sup> Mirams believed that between the end of 1942 and the end of 1944, more New Zealanders paid to see *Mrs Miniver* than any other film.<sup>83</sup> Mirams' review of the film praised it for being 'a very handsome and warm-hearted tribute to the spirit of England and her people' and he was impressed that for a film made in Hollywood, there were 'astonishingly few outcroppings of Americanism[s]'. He commented it had taken three years of war for 'the first real picture about the war to make its appearance' and added that it was not only critics who approved of the film; 'it's what the public wants if the crowds inside

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<sup>76</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 9 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 July 1929, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard* 3 January 1929, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 1 July 1929, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, p. 429.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Geoffrey B. Churchman, (ed.), *Celluloid Dreams: A Century of Film In New Zealand*, Wellington: IPL Books, 1997, p. 28.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul's Arcade, 1945, p. 15.

and outside the theatre are any indication', adding, 'Critics are not always out of touch with the box-office!'<sup>84</sup> The film screened in Palmerston North on the first days of 1943, with the local newspaper enthusing

America's Glowing Tribute to the Courage and Heroism of the People of Britain ... of which Field-Marshall Smuts says, "This is a wonderful picture – a great picture – and in it we have been brought up against the great things of life – and we can thank God that the greatness has not departed from this world. *Mrs Miniver* is a reminder to us what is happening in the world today and what might happen to us, and we must be prepared to prevent such things coming to us".

Movie patrons in the United States also enjoyed *Mrs Miniver*, the 'sentimental war-story about upper-middle-class English people' to the degree that it was their third most popular movie of all time [up until 1945] with *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) in first and second place respectively.<sup>85</sup> *Mrs Miniver* was the most popular and the top grossing film in both the United States and the United Kingdom in 1942.<sup>86</sup>

McKibbin believes that overall, the most popular films in the United Kingdom in the 1940s were the British Gainsborough melodramas, describing them as having 'something in common with Barbara Cartland or Mills and Boon romances ... the films are, in many ways, conventional bodice-rippers'.<sup>87</sup> Two of the most popular Gainsborough movies shown in Britain in the 1940s were also very well received in Palmerston North. *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944) was advertised as

A story of illicit love in a saucy corner of Queen Victoria's London ... Leicester Square and Haymarket! The bright spots of the 1870s, the "dives" frequented by young bloods in search of easy

<sup>84</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 8 January 1943, p. 17.

<sup>85</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul's Arcade, 1945, p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 441.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

virtue laced with a bottle of champagne ... TRULY A BRILLIANT DRAMA. Superbly acted by the Magnificent Team which gave you *The Man in Grey*.<sup>88</sup>

*The Man in Grey* (1943) was described by McKibbin as

specifically historical but ... vague as to period ... which allowed the luxurious and dramatic *mise-en-scène* and dress in which the films specialized. They were heavily “gothic” in style as well as in plot and ... the heroines displayed a *décolletage* Hollywood would never have permitted ... they were “women’s films”.<sup>89</sup>

In Palmerston North the movie was advertised as

THE MOST DARING NOVEL OF THE CENTURY LIVES ON THE SCREEN. A story of passion, lust, avarice, evil cunning and simple child-like love! The tragedy of a wife whose life was crowded by the evil passion of another woman for her husband.<sup>90</sup>

Such “bodice-rippers” were also popular in ‘Middletown’, where patrons’ second most preferred genre after comedy was ‘sensational society films’, which tended to be classified as drama. Such movie titles included *Alimony* (1924), with the additional advertising, ‘brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp’. Advertising for *Married Flirts* (1924) asked ‘Husbands: Do you flirt? Does your wife always know where you are? Are you faithful to your vows?’ Wives were asked ‘What’s your hubby doing? Do you know? Do you worry?’ These movies were prolific enough that at one time the following titles were running synchronously: *The Daring Years* (1923), *Sinners in Silk* (1924), *Women Who Give* (1924), and *The Price She Paid* (1924).<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 23 November 1945, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 448.

<sup>90</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 22 June 1945, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, p. 266.

Advertisements in Britain illustrated a similar focus on promiscuity. The advertisement for 'Why Girls Go Wrong (1928) asked, 'Who is to Blame? Is it the Girl? Is it the Boy? Is it the home?' *Marriage by Contract* (1928) asked, 'When a companionate wedded wife finds her husband with another woman what can she do????' and Greta Garbo's *Street of Sorrow* (1925) had the teaser: 'This time it will be a story of vice and poverty and redemption! You'll understand what folks see thru lust and gin-filled glasses. WATCH FOR THIS SENSATIONAL SEX DRAMATIC SMASH ... DON'T MISS THIS UNUSUAL SEX PICTURE. It's SENSATIONAL!!!! IT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT SEX'.<sup>92</sup>

With even the style of advertisements showing similarities across continents, the movies being watched in Palmerston North were the same as those being watched in the United States or the United Kingdom. Likewise, the preferences and reactions of patrons in Palmerston North were remarkably similar to those of their counterparts in those two countries, illustrating Cripps' belief that 'the beauty and power of the movies was that they were universal'.<sup>93</sup> It did not matter that Palmerston North was at the opposite end of the world from the United States and United Kingdom, for as Harrison wrote, 'more than any other medium, motion pictures contributed to breaking down the barrier of time and distance'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996, pp. 163-4.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997, p. 45.

<sup>94</sup> P.A. Harrison, 'The Motion Picture Industry in New Zealand 1896-1930: A History of the Commercial Distribution and Exhibition of Films', MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1974, p. 26.

## Chapter Five: An Escape Hatch into Another World

*People realise that for a small charge they can be lifted up on a magic carpet and set down in a dream city amidst palatial surrounds where worry and care never enter, where pleasure hides in every shadow.<sup>1</sup>*

In a study of women and movies, Jackie Stacey determined three central discourses in female movie ‘spectatorship’: escapism, identification and consumption.<sup>2</sup> These are relevant not just for women ‘spectators’, but for most who regularly watched movies. In the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the importance of the movies in providing an element of escape is significant. While Chapter Two discussed identification and consumption, this chapter will focus on the element of escapism as a reason why people went to the movies.

Movies were affordable, accessible, entertaining, social or solitary depending on your need, sometimes educational, sometimes glamorous, and they provided an hour or two of escape from everyday life. One definition of ‘escapism’ is ‘an inclination to retreat from unpleasant reality, as through diversion or fantasy’.<sup>3</sup> Because ‘unpleasant reality’ can be used to describe a multitude of situations, it is no surprise to find that movie-goers frequently acknowledged the importance of escapism as a reason for their movie-going. Internationally, movies responded to what Max Weber called the ‘disenchantment of the modern world’ by ‘partially re-enchant[ing] the world.’<sup>4</sup>

A 1925 Paramount advertisement in the United States indicated the company knew exactly what attracted people to the movies:

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Barry and Epes W. Sargent, ‘Building Theatre Patronage’ in *Moviegoing in America*, Gregory A. Waller, (ed.,) Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002, p. 110-115, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1993, p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood’s Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992, p. 429.

Go to a motion picture ... and let yourself go. Before you know it you are *living* the story – laughing, loving, hating, struggling, winning! All the adventure, all the romance, all the excitement you lack in your daily life are in – Pictures. They take you completely out of yourself into a wonderful new world ... Out of the cage of everyday existence! If only for an afternoon or an evening – escape!<sup>5</sup>

Movie studios provided exactly what the public wanted. Studios were in an extremely competitive environment, and the movies they made were ‘products of a sophisticated industrial system’ which reflected ‘not only the attitude of the system, but also the mood of the time and the audience’. As such, they were ‘completely in tune with what the paying public wanted’,<sup>6</sup> which is one of the reasons why it has been said that Hollywood and motion pictures were ‘more firmly established and more deeply rooted in the American consciousness from the early ‘thirties to the end of World War Two than at any other time in history’.<sup>7</sup> In times of economic hardship and international conflict, movies were a powerful antidote, to the degree that one American historian declared that ‘Amusement seemed such an urgent matter that Americans were ready to give up anything else, rather than stint on simple pleasures ... Movie-going was a comparative necessity during hard times’.<sup>8</sup> In 1933, going to the movies was called ‘the most prominent feature of the spare time activity of the employed and the unemployed’.<sup>9</sup>

In a speech to the Associated Motion Picture Advertisers in New York in 1942, famous Hollywood producer Cecil B. de Mille said that although

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<sup>5</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, quoted in Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrill Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas W. Bohn and Richard L. Stromgren, *Light and Shadows: A History of Motion Pictures*, Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 1987, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Man, A Social Study*, London: Nisbet and Co, 1933, p. 178.

Hitler and the Mikado think they can conquer the world, we, motion pictures, have already conquered it. We have invaded every country, not to bring death and destruction, or take from it wealth, but to bring it our wealth which is humour and drama, and science and art ... We can give harassed America relaxation and rest and occasionally, even an hour of peace and laughter ... people everywhere in these times of turmoil and distress look to Hollywood for diversion and relaxation and even a little bit of glamour. It is a touching tribute and a magnificent responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

The study of 'Middletown' found that residents' favourite movie genres followed their reading preferences. 'Comedy, heart interest, and adventure',<sup>11</sup> all genres of escapism, made up their primary enjoyment. Some townswomen admitted that while their church encouraged boycotting the movies, they often 'gave in to their own and their children's fascination with Hollywood glamour and movie fantasy'. Furthermore, a group of local women, purportedly meeting on the 'problems of the movies' ended up devoting most of their discussion to their favourite screen stars and story lines.<sup>12</sup>

In the United Kingdom too, the escapist element of the movies was a primary attraction for movie-goers. Writing in *London Life* in 1913, Shaw Desmond explained that

It is here in the Picture Palace that the businessman forgets his worries, the mother her household cares, the child its sorrows ... And, as we file out into the night air, we are still living in the land of memories. And the world is not only the old, grey world of a few hours before, but a world also of strong men and beautiful women – a world of adventure – of success – of all things desirable – for the shadow had the sunshine in the heart of it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 19 June 1942, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, p. 266.

<sup>12</sup> H. Kathryn Fuller, *At The Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw Desmond, *London Life: "PIP" The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 5 April 1913, p. 13.

British sociologist Seebohm Rowntree found in his study of York in 1939, that the movies had an important part to play in

relieving the monotony of countless lives. At a cost of five pence or so a working woman, bored to death by a never-ending round of humdrum household chores, or a factory worker oppressed by the monotony of his work, can be transplanted, as if on a magic carpet, into a completely new world; a world of romance or high adventure.<sup>14</sup>

Mayer's British respondents claimed 'we go to films to see a more glamorous and luxurious way of life, a life we should like to live ourselves. I definitely go to the cinema to be taken out of myself, and to forget the cares of housework, rationing, and washing baby's nappies!'<sup>15</sup> American researcher E. Wight Bakke, in his study of residents in Greenwich, in Britain, found that movies were as important to the unemployed as they were to the employed, and they continued to spend a 'tanner' (sixpence) at the movies, despite their need to 'practice the most rigid economy in order to live'.<sup>16</sup> Reasons given by his respondents included, 'The pictures help you live in another world for a little while', 'Pictures are my first choice, because they make you think for a little while that life is all right', and 'the pictures take you to places you can only dream of going'.<sup>17</sup>

In a study of the movie preferences of the residents of Portsmouth, Britain, it was found that 'not a single realist or socially-conscious film appeared' in the 'runaway hits' of the decade of the 1930s. What was favoured was 'the exotic': audiences liked 'being ushered into an unfamiliar world which tested the boundaries of their own', which is why *The Blue Danube* (1932), in which a 'swarthy gypsy abandons his sweetheart for a

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<sup>14</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York*: London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1941, p. 470.

<sup>15</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Man: A Social Study*, London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1933, p. 181.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

countess' was a hit.<sup>18</sup> When this screened in Palmerston North, at the Regent (as it had in Portsmouth), the advertising trumpeted, 'The Glorious English Musical Romance *The Blue Danube*, A Revelation in Marvelous Melody and Glamorous Beauty'.<sup>19</sup>

The movies were popular for many reasons and Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen encapsulated many of those reasons when asked to reflect on her movie-going for a collection of essays on the cinema, published in 1938.

I go to the cinema for any number of reasons ... I go when I don't want to think; I go when I do want to think and need stimulus; I go to see pretty people; I go when I want to see life ginned up, charged with unlikely energy; ... I go to see America, France, Russia; I go because I like wisecracks and slick behaviour; I go because the screen is an oblong opening into the world of fantasy for me; I go because I like story, with its suspense; I go because I like sitting in a packed crowd in the dark, among hundreds riveted on the same thing; I go to have my most general feelings played upon.<sup>20</sup>

The desire for escapism, while prevalent at any time, was seen particularly during the Depression and World War Two, when film patrons had a natural desire to watch movies that took their minds off their financial anxieties or the worry of their husbands, sons, brothers and friends in the war. One of Mayer's respondents recalled, 'I used to go to the cinema when I was about five with Mummy ... we were so poor ... that she wanted to escape from the reality of bills, summonses and how to get money ... [we] felt at home in a cinema'.<sup>21</sup> In New Zealand, cinema managers were known to admit the unemployed, free, in to the back stalls, during the Depression years.<sup>22</sup> A twenty-four-year-old male respondent in *Mass-Observation* research asked rhetorically, 'why do we want to see war on the screen, do we not read enough in the

<sup>18</sup> Sue Harper, 'A lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: admissions figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24:4, 2004, p. 572.

<sup>19</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 23 March 1933, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bowen in Charles Davey (ed.), *Footnotes to the Film*, London: Lovat Dickson, 1938, p. 205.

<sup>21</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, pp. 35-6.

<sup>22</sup> Nerida Jeanie Elliot, 'Anzac, Hollywood and Home: 1909-1939', MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1989, p. 91.

papers. For myself I enjoy them but there are old people too, who go the pictures. Do they want reminding how their sons or husbands left them. Give us good comedians and we will appreciate them.<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Richards emphasised the need for comedy during the war years, stating that even in serious war films there was an element of comedy, with the British sense of humour being seen as their secret weapon in *Pimpernel Smith* (1941). The British preference for comedy during the war was seen in the popularity of the comic actor, George Formby, who was the top British box-office attraction from 1938-1943.<sup>24</sup> Formby's movies were formulaic and this perhaps also met a need at a time of difficulty and unrest for the British. As one observer stated, 'George is goomph; George meets girl; George plays 'uke'; George beats villain; George gets girl'.<sup>25</sup> The plots were always romantic with 'virtue and true love triumphing' and the 'small man somehow emerges unscathed'.<sup>26</sup> Positive storylines were part of the escapist antidote.

Other top box-office attractions for the British in this period were the Gainsborough movies, known for their light-hearted topics, in stark contrast to the British critical establishment of the 1940s, which was rooted in traditions of documentary realism, literary quality and of the middle-class improvement ethic.<sup>27</sup> Gainsborough movies were neither uplifting nor realistic, and instead focused on escapism from the rigours of war and the deprivation of post-war austerity. Gainsborough's sister company was Gaumont-British Picture Corporation which produced 'quality' pictures, leaving Gainsborough to produce the popular 'B' movies and melodramas. Gainsborough also produced 'the women's picture', something that had not existed previously in Britain, and which was produced in direct response to a perceived box-office need – with men away, it was believed that women needed some specific women's entertainment and a

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge, 1987, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to 'Dad's Army'*, Manchester: Manchester University, 1997, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 222.

<sup>26</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, pp. 437-8.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to 'Dad's Army'*, Manchester: Manchester University, 1997, p. 111.

defined and movie-hungry group responded avidly to their new product.<sup>28</sup> The action of the plot centred around women, whether helpless or heroic, and this polarity was always a marked feature of the storyline. The female characters were either chaste or unchaste and the men either sensitive and caring or brutal and uncaring; by contemporary standards, Gainsborough movies were open about violence and sex.<sup>29</sup>

As in the United States and the United Kingdom, the movies provided ‘something to do’ for residents of Palmerston North. One resident remembered ‘there was actually nothing else to do’.<sup>30</sup> Fred Symes, another local resident, recalled that as a child if you wanted entertainment, ‘you went to the movies’.<sup>31</sup> Like their United States and United Kingdom counterparts, Palmerston North residents enjoyed the escapism and fantasy they derived from the movies. An advertisement in January 1929, for *The Cardboard Lover* (1928) had the following escapist hyperbole:

A Palpitating Pageant of Pleasure featuring MARION DAVIES is Captivating Palace Patrons ... Scintillating and Sparkling, Rippling with Romance, Agitating with Action, Convulsing with Comedy amid Scenes of SPECTACULAR SPLENDOUR. Unclouded, Untroubled, Unalloyed, Hilarious Happiness for Everybody. Radiant, Riotous, Rough and Ready Comedy.<sup>32</sup>

A reviewer for *Caught in the Fog* (1928) commented that the movie was a good one for ‘folks who are befogged with this or that. It will make them laugh and forget it.’<sup>33</sup> The *Dream of Love* (1928) was described as being set in a ‘mythical and picturesque Balkan kingdom’, telling the story of a ‘love romance between a wandering gipsy and the royal heir to a throne’,<sup>34</sup> and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) was an ‘epic of spectacular settings

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998, pp. 448.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Bob White, Palmerston North, 11 July 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Fred Symes, Palmerston North, 2 December 2010.

<sup>32</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 3 January 1929, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 24 August 1929, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 31 July 1929, p. 3.

and romance in ancient Rome'.<sup>35</sup> *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928) was described as a film that 'probably ranks as the greatest contribution to the art of the silent drama', but in case that was not enough to entice patrons, the reviewer added

Down in the South Seas, where nights are long and languorous, and days sun-kissed and climate-blest; where stately palms stand out invitingly against a heavenly blue sky and exotic flowers grow in riotous profusion; where love comes with the suddenness and fierceness of a tropical hurricane – that's where Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer actually filmed *White Shadows in the South Seas*, the bewitching screen version of Frederick O'Brien's romantic story.<sup>36</sup>

When *Michael and Mary* (1931) came to Palmerston North, it was hailed as 'Yet another big Gainsborough offering' which after 'a phenomenal run of six months at the historic St. James Theatre, London,'<sup>37</sup> was to be 'lifted bodily to Palmerston North'.<sup>38</sup> It was called the 'outstanding hit' of the 1930 London season and *The Brisbane Courier* claimed the acting 'was the finest ever seen on the screen in this city',<sup>39</sup> indicating that Australians too enjoyed the movie.

New Zealanders were just as keen to escape the realities of war as were those in the United States and United Kingdom. The *New Zealand Listener* movie reviewer, Gordon Mirams, frequently found movies were well received because of the absence of war: 'Our small friend'<sup>40</sup> has given this film a hearty handclap because he had an hour and a-half of good, simple enjoyment, and the only time he remembered a war was on was when he momentarily tried to puzzle out whether the houseboys were Japanese or

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<sup>35</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 9 June 1933, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 11 July 1929, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 23 May 1933, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, 24 May 1933, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 23 May 1933, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Mirams used a stick figure and a chair to indicate his scoring of movies. The figure standing and clapping was the highest praise given to a film and if he was leaving the chair (and by extension the room) it was the poorest of films. Usually the figure was arranged in a variety of seated and slouching positions indicating the film was somewhere between extremely poor and exceedingly good.

not'.<sup>41</sup> Mirams wrote that the huge popularity of the *Quiet Wedding* (1941) may have been due to the fact that 'although the film was made in England in the midst of the war, there is absolutely nothing in it to remind one of the fact',<sup>42</sup> and *International Lady* (1941) 'did very well at the box office ... because it took people's minds off war'. Mirams did, however, criticise that particular movie for 'viewing the war simply as a convenient background for melodramatic adventures by impossible characters'.<sup>43</sup> Mirams raised this topic again in reviewing *Paris Calling* (1941), saying it was 'another one of those pseudo-realistic fairy tales which convince me more and more that Hollywood still regards the war mainly as an excuse to flood the screen with melodramatic fiction about International Ladies, Sinister Spy Rings, Secret Ciphers, Well-Informed Quarters and Love versus Patriotism'. He had to concede however, that 'maybe this *is* the alley down which the public want to escape'.<sup>44</sup>

The appeal of an escapist antidote to the dark days of war assisted New Zealand movie theatres in attaining strong attendances in World War Two, just as they did in the United States and the United Kingdom. In 1943, New Zealanders attended the movies 38,256,659 times, with an average admission of 23 times per year, a level that was not reached before World War Two, or been reached since.<sup>45</sup> In the United States, admissions averaged 85,000,000 over the years of World War Two, a strong increase from the depression of the 1930s.<sup>46</sup> The United Kingdom attendance peaked at the end of the war with 1,635,000 attendances in 1946.<sup>47</sup> The New Zealand movie business was also helped, inadvertently, during the Second World War by having American servicemen stationed in the country. New Zealanders benefited from the latest films sent by the United States Government for the entertainment of their troops. In Palmerston North, Merv Hancock recalled that in 1942 the city hosted the

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<sup>41</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 27 March 1942, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 23 January 1942, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 17 April, 1942, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 3 July 1942, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> G. T. Bloomfield, *New Zealand: A Handbook of Historical Statistics*, Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984, p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> John Belton, *American Cinema: American Culture*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, p. 257.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk> retrieved 2 January 2012.

American Marines for a year which increased Palmerstonians interest in all-things American, as the Marines cut striking figures in their ‘smart uniforms’, they always has ‘plenty of money’, and the ‘girls were very interested in them’.<sup>48</sup>

A particular component of escapism that the public was drawn to was the opportunity to see the almost invariably glamorous and gorgeous actors and actresses who starred in the movies. One of Mayer’s British respondents wrote ‘Carry me into the past with Laurence Olivier, Nelson Eddy, Greta Garbo, and the others and I’m happy!!’<sup>49</sup> McKibbin stated that for women, American movies were associated with glamour and ‘the more austere life become in the 1940s the stronger was the association’.<sup>50</sup> Children were as *au fait* with stars as adults were, with a twelve-year-old stating, ‘My favourite films were cowboys, [and] Gangsters, and my favourite film stars were Buck Jones, James Cagney, Marea Montez, and Songa Henie’.<sup>51</sup> In looking at what attracted people to the movies, American author Larry McMurtry stated ‘If I had to bet, box office-wise, on either the star system or the national conscience, I’d bet on the star system every time’.<sup>52</sup>

Reviewers and advertisers were quick to capitalize on this attraction by highlighting the actors in the movie. American actors, brothers John, Ethel, and Lionel Barrymore all screened in *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932) and were described in a Palmerston North newspaper as the ‘Royal Family of the Theatre’, in more than a passing nod to our British heritage.<sup>53</sup> Bette Davis in *The Little Foxes* (1942) was described as the ‘Screen’s Greatest Emotional Star in the Greatest Drama’,<sup>54</sup> and *If I Had a Million* (1932) was advertised as ‘portrayed by a cast including Fifteen of the Screen’s Most Popular

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Mervyn (Merv) Hancock, 3 February 2012.

<sup>49</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 31.

<sup>50</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 431.

<sup>51</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 36.

<sup>52</sup> Larry McMurtry, *Film Flam: Essays on Hollywood*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 70.

<sup>53</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 25 July 1933, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 31 March 1942, p. 2.

Stars'.<sup>55</sup> In *Sir Lumberjack* (1926), the reviewer writes that 'No atmosphere is more suitable to a big, upstanding, athlete than the surroundings of virgin timber and the background of a great logging camp. And it is in this environment that Lefty Flynn finds himself.'<sup>56</sup> Imogene Robertson is reported to be 'one of the most beautiful girls ever seen on the screen',<sup>57</sup> and Richard Cromwell is described as 'that much sought after young leading man in Hollywood'.<sup>58</sup> Advertising for Marion Davies in *The Cardboard Lover* (1928) claimed that one look at the star 'and you'll readily understand why GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES!'<sup>59</sup> In noting the very few men at a screening of *Appointment for Love* (1941), Mirams wondered whether they were jealous, and whether the primarily female audience were there to see Charles Boyer's 'boudoir eyes and his sex appeal'.<sup>60</sup>

The public were satisfied as long as they could see their stars in action, as Mirams noted in his review of *You'll Never Get Rich* (1941): 'Astaire dances, and dances well, and Rita Hayworth does likewise and looks well into the bargain, and it is unlikely that their public will want more. At any rate, I didn't'.<sup>61</sup> It was also noted when a favourite star was not shown off to their best, as in a *Second Chorus* (1940), where 'there was a tendency to crowd Astaire out of the limelight in favour of Artie Shaw and his orchestra, and since most people who go to see a Fred Astaire picture, go to see Fred Astaire, this was a bad blunder'.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes the relatively rare appearance of a star led to increased interest in their movies, as was the case with Greta Garbo's films, which were 'so few and far between that each one is a cinema event and we are entitled to expect something rather special from it'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 6 July 1933, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 31 July 1929, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 13 August 1929, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 9 June 1933, p. 3

<sup>59</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 4 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 10 April 1942, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 24 April 1942, p 14.

<sup>62</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 24 April 1942, p 14.

<sup>63</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 26 June 1942, p 18.

What the stars represented was also a factor that drew the crowds. When Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were dancing, they were having fun. Their movies expressed pleasure and the promoters of those movies were selling a state of mind, a lifestyle.<sup>64</sup> Movie exhibitors often ensured they catered to more than one 'lifestyle', as seen in the advertisement for *Salomy Jane* (1932), describing the 'great star' Charles Farrell in 'one of his most romantic and colourful roles ... being highly dramatic, intensely exciting, and of tremendous appeal to men who like plenty of action and to women who prefer romance.'<sup>65</sup> Advertisements often spoke to both genders in an attempt to increase their viewer numbers, as seen in the advertisement for *Adam Had Four Sons* (1941), 'A picture all women will see and no man will want to miss.'<sup>66</sup>

Another facet of escapism that gave the movie theatre a definite allure was the 'illicit' nature of both the theatre and the movies shown, and this attraction was there from the earliest days of the moving pictures, as was discussed in Chapter Four. For some of the audience, the fact they were entering into a dark room was itself the attraction. Movie theatres offered a 'public privacy' to people who had no other legitimate access to a comfortable, unchaperoned space. Maltby and Craven describe the movie theatre as

the great dark room where the dream factory's dreams are sold, permits its audiences the intensity of privacy in a public space. Our eyes, our minds, and sometimes our hands are permitted to wander, perhaps into forbidden places in an exploration of self, or other, of difference ... We know ... that the great dark room is a site of Eros: at the most banal level one of our culture's places for adolescent sexual discovery. But also a place for public fantasy, for the public expression of ideas and actions we must each individually repress in our everyday behaviour.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Robert James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1920-1939: A Round of Cheap Diversions?*, Manchester: Manchester University, 2010, p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 March 1933, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 31 January 1942, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 20.

The ‘luxury and semi-privacy’ of the theatre, combined with the romantic and titillating movies, made the theatre ‘the ideal venue for courtship’.<sup>68</sup> In the United States, the back row of the cinema has long been associated with young couples ‘making out’. A 1933 investigation into the relationship between youth and the movies found that the majority of young people admitted imitating the forms of love-making they saw on the screen, with one fifteen-year old American girl asking ‘What movie does not offer pointers in the art of kissing?’<sup>69</sup> The same response was found in the United Kingdom, with one of Mayer’s respondents admitting ‘I try and take tips in love affairs and romance pictures, one never knows that one day it may provide me with an everlasting sweetheart of my own’,<sup>70</sup> with another commenting that ‘I used to tell my ‘boyfriend of the moment’ to note the way Robert Stack held Deanna [Durbin] in his arms and kissed her’.<sup>71</sup>

Simon Sigley remembered his teenage years in the 1970s where ‘cinemas were semi-public social spaces that allowed ... glimpses into illicit sights’.<sup>72</sup> This memory parallels that of Fred Symes, a Palmerston North resident, who recalled his movie-going experiences in the 1940s where, as a young teenager, he enjoyed the ‘hair-raisingly naughty’ and ‘scandalous goings-on’ of the stars on the big-screen.<sup>73</sup> Symes also remembered seeing *Gilda* (1946) when he was fourteen, and the image of Rita Hayworth putting on a stocking stayed with him for a long time; he claimed he ‘never, ever saw anyone put on a stocking as sexually as Rita had done’.<sup>74</sup> Charlotte Greenhalgh wrote of the attraction the movies held for young New Zealanders at a time when ‘passion and the cinema went hand in hand.’<sup>75</sup> The Encyclopedia of New

<sup>68</sup> Charlotte Greenhalgh, ‘Bush Cinderellas: Young New Zealanders and Romance at the Movies, 1919-1939’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 44:1, 2010, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 37.

<sup>70</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 34.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>72</sup> Simon Sigley, ‘Film Culture: Its Development in New Zealand 1929-1972’, PhD thesis, Auckland: Auckland University, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Fred Symes, ‘My Rival, the Aga Khan’, unpublished article, 2010, 794.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Fred Symes, 2 December, 2010.

<sup>75</sup> Charlotte Greenhalgh, ‘Bush Cinderellas: Young New Zealanders and Romance at the Movies, 1919-1939’, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 44:1, 2010, p. 1.

Zealand states that the 1920s saw a ‘new dating ritual’ introduced, as ‘hand holding in the movies on a Saturday night’ became a regular pastime. ‘In the dark of the cinema, arms would extend around the shoulders of potential lovers and kisses were exchanged’. At the same time, on the movie screen, ‘film stars modeled how viewers should ‘do’ romance.’<sup>76</sup>

Encouraging the sexual overtones of movie attendance, advertising often used suggestive phrasing. *Lady Robin Hood* (1919) was described as ‘Throbbing with Mystery, Thrills, Romance’,<sup>77</sup> *The Black Watch* (1929) was ‘the story of a passionate romance that blazes from the screen – with its central figures a beautiful woman – inflamed with power – and of a man – hero and gentleman, who had sworn to strip her of her strength, but succumbed – for a few unforgettable moments – to her charms and allure’. *Marine Raiders* (1944) was described as ‘THROBBING with romance that must be seized in swiftly stolen moments’<sup>78</sup> and *The Cardboard Lover* (1928) was a ‘Palpitating Pageant of Pleasure’.<sup>79</sup>

The physical aspect of the theatres themselves, with their exotic architectural styles and décor, assisted in creating ‘a romantic atmosphere within which audiences could consume onscreen fantasies’.<sup>80</sup> The often luxurious surroundings and comfortable seating sometimes surpassed that of the grandest hotels. The combination of ‘venue and product worked together to create the darkened world ... so effectively as to render onlookers powerless to resist’.<sup>81</sup> One observer believes that today, ‘a television in a well-lit living room has been a puny substitute’ for the earlier days of picture palaces.<sup>82</sup> In the 1930s, the arrival of air-conditioning added a significant draw-card for hot, weary patrons looking for respite from the heat of the day. In America, air-

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/love-and-romance/4> retrieved 1 January 2012.

<sup>77</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 27 February 1929, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 7 March 1945, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 3 Jan 1929, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, New York: McGraw Inc., 1994, p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997, pp. 54-5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xi-x.

conditioning turned the summer months from the worst attended to the best-attended season.<sup>83</sup> In Palmerston North, the Regent advertised its theatre as ‘Where It is Always Delightfully Cool’ and the Palace Theatre made sure patrons knew it was ‘Electrically Cooled’,<sup>84</sup> and claimed to be ‘The Coolest Spot in Town’.<sup>85</sup> The Meteor, opening in 1937, emphasised it had the ‘latest air reconditioning system, together with provision for heating in winter’.<sup>86</sup> The photo of the Rivoli Theatre in ‘Middletown’ shows that in the United States too, air-conditioning was considered an important attraction for patrons to ‘escape’ the outdoor heat, and perhaps explains the queue. Air-conditioning was considered important enough for Gomery to consider it one of his five ‘important factors’ outside of the movie itself (the others being the theatre location, the building, service, and stage shows).<sup>87</sup>



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Figure 5.1 The Rivoli Theatre, Muncie, ('Middletown'), Indiana, 1941.

As well as the comfort of the interior, the theatre itself was a’ visible connection to the outside world’. Theatres placed in the middle of towns or in the town’s Main Street showed their importance by being one of the first things seen upon entering the town

<sup>83</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 12 December 1934, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 6 December 1934, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 12 February 1937, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Exhibition in America*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 43.

<sup>88</sup> Wiley W. (Bill) Spurgeon Jr., *Muncie at the Millennium*, Muncie, Indiana: Muncie Newspapers, 1999, p. 91.

and one of the last things seen as you left. ‘It is a vision that connects you with a wider world; a world of larger-than-life adventures and dreams – a visible pop mythology for the twentieth century’.<sup>89</sup>

Mirams wrote in 1942 that movies were

Dope at one and six a dose. Despite the grimness of the times and the need for straight and ruthless thinking – or possibly because of this – the cinema is still the great purveyor of pipe-dreams; it is just as much concerned with superficialities and evasion of real issues as it has ever been.<sup>90</sup>

Emotionally, and physically, the movies were a place of refuge from the realities of life, whether in the United States, the United Kingdom or Palmerston North; they were an escape hatch to another world.

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Putnam, *Silent Screens: the Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theatre*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2000, p. 29.

<sup>90</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 10 July 1942, p. 10.

## Chapter Six: Criticism

*This protest does not exclude from the cinema pleasant fantasy, but the fantasy should have some purpose or link with life: it should not be so many minutes of airy nothingness.<sup>1</sup>*

The rise of popular culture, seen in a range of activities from movies to comics to music and dancing, was seen by some in the Western world as a threat to established values and socially acceptable behaviours. The movies were not universally loved and there were many in New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom, who wished to see the new, popular form of entertainment tightly controlled. The movies were seen by those concerned with the moral well-being of the community, generally politicians, middle-class ‘reformers’ and the clergy, as an activity that threatened the predominantly middle-class cultural hegemony, thus leading to a ‘moral panic’.<sup>2</sup> These concerns were manifest in increased agitation for censorship in a business that had been, in its earliest days, left unregulated. Another concern expressed in both New Zealand and the United Kingdom was the high proportion of American movies being watched. Concerns centred on the perceived negative impact of American culture on local culture, and the lack of support for the British movie industry. Criticism and pro-British legislation did little, however, to decrease the popularity of American films in either New Zealand or the United Kingdom.

Openshaw and Shuker have suggested four theoretical ideas which have informed attempts to censor popular culture in New Zealand: ‘censorship as an aspect of state middle-class cultural hegemony; the notion of moral panic; the dichotomy between high and low culture; and ... Americanisation.<sup>3</sup> These themes are pertinent to any

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<sup>1</sup> Letter-to-the-editor, *New Zealand Listener*, 31 July 1942, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Openshaw and Roy Shuker, ‘Silent Movies and Comics’, in Malcolm McKinnon, (ed.), *The American Connection: Essays from The Stout Centre Conference*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1988, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

discussion on the development of a movie culture in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

In the United States, criticism of the content of movies began almost immediately. Soon after the Lumière's first public screening in 1895, *The Kiss* (1896), came under attack when shown in America. The actual kiss was between May Irwin and John C. Rice and while it lasted less than a minute of viewing time, it thrilled thousands and was decried by others as a 'lyric of the stockyards'.<sup>4</sup> A magazine review at the time stated that while many patrons were comfortable viewing a kiss on the stage from a distance, it was 'absolutely disgusting' to see it 'magnified to Gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over'.<sup>5</sup> In 1898 a travelling film exhibitor was taken to court by a parson who objected to a scene in the movie *Courtship*, where a 'lady was sitting on a seat in a garden while a gentleman came up slyly behind and kissed her'.<sup>6</sup>

Guy Phelps claims that the 'Catholic orientation of American censorship has generally led to more restrictions on sexual matters than violence', and he states that in the United Kingdom too, 'censors have at all times been particularly concerned with sex'.<sup>7</sup> In 1917, the British Film Board was working to a 43-rule Code, of which twenty related to sexual behaviour. These included the specific banning of 'unnecessary exhibition of underclothing, indecorous dancing, scenes suggestive of immorality, situations accentuating delicate marital relations and, of course, nude figures'.<sup>8</sup>

In New Zealand too, there were concerns about the sexual content of movies, with the New Zealand Educational Institute calling at an early stage for a ban of 'impure pictures', with most of the concern focusing on films that recreated the atmosphere of

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<sup>4</sup> Richard S. Randall, *Censorship of the Movies: The Social and Political Control of a Mass Medium*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1968, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry*, New Haven: Yale University, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Neville March Hunnings, *Film Censors and the Law*, George Allen and Unwin, 1967, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1975, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

the ‘seducer, or the illicit loves of husband and wife, or some such tragedies that are developed out of sexual connections’, although theft and unlawful behaviour were also a concern.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the concern over the sexual content of movies stemmed from the attraction the movies had for children. From its earliest days, the cinema was primarily a family medium, so ‘nobody favoured a system that would deny admittance to any film to any section of the public’. Because no distinction was made, or wanted, between adult and child for many years, this meant ‘every production had to be of a standard suitable for children’.<sup>10</sup> It was therefore a decade or so before concerns emerged about the need to protect the young who were perceived by some to be ‘potential victims’ of movie content, with the resultant censorship debates focused on preventing the ‘corruption of the innocent’.<sup>11</sup> The fascination that young people had with movies in the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand meant this was a concern for legislators in all three countries, and the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs responded to public pressure by ‘keeping a careful eye on overseas responses to film censorship’.<sup>12</sup> Richard Maltby observed that ‘although the details of censorship procedures varied from nation to nation there was a striking similarity in the evolution of those mechanisms in the countries of Europe, the Americas and Australasia.’<sup>13</sup>

One of the similarities, outlined by Chapman, is that the history of film censorship during its first decade and a half ‘is one of transition from the local to the national.’<sup>14</sup> In Britain the Cinematograph Act of 1909 required local authorities to license cinemas

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<sup>9</sup> Roy Shuker and Roger Openshaw, ‘New Zealand Youth and Silent Movies’, in *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 22:1, 1987, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1975, pp. 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Shuker and Roger Openshaw with Janet Soler, *Youth, Media and Moral Panic in New Zealand*, Palmerston North: Massey University, 1990, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Roy Shuker and Roger Openshaw, ‘New Zealand Youth and Silent Movies’, in *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 22:1, 1987, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Maltby, ‘Censorship and Self-Regulation’, in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, (ed.), *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford: Oxford University, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p. 68.

to ensure they met safety regulations, although Chapman points out that some councils used this authority to license cinemas on the movies they showed, citing the example of the London County Council in 1910 banning a topical news clip of a boxing match between Jack Johnson (the black champion, who won) and James L. Jeffries (the white challenger).<sup>15</sup> The United States dealt with the specific issue of the screening of boxing matches at a national level, with the United States Congress passing legislation following the fight to ban ‘any film or other pictorial representation of any prize fight’ from public exhibition, from the fear the film could cause racial disturbances.<sup>16</sup> In New Zealand, there were no such concerns; when the National Council of Churches asked the Government to ban the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship in 1909, they were declined.<sup>17</sup>

In the United States, local censorship boards had been in evidence since 1907 when Chicago City Council had introduced a law allowing the Chief of Police to ban any film that

portrays depravity, criminality, or lack of virtue of a class of citizens of any race, colour, creed or religion, and exposes them to contempt, derision or obloquy, or tends to produce a breach of the peace, or riots, or purports to represent any hanging, lynching or burning of a human being.<sup>18</sup>

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, censorship became self-regulation as the cinema industry, realising that some form of censorship was inevitable, ‘took the initiative in agreeing to censor itself.’<sup>19</sup> There had always been an element of self-regulation within the business as the earliest movies and theatres suffered from the ‘issue of respectability’. At first, novelty value guaranteed every film would be popular, regardless of its content and quality. It was soon realised, however, that to reach the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Roy Shuker and Roger Openshaw, ‘New Zealand Youth and Silent Movies’, in *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 22, 1, 1987, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Jones (ed.), *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, p. 798.

<sup>19</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p. 70.

largest audiences, movies had to undergo a ‘great drive for respectability’.<sup>20</sup> This led to better theatres, but it was always acknowledged that real victory would only come through the production of better films. The movie industry responded to the challenge of an era of ‘Busybodies and Meddlers’ by not only cleaning up minor abuses but by becoming itself an ‘agency of social improvement’.<sup>21</sup> The United States film industry formed the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1908, which evolved into the National Body of Censorship (NBC) in 1915. In Britain, film industry representatives persuaded the government to establish the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in 1913. Like its American equivalent, the NBC, it had no statutory powers and it did not replace local censorship, although most councils followed its classification system of ‘U’ for universal viewing, and ‘A’ for adults.<sup>22</sup>

Censorship concerns continued in the United States and led to the legendary Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, often called the Hays Code after its creator, William Hays. This was also implemented by the movie industry, not the Government, and included such general principles as disallowing films that lowered the moral standards of those who saw them and declaring that natural or human law was not to be ridiculed. Particular applications included ‘brutal killings are not to be presented in detail’ and ‘the use of firearms should be restricted to the essentials’. The production studios adopted the Hays Code, but it was not strictly enforced and a Supreme Court decision in 1952 furthered the decline of motion picture censorship in the United States, arguing that it was a ‘restraint on freedom of speech’ and thereby a violation of the First Amendment.<sup>23</sup> The result was a balancing act that left it to the studios to determine to what degree they erred on the side of caution for fear of using

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp.18-19.

<sup>22</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Donald T. Critchlow and Emilie Raymond (eds.), *Hollywood and Politics: A Sourcebook*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 251.

controversial themes that would upset their audiences, and to what degree they pushed the boundaries to ensure innovation and a novelty factor.

New Zealand differed from the United States and the United Kingdom in not having a substantial film industry, so its film legislation came from the state, with the first film censorship appearing in 1916 with the Cinematograph-Film Censorship Act, at roughly the same time as industry controls were being instituted in those countries. This appointed New Zealand's first national film censor, who had the power to reject films considered unfit for public viewing. The Act made it illegal to show any film which had not been approved by the censor, and movies could be given unequivocal approval or could be subject to exhibition to restricted audiences.

Despite legislation and self-regulation, censorship concerns continued in Palmerston North, just as they did in the United States and the United Kingdom. A report in the *Manawatu Evening Standard* quoted a headmaster as saying

excessive attendance of pupils at pictures results in a lack of sleep and undue emotional excitement ... I find that 64 per cent of the pupils go regularly once a week to the pictures, 30 per cent two or three times, and some to each single programme. These pupils are not found at the top of their class. Sixty-one per cent chose their own films and only thirty-seven per cent are advised by their parents.<sup>24</sup>

An editorial in the *Manawatu Daily Times*, in support of the Education Board, had earlier called for the Government to 'make more drastic the censorship of cinefilms ... with the object of eliminating the noxious elements which are tending to destroy the moral sense of so many young persons'. It wrote of a complaint against the 'laxity' of New Zealand censorship, saying a correspondent had seen a movie giving an 'exhibition of base passions', including 'four murders and one suicide' and 'an exhibition of

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<sup>24</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 17 June 1942, p. 4.

libidinous love'.<sup>25</sup> The censor explained that the movie had been given an A rating certificate, indicating it was approved for general exhibition, although recommended for adult audiences. The newspaper concluded that the Government did not feel the need for any other recommendation, thereby 'throwing the onus upon parents of keeping their children away from pictures that may be unsuitable for them to see'. It was added that the Censor could not 'compel picture exhibitors to refuse admission to children'.<sup>26</sup> Gordon Mirams agreed that the responsibility for keeping children away from undesirable movies lay with the parents, where it 'does properly belong'. He also believed that a rating certificate such as 'Recommended as particularly desirable for children' would assist both parents and children in making the right choices.<sup>27</sup> This more positive approach would see people concerning themselves

less about what children *should not* see at the cinema and more about what they *should* see. In other words, what is really needed is not censorship, but guidance. Censorship may, indeed, have exactly the opposite effect from what is intended. It is quite likely to emphasise the desirability of the thing that is censored: give it the attraction of forbidden fruit.<sup>28</sup>

An example of the 'attraction of forbidden fruit' was given by G. M. Thomson, a member of New Zealand's Legislative Council, in 1920. He cited a film in Dunedin where an advertisement announced that no girl under sixteen was to be allowed into the theatre. The result was that the theatre was 'rushed with school girls, with their hair up, and nobody could say that they were under sixteen years of age.'<sup>29</sup>

Richard Lambert, a British film critic writing in 1934, also agreed that the 'path to mere restriction leads nowhere.' Lambert believed that the 'energy thrown into trying to

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<sup>25</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, 27 October 1920, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, 27 October 1920, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1945, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Roy Shuker and Roger Openshaw, 'New Zealand Youth and Silent Movies', in *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 22:1, 1987, pp. 91-92.

prevent people from seeing harmful films would be much better employed in trying to help them see better films'.<sup>30</sup>

Parents had mixed reactions to their roles in censoring their children's viewing. It was reported in Palmerston North that

The parents of two boys charged with petty thefts attributed their children's action to witnessing kinematograph pictures of burglaries, and stated that the boys had tried to copy the easy manner in which the thieves abstracted their booty.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, a letter to the editor in 1942 expressed the concern of 'A Worried Parent', that their young son had attended the cinema on Saturday afternoon and included in the

usual serial and cowboy pictures which they love so much ... [was] a murder picture ... I cannot understand why this kind of picture should be included in their afternoon pleasure. Our little chap was terrified all Saturday evening, and we had to attend to him most of the night and again to-night.<sup>32</sup>

Theatre management's response to this complaint was to acknowledge that a movie for adults had been shown, but they explained that it was accompanied with the usual 'Recommended by Censor for Adults' warning. While it was not the usual practice to show such movies on Saturday afternoons, theatre management admitted that, due to the war, there was a 'difficulty of obtaining short subjects' to make up a programme of sufficient length, and as such the situation did not give 'theatre management as wide a selection as they would wish'.<sup>33</sup> This problem was not confined to New Zealand alone. The Chief of the Commonwealth Film Censorship reported in the *Sydney Post* in 1934 that the main issue for the year had been the difficulty in catering for children, saying it

<sup>30</sup> Paul Rotha, Andrew Buchanan, Mary Field, R.S. Lambert, C.A. Lejeune, edited by R.S. Lambert, *For Filmgoers Only: The Intelligent Filmgoer's Guide to the Film*, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> *Poverty Bay Herald*, 14 June 1911, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 6 January 1942, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 6 January 1942, p. 2.

'was generally agreed that practically all the films made now are for adults only'. It was commented that 'in England legislation had been enacted compelling the unsuitability of otherwise of pictures for general exhibition to be prominently advertised'.<sup>34</sup> In New Zealand at this time, there were two ratings; Recommended for Adults or Recommended for General Exhibition. Picture theatre managers expected parents to monitor their children's viewing consumption, and to take heed of the censor's ratings.

One of the strongest advocates on behalf of the protection of children in New Zealand was Sir Truby King. The 1920 Conference of the Royal New Zealand Society for the Health of Women and Children in Wellington endorsed King's views on movies and children and resolved that moving pictures were injurious to children and young persons; that attendance of children at picture shows and the nature of the pictures allowed to be shown to children should be regulated by the Education Department; and that the nature of the programmes should be classified into a) adult and b) children's programmes.<sup>35</sup> The first censor's recommendation did not appear in Palmerston North until 17 April 1929, with *The Girl Who Wouldn't Work* (1925), starring Lionel Barrymore, described as 'Recommended by the Censor More Specially for Adult Audiences'.<sup>36</sup> It was not until February 1933 that all movies advertised in *Manawatu Standard* carried a censor's recommendation.

The problem of the influence of movies on young people was also seen in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. An article in a Melbourne paper stressed the desire for movies to be a family affair, claiming that the large number of movies forbidden to children between 'six and sixteen ... injures the excellent family spirit of the picture theatre'. The article went on to argue that 'to a large degree the movies

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<sup>34</sup> *Evening Post*, 1 May 1934, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Appendix Six, 'The Evils of Picture Shows', in Lloyd Chapman, *In a Strange Garden: the Life and Times of Truby King*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003, pp. 241-245.

<sup>36</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 17 April 1929, p. 1.

have won their popularity by providing entertainment day or night for parents and children in domestic parties', and this needed to be retained.<sup>37</sup>

Some residents of 'Middletown', United States, were concerned with what they called the 'problems of mating' this 'new agency' introduced, as movie advertisements and billboards shouted the educational nature of their fare with headlines such as 'Girls! You will learn how to handle 'em!' and 'Is it true that marriage kills love?' High school teachers were convinced the movies were an important factor in bringing about the 'early sophistication' of young people, resulting in a 'relaxing of social taboos', or in other words, an increased incidence of teenage sex.<sup>38</sup>

British author, Richard Ford, believed 'everyone is agreed that the normal cinema programme does not provide proper entertainment for children. Nearly half of all full-length feature films receive an 'A' certificate, and of the 'U' feature films only a few possess the characteristics with make them enjoyable for children.'<sup>39</sup> He stated that the

adult film is rarely the child's film. Adults are sometimes strongly moved by really tragic films. They have already come in to contact with tragedy in real life and are therefore able to assess what they have seen at its true spiritual value. Young people, to whom life has so far offered nothing but fragrance and moonshine, find such serious things merely dry and boring or even ridiculous.<sup>40</sup>

However, Ford disagreed with what he called the

common delusion to suppose that the really harmful element for children in an 'A' film is a long intimate love scene. Nothing is further from the truth ... Children are bored – enormously bored – by lovemaking on the screen. The mere sight of a woman who

<sup>37</sup> *The Sun News-Pictorial*, 3 August 1932.

<sup>38</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, pp. 267.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

seems likely to fulfill this function in the story may easily provoke loud disapproval from the children. The reason is obvious. Lovemaking is an activity which holds up the action of the film ... Kissing provides the nadir of tedium, and if drawn out, it provokes the most violent catcalls.<sup>41</sup>

An example of this disinterest is remembered by one of Mayer's research correspondents, on her first trip to an adult's movie with her parents, armed with sweets and an orange as her 'treats'. She recalled nothing of the actual movie, 'except the fact that just as the hero kissed the heroine I commenced to suck on my orange. Never again, vowed my parents'.<sup>42</sup> As Thomas Cripps said, 'adulthood dawned when a kid learned the etiquette of movie-going'.<sup>43</sup>

While many complained of the increase in juvenile crime, either stealing to get into the pictures or bad behaviour because of their viewing, others talked about the positive effects of the 'educative, morally healthy and pleasure-giving entertainment'.<sup>44</sup> Mayer's study of British cinemagoers in the 1930s found the movies had many positive impacts on his correspondents, with one stating that 'films do influence my play and other activities because I can pick my words better and I can put more feeling into my plays at school'.<sup>45</sup> Another respondent said films had influenced him because he tried to 'take tips in love affairs and romance pictures', and he tried 'to imitate one or two stars and come away with the feeling I am good'.<sup>46</sup> Another admitted that 'films have done a lot for me, developed dress and colour sense, and a wild desire to see the world; to be a somebody, not just a someone in the daily pattern of life'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Jeffrey, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 72.

<sup>45</sup> J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

An American parent said she welcomed the educational aspect of the movies as her daughter ‘has to learn the ways of the world somehow and the movies are a good safe way.’<sup>48</sup> In Palmerston North, a parent was disappointed at the missed opportunity of the educative nature of the movies, precisely because the censor was too tough. ‘Mother of Two’ wrote that while there were movies that provided education on unwanted pregnancies and ‘social disease’, the ‘censor prohibits children under sixteen from seeing them, and these are the very children who should be taken in organised classes to see them, so that they may realise the pitfalls of life’. This parent believed it was time ‘that this false modesty was dropped’.<sup>49</sup>

Just as those involved in the film industry in the United States and the United Kingdom were keen to circumvent state censorship, so too were those involved in the film industry in New Zealand. John Fuller, one of the leading figures in New Zealand’s early cinema industry, was quick to dismiss the need for censorship.

#### WOWSERS AND PICTURE SHOWS.

No Need for Censors. John Fuller, Senior, had a word or two to say the other night at the King's Theatre, Auckland, in reply to Ranter J.J. North, over the latter's criticism on picture shows and the need of a censor for kinematograph films. When North tackled our picture shows, he tackled the ‘most decent, most popular, most instructive, most amusing, and most wholesome form of recreation and amusement that is available to the great mass of people’. Parson North stated in Christchurch recently, among a number of other tarradiddles, that a borough officer at Palmerston North had to reject large numbers of films sent out from Europe on account of their objectionable nature and questionable character. Mr Fuller gave the wowser parson the lie direct, when he stated that for twelve months his firm had supplied the programmes at the Palmerston North municipal theatre, and during each week only enough pictures were sent to be sufficient to complete the programme, and none had been thrown out. ‘We do not want a censor’ said the Picture King,

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<sup>48</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, pp. 267-8.

<sup>49</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 10 September 1942, p. 2.

'because the public is our censor. If our pictures were bad the public would stay away from our shows.' The crowded audience unanimously passed the following resolution: 'That on no occasion have the many thousands of patrons who have visited the King's Theatre ever witnessed a picture that could be taken exception to by any class, or one of a character injurious from a moral standpoint'. It now transpires that Jay Jay North's fears that the susceptibilities of the public were likely to be shocked by kinematograph pictures are absolutely groundless. Like most of the reverend gentleman's aversions, this proves to be a mere wind egg. This is the sort of piffle which is periodically circulated in support of a puritanical agitation in favour of the annihilation of every form of rational amusement.<sup>50</sup>

Along with the concern over the content of the movies was the concern with the high volume of American films that found their way onto New Zealand screens. The issue was two-fold: whether New Zealand should be supporting American movies rather than those being produced by Britain, the 'mother land' and other 'British' countries; and the perceived negative impact American movies had on the behaviour and language of New Zealanders.

Closely aligned to the concern of the influence of Americanisation was a discussion on 'high' and 'low' culture. Lealand believed New Zealand's 'high culture' came from Britain and was consumed by the older generation, while the United States provided the 'low culture' which was consumed by the younger generation. He stated that given New Zealand did not have a 'vigorous indigenous popular culture', most of its popular culture and 'persistent myths and significant signs' came from the United States.<sup>51</sup>

Another explanation of the differing cultures was that mainstream movies, which usually meant Hollywood-produced movies, were seen as low culture, whereas 'art movies', film festival movies, and the development of film societies were seen as high culture. Sigley explains movie high culture as being 'films associated with the avant-

<sup>50</sup> *New Zealand Truth*, 6 May 1911, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Geoff Lealand, 'Popular Music' in Malcolm McKinnon, (ed.), *The American Connection: Essays from The Stout Centre Conference*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1988, p. 86.

garde, or with ‘serious’ literature and theatre, or with education’.<sup>52</sup> A writer to the *Listener* agreed that movies should ‘utilise the brains of men like John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, William Saroyan, Ernest Hemingway and Richard Wright, men who see people as Tolstoy and Dostoevski saw them, as Henry Fielding and Samuel Butler saw them. Let us utilize the brains of real artists, not mere penpushers.’<sup>53</sup> The same writer did acknowledge, however, that ‘intellectual entertainment is admittedly risky.’

Not everyone agreed, however, that movies needed to follow ‘serious’ literature and theatre, with more than one writer roundly criticising movies that were based on plays meant for the stage. ‘The fault as I see it’, wrote a New Zealander

lies in the glaring fact that three-quarters of our films are adapted from Western stage plays, and that stage today, for preservation, features only ‘the rich and leisured cocktail-sipping class’. The modern cinema is a specific form of art and until Hollywood and England ... stop this mere mechanical copying of the stage and, in its place, substitute material written for the cinema’s possibilities of expression, we shall continue to be nauseated by ‘mass-produced things from the sausage machines of the cinema industry’.<sup>54</sup>

Mirams was the original author of the ‘sausage machine’ phrase, along with the wish ‘that the cinema would give me a bit more help in this job of championing it, by producing a few more films like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Dead End*, *Fury*, *Citizen Kane* .... to toss over into the enemy’s trenches [those who were anti-movies]. For the champions of the cinema are dangerously short of ammunition!’<sup>55</sup> Mirams preferred movies with ‘substance’, and his preferences echoed those of the *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther who ‘plead[ed] for films which came to grips with contemporary problems and contemporary ideas’, and Boyd Martin from Louisville’s

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<sup>52</sup> Simon Sigley, ‘Film Culture: Its Development in New Zealand, 1929-1972’, PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> Letter-to-the editor, *New Zealand Listener*, 31 July 1942, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 31 July 1942, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 10 July 1942, p. 10.

*Courier-Journal* who campaigned against ‘escapist fairy tales and threadbare formulas in favour of genuinely dramatic problems of these critically momentous times’.<sup>56</sup>

Openshaw and Shuker have said that American culture has both fascinated and alarmed New Zealanders,<sup>57</sup> and while this is true, it is less about an individual’s ambivalence and more about two differing philosophies. Either people embraced the American influence, or they were against it. Sigley downplayed any aspect of ‘moral panic’ by calling the debate the ‘Public cauldron of polite disquiet and disapproval that greeted American popular culture in its filmic form in a colony whose middle-class sense of self looked to Britain for its forms of cultural identity’.<sup>58</sup>

There was a clear and significant predominance of American-made movies shown in Palmerston North (see Chapter Three). In fact, the proportion of American movies watched in both Britain and New Zealand was staggering, particularly given the attempts to impose quotas and movie advertising in New Zealand, well in evidence in Palmerston North, that favoured British movies.

However, the support for the United States was not limited to their movies, particularly when they joined the War toward the end of 1941. A letter to the editor of the *Listener* suggested that we ‘write to Disney and ask him to design something for the NZ units’ after hearing that he designed insignia for the US forces. ‘America is our great ally now in the Pacific battle arena, and what could be more appropriate for our fighting units than a series of Disney’s quaint animals’.<sup>59</sup> Mirams wrote that ‘there could be nothing harmful to the war effort in showing us that the best things in life are simple, or that Americans are very much like ourselves’.<sup>60</sup> Young New Zealand women

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<sup>56</sup> Budd Schulberg, ‘Movies in America: After Fifty Years’ in *The Atlantic*, November 1947, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/1969/12> retrieved 15 March 2011.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Silent Movies and Comics’, Roger Openshaw and Roy Shuker, in Malcolm McKinnon, (ed.), *The American Connection: Essays from The Stout Centre Conference*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1988, p. 52.

<sup>58</sup> Simon Sigley, ‘Film Culture: Its Development in New Zealand, 1929-1972’ PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, 2003, p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 2 January 1942, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 16 January 1942, p. 10.

spoke of their experience entertaining American troops, saying ‘Occasionally we have dinner in town and then go to the pictures’, with another describing some of the very young soldiers as ‘just kids straight from school. Then as some of us are several years there senior, we can take them to the pictures, concerts, and so on, and not let them dip into their pockets’.<sup>61</sup>

Studies of the movie-going preference of the British also showed an almost universal bias towards American movies.<sup>62</sup> Respondents claimed British movies were always ‘lifeless’: they were ‘dull, ugly and uninspired’ and lacked the ‘slickness and polish of their American counterparts’. It was claimed that ‘English films have *still* a long way to go to satisfy as do the majority of American, although they are improving. I doubt whether anyone would prefer them’.<sup>63</sup> Others believed that British films were too middle or upper class, with comments often focusing on accents. A respondent wrote, ‘Why cannot our actors be real, and leave the ‘old school tie’ talk out, speak natural. Believe me the best films we have made have been spoiled by their silly ‘Bia Jove’ talk’. Another said ‘I voted American films best ... I hate to hear an ‘American gangster’ with an English accent’. A respondent who favoured American movies and went to the cinema on average three times every week said ‘The dialogue in British films is often a recitation instead of being spoken realistically as in the American’. George Perry explained that ‘excessive theatricality’ was a hallmark of the British film industry for many years as the ‘cosy scale of the country’ meant that film studios were sited in and around London, meaning ‘as actor could film all day and appear on the West End boards in the evening.’<sup>64</sup> American cinema, in comparison, discovered ‘the open spaces’

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<sup>61</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 19 June 1942, p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London: Routledge, 1984 and Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 90.

<sup>64</sup> George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show: From the 90s to the 70s*, London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon Ltd., 1974, p. 10.

and put a ‘whole continent between the theatres of the east and the studios of the west.’<sup>65</sup>

Of course not everyone preferred American movies and there were patrons who did not like ‘all that shooting’ and the ‘American nasal drawl and slang words’.<sup>66</sup> A frequent criticism of the talkies concerned the various accents and allegedly unpleasantly pitched voices. The Palace Theatre in Palmerston North advertised *The Black Watch*, in December 1929, by saying that ‘Every member of the formidable cast speak perfect English’ and the following night they added, ‘Now you can hear 100 P.C [per cent] English and Scotch voices’.<sup>67</sup>

An indication of the concern felt over ‘slang words’, and other words deemed inappropriate, is illustrated in the number of American movie titles that were changed for their British and New Zealand screenings. The American title *A Passport to Hell* (1932) was changed to *Burnt Offering*,<sup>68</sup> *Madame Racketeer* (1932) became *Sporting Widow*,<sup>69</sup> *My Gal Loves Music* (1944) became *My Girl Loves Music*,<sup>70</sup> and *The Gang’s All Here* (1943) became *The Girls He Left Behind*.<sup>71</sup> These movies were not, of course, advertised with the American titles. The changes were made long before the product was seen by patrons in the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

Landy noted that films produced in America were often heavily critical of ‘entrenched wealth and privilege’ and were more willing than British-produced films to ‘pose radical social alternatives to oppression’,<sup>72</sup> which had appeal to many British viewers. In Robert James’ study of the popular films shown by the Granada cinema chain in Britain

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 88-90.

<sup>67</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 27 and 28 December 1929, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 14, 16, 17 January 1933, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 4,6,7 February 1933, p. 1

<sup>70</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 23, 24, 26 June 1945, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 13, 14, 16 July 1945, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1991, p. 433.

in the early 1930s, he comments that ‘it may not have escaped the reader’s attention that none of the above-mentioned [popular] films were produced in Britain’.<sup>73</sup>

The reason some New Zealanders favoured British movies was not because the British movies were of a superior quality. It was generally recognised that American movies had become the dominant international style because their movies were longer, had popular stars, lavish sets and skillful cinematography.<sup>74</sup> That is, they provided what most of the public wanted. Those advocating for more British movies gave a variety of reasons for their preference, from supporting the Empire, to the ‘better influences’ offered by British movies, and the perceived (and desirable) cultural similarities between New Zealand and Britain. The *Manawatu Evening Standard* wrote that ‘The British Empire has been thrilled with the news that Britain is making its own pictures on a grand scale. They are productions breathing our national sentiments, upholding our ideals, our humour, our time honoured traditions, our beauty, our enterprise, and our particular genius.’<sup>75</sup>

The showing of a British movie in Palmerston North was infrequent enough to warrant a special mention. Exhibitors and reviewers often went to great lengths to emphasize British movie quality and development. *The Frightened Lady* (1932) was described as achieving ‘something which justifies Britain’s claim to acting supremacy on the screen’.<sup>76</sup> *Sailors Don’t Care* (1929) was said to be

in every respect excellent and proves conclusively that British film producers are now making pictures which will compare favourably with any other product in the world’s market ... A well-known American film critic, after reviewing this picture, said: If the British producers maintain the standard attained by

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<sup>73</sup> Robert James, ‘Popular Film-going in Britain in the Early 1930s, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46:2, 2011, p. 282.

<sup>74</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 5 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 25 July 1933, p. 3.

*Sailors Don't Care*, they will in future, have nothing to fear from their American rivals. High praise indeed!<sup>77</sup>

The advertisement for *The Battles of Coronel and Falkland Islands* (1928) was full of enthusiasm for Britain:

The Palace Theatre Are Proud to Present The Outstanding Episode in Britain's Naval History ... A BRITISH PICTURE FOR BRITISHERS, Produced with the assistance and co-operation of the British Admiralty with 35 Battleships and 40,000 Sailors and 80 tons of Explosives. Depicting how the Falkland Islands were saved – the loss of the H.M.S. Monmouth and Good Hope at Coronel – the historic December 8, when the German Navy was scuppered. A BRITISH SUPER-ATTRACTION. The Might of Britain Sweeps the Seas of the Foe.<sup>78</sup>

British enthusiasm was not reserved purely for the content of the movies themselves. Any link to the Royal Family was also reported on, as seen in this comment in 1929.

It has been very gratifying to note that since the illness of His Majesty the King, the full verse of the National Anthem has been played by the Palace orchestra prior to the commencement of their entertainment; at the same time a recent slide photograph of His Majesty is screened. Picturegoers are treating this little set of loyalty in a very reverent spirit.<sup>79</sup>

Another example of the interest in the Royal Family is the reported comments on their view of *The Battles of Coronel and Falkland Islands*:

In the stately ballroom of Balmoral Castle, the King and Queen saw *The Battles of Coronel and Falkland Islands*. The King was enthusiastic over the production. With his experience and knowledge as a practical sailor, he was able to study the film with the critical eye of an expert. The King told the director of the film, and the Managing Director of British Instructional Films,

<sup>77</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 5 January 1929, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 January 1929, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 5 January 1929, p.3.

that it ‘was excellent and had given him much pleasure and satisfaction’.

The reviewer added his own support for the movie by stating it was ‘better than a war lecture, this is a picture that will teach the boys and girls something of the spirit that has gone to the making of a great Empire’.<sup>80</sup>

Mirams was pleased to report in 1942 that the war appeared to have had a positive effect on British movie production, as

forced by the war to limit quantity, British producers in general have made an improvement in quality ... Without having become pre-occupied with war themes, and without having forgotten that entertainment is still their main purpose, they are choosing their subject-matter more carefully, and are making the best use of their available manpower and resources.<sup>81</sup>

The New Zealand ploy to use the Royal family as a means of endorsing movies mirrored that of the British. The *London Times* wrote that the Prince of Wales had appeared in a movie called *The Power of Right* (1919), presenting watches and medals to deserving cadets, and female members of European Royal families appeared in *Women Who Win* (1919), showing what women did to help their country in its time of need.<sup>82</sup>

Kerry Segrave observed that in the years when countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and Canada agitated against American product, they called for British movies to be screened, not their own nationally produced movies. Due to their ties with Britain, Segrave argues that those countries regarded British films as their own.<sup>83</sup> This contradicts Lealand’s theory that ‘A sense of national identity is best expressed in the cultural products of a country ... Film is deemed the best vehicle for developing a sense

<sup>80</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 January 1929, p.3.

<sup>81</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 15 May 1942, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> *The Times*, 7 April 1919, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Kerry Segrave, *American Films Abroad: Hollywood’s Domination of the World’s Movie Screens from the 1890s to the Present*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1997, p. 31.

of heightened nationalism'.<sup>84</sup> New Zealand's homegrown film culture was very slow to develop; by end of 1980s there was a New Zealand film industry but it resembled a 'cottage industry rather more than a factory production'.<sup>85</sup> Although early New Zealand feature films such as *Birth of a Nation*, which premiered in Palmerston North in 1922, received 'considerable interest wherever it [was] exhibited',<sup>86</sup> Dennis and Bieringa still believed movie patrons were not interested in viewing 'homemade' New Zealand movies.

It never occurred to us that we, our families, friends and neighbours, were unique and worthy of a story, a song, a drama, or even a painting that would wonder what we meant. We barely knew where we were – expect as a part of 'the Empire'.<sup>87</sup>

Merv Hancock recalls however, that while everyone enjoyed American movies, they also enjoyed the 'quarter of an hour programmes' produced by the Government Film Unit shown in some Palmerston North theatres, 'because they portrayed our society - cows and sheep and the meat freezing works ... In a way those films helped us understand what was happening when the war broke out and the New Zealand troops went away.'<sup>88</sup>

Mirams famously said, 'If there is any such thing as a 'New Zealand culture', it is to a large extent the creation of Hollywood.'<sup>89</sup> Any criticisms of the influence of the American movie culture, and subsequent moves to regulate that culture have come about through a desire for 'the consolidation of an emergent middle-class hegemony in New Zealand life'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in our Nest? American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988, p. 79.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>86</sup> *Evening Post*, 23 March 1922, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Jonathon Dennis and Jan Bieringa (eds.), *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University, 1992, p. 15.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Mervyn (Merv) Hancock, 3 February 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1945, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Roy Shuker and Roger Openshaw, 'New Zealand Youth and Silent Movies', in *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 22, 1, 1987, p. 97.

More recently, Lealand summarised the anti-American stance by concluding that 'A doctrinaire rejection of American popular culture is ill-considered and naïve ... our main shopping will still be at the American supermarket'.<sup>91</sup> Whether that continues to be true into the twenty-first century remains to be seen, but it is most certainly true that for a number of decades after World War One, American movies dominated the screens of the United States, United Kingdom and Palmerston North. Those movies were generally very well received and legislation by New Zealand or British Governments to change the American dominance met with little success.

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<sup>91</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in our Nest? American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University, 1988, p. 112.

## Conclusion

This thesis has asked whether the development of a movie-culture in Palmerston North followed that of the United States and the United Kingdom, or whether the experience of Palmerston North was to any great extent exceptional.

It is evident that in all three countries, movies had a significant impact on a broad cross-section of society; all ages, both genders, and across all socio-economic spectrums. Through newspapers and magazines and the photos and advertisements they carried, posters, and the advertising of a wide range of star-endorsed consumables, movies and movie stars were given a prominence that reflected the passion the public held for them. As A.J.P. Taylor stated, movies 'slaughtered all competitors' to become 'the essential social habit of the age'.<sup>1</sup> The accessibility of the movies and the (eventual) comfort of the buildings that screened them assisted in ensuring the movies played an important role at a time society was undergoing considerable economic, cultural and social change in the first half of the twentieth century.

In examining the characteristics of the cinematic establishments, the 'romantic, foolish and fabulous fantasy of the picture theatre',<sup>2</sup> it is clear that Palmerston North was strongly influenced by what was happening internationally. From the earliest days of the travelling showman, to movies shown in conjunction with vaudeville acts, to make-shift temporary exhibition sites, through to purpose-build theatres, Palmerston North theatre building development was anything but exceptional. Although the city's development of a picture-palace was later than in similar towns and cities in the United States and the United Kingdom, and like the United Kingdom there were none of the 'nickelodeons' that populated the United States, in almost every other facet,

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<sup>1</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Kellaway, 'I Remember When it was a Picture Theatre', *New Zealand Architect*, 4, 1984, p. 34.

Palmerston North's development of theatre buildings paralleled that of the United States and the United Kingdom.

In all three countries the movie business started from short clips of moving images being screened in conjunction with vaudeville variety shows, or shown by travelling showmen who rigged up temporary portable screens on which to show their wares. This new entertainment took an immediate hold on audiences, leading to rapid expansion and competition between individuals and companies as businessmen vied for this increasingly lucrative revenue. Independent movie exhibitors found it hard to remain in an industry that increasingly came to be controlled by large conglomerates who welded control of the distribution of films, and this was seen in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

While some research has argued in favour of specific regional preferences,<sup>3</sup> there are clear indications that what was popular in the United States and the United Kingdom was popular in Palmerston North. The overwhelming percentage of movies shown in both Palmerston North and the United Kingdom were from the United States. As Gordon Mirams said, 'most of the celluloid eggs that arrive in this country were laid in Hollywood ... and Hollywood does not produce them to suit us'.<sup>4</sup> This did not concern Palmerstonians; along with many others from New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, it was the American culture they wanted to experience.

One of the primary reasons for the popularity of the movies was their ability to take people out of the present moment. The importance of escapism, particularly during the years from 1919-1945, years that incorporate post-World War One rehabilitation, the Depression, and World War Two, cannot be underestimated. While there were

<sup>3</sup> Three examples are Sue Harper, 'A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: admissions figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24, 4, 2004, pp. 565-587 and 'Fragmentation and Crisis: 1940s Admission Figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 26, 3, 2006, pp. 361-394, and Robert James, 'A Very Profitable Enterprise: South Wales Miners' Institute Cinemas in the 1930s', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27, 1, 2007, pp. 27-61

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1945, p. 14.

variations in the degree of impact these global events had on the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, going to the movies to ‘escape’ was always a significant reason for movie-goers of all three countries. However, in all three places the concept of escapism was one that riled those who criticised the movies for their frivolity and ‘looseness’ and this sector of the public feared the impact of this pastime that had accumulated ‘a mass audience in one great swoop that bypassed the schools, the churches, the charities, and all the other traditional agencies of cultural influence’.<sup>5</sup> It was the unprecedented popularity of the movies that was behind the swift and reactive demand for controls on both the industry and the product, as this was seen in the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand.

A fear of the impact of the American culture and that ‘Uncle Sam may hope someday to Americanise the world’,<sup>6</sup> was behind a pro-British movie campaign throughout the United Kingdom which was also practised in theatres in Palmerston North. In this regard Palmerston North was clearly different from the United States, but very similar to Britain.

While New Zealand has traditionally been linked to the United Kingdom, with its dependence on the ‘leading industrial power’, resulting in ‘an economy dependent on another half-way round the world’,<sup>7</sup> Jerry Tunstall has teamed New Zealand with the United States, along with Canada, South Africa, and Australia, as countries that have ‘historically shared aspects of the United States media pattern – original dependence on England and the English language, added to other cultural strains and set down in large, unpopulated land.’<sup>8</sup> This thesis has shown that it is not one country or another, but that both the United States and the United Kingdom have heavily influenced

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> From the *London Post* in 1925, quoted in Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Sinclair (ed.), *Distance Looks Our Way: the Effects of Remoteness on New Zealand*, Auckland: Paul’s Book Arcade, 1961, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Jerry Tunstall, *The Media are American: Anglo-American Media in the World*, London: Constable, 1977, p. 102.

cinematic developments in Palmerston North. Given the technological impediments in the early twentieth-century relative to today's world, the rapidity with which moving pictures made their way from Paris to Palmerston North is quite staggering, and suggests right from the outset Palmerston North was firmly rooted in part of a far wider 'world system' that enabled films to be part of the provincial city's 'primary windows on the world'.<sup>9</sup>

This perspective has been from that of a small provincial city. Further research could shed light on the degree to which larger centres mirrored the patterns considered here.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Babington, *A History of the New Zealand Fiction Feature Film*, Manchester: Manchester University, 2007, p. 2.

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