

‘Wild and Untamed Thing’:
Tāmaki Makaurau Cinema Culture and Hollywood Avondale’s Love Affair with the *Rocky*
Horror Picture Show, 1978-1988.

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ABSTRACT

From 1978 through 1988, every Friday and Saturday night, patrons would step inside the Hollywood cinema in Avondale at 11:30pm. They were not there for a secret club, nor a meeting with unusual timing. Instead, they were all there to dance, sing and yell. The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* has been on the midnight circuit for nearly fifty years. Originally a stage show, it has captured generations for being a weird, unhinged science-fiction musical. *Rocky Horror* is the original cult film. This thesis uncovers the theory and history behind the show itself, and then applies a local context. The 1970s and 1980s were a turbulent period for Aotearoa, especially in my region of choice, Tāmaki Makaurau. Not only were politics and social issues at the forefront of everyday conversation, the so-called ‘demise’ of cinema culture was occurring. The end of the ‘golden age’ saw people were growing bored of dressing up to see a film. Cinemas in the central city were demolished or became venues dedicated to live performance. In the suburbs, there was little desire to maintain many of the independent cinemas. Many were multipurpose venues, designed to suit suburban communities that were geographically distant from the city centre. Amongst these closures or drop in popularity, the Hollywood stood strong. *Rocky Horror* was a phenomenon that helped to reinvigorate Tāmaki Makaurau’s independent cinema history. The city loved *Rocky Horror*, whether it was on stage or on screen. By using newspapers, as well as Jan Grefstad’s extensive research on Tāmaki Makaurau cinemas, this thesis argues for the importance of *Rocky Horror* as a crucial player in the continuation of cinema culture.

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INTRODUCTION

‘I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey.’

‘You can add up all the telephones, the washing machines, the vacuum cleaners, motormowers, refrigerators, motorcars and other mechanical gimmicks and together they have not contributed as much in making life bearable and even enjoyable for the mass of the people - without accompanying tensions - as has the motion picture.’¹

Since its earliest iterations, people have been enthralled by the cinema. The act of sitting in the dark, watching a world that purely exists for the entertainment of strangers, has become an art form. Cinema culture is a global phenomenon, and the residents of Tāmaki Makaurau are no strangers to it. Aotearoa’s largest city were avid participants in the hey-day of pictures. They travelled in droves to the central city, enjoying the numerous picture theatres lining Queen Street. Almost every suburb boasted a cinema, usually beginning as a multipurpose venue that derived from the bones of a town hall. They were communal spaces, creating a community within every pocket of a far-reaching region. At the time of writing in 2023, many of these buildings are gone. A rich cultural history has not been preserved. However, those spaces that still exist offer a home – often much reduced in size – to the remaining audiences. While the numbers will perhaps never match their predecessors, these audiences are not the final ones. This thesis aims to celebrate the longevity of some, and the failure of others. There are some significant bodies of research that explore the peak of cinema-going in Tāmaki Makaurau, but there are few written beyond the mid twentieth century. By the 1970s, television had a grip on entertainment consumption. This thesis will attempt to offer a contribution to these histories, with a case study, of one film, shown in one cinema.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) is not a normal film by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, I would argue that it is the epitome of weird. And yet, the weirdness has

¹ Gordon Ingham, *Everyone’s Gone to the Movies: the Sixty Cinemas of Auckland and Some Others*, Auckland, 1973, p.2.

made it timeless. *Rocky Horror* was initially written for the stage by Richard O'Brien, child of an English migrant family who made a home in Aotearoa. The show was successful on the West End, later transferring to the Roxy theatre on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. *Rocky Horror* then flopped on Broadway. Still, it had a second lease of life as a film. It is no *Citizen Kane*, nor *The Wizard of Oz*. The film version failed on its initial release. However, an idea to run the film at midnight ended up being a stroke of genius, and forever changed the cinema landscape. *Rocky Horror* became a cult film – arguably, the ultimate one. There are no accolades to the film's name apart from records set for longevity in cinemas. But people were drawn to the singing and dancing aliens and kept coming. This international adoration was evident in Tāmaki Makaurau, too. Between 1978 and 1988, the Hollywood Cinema in Avondale screened *Rocky Horror* every Friday and Saturday night. For an entire decade, cinema owner Jan Grefstad opened his doors to floods of fans. Word-of-mouth ushered people in and created a remarkable slice of Tāmaki Makaurau history.

This thesis makes an argument for the importance of cinema history in New Zealand beyond the golden age, using a case study of *Rocky Horror* at the Hollywood Avondale. Whilst there have been many local accounts of cinema going, there have been few documenting the period beyond the golden age of cinema. This period of a 'golden age' in question can be contested, but for the sake of this thesis, exists from approximately the 1920s through to the mid-1960s. Factors such as the introduction of television and the closure of cinema houses contributed to the end of the golden age. Within the golden age, cinemas sold out on a weekly basis, both in the city and the suburbs. Cinema buildings were a regular sight, and the excitement of modernity culminated in an obsessive consumption of the latest international release. In later years though, cinema lost its freshness, and future generations became more disengaged. But *Rocky Horror* shifts the gloomy trajectory of post-golden age cinema offering some insight into the continued – if changed - importance of cinema.

The strange success of *Rocky Horror* argues for the recognition of cinema history beyond the golden age in Tāmaki Makaurau. Though cinema culture was integral to the functioning of a social life and community in the city, it declined from the 1970s onwards, and its replacement of television and streaming services have permanently altered the way that the city consumes entertainment. Today, it is very rarely a communal activity. *Rocky Horror* at the Hollywood was, I believe, a new form of cinema activity that saw success in twentieth century Tāmaki Makaurau. The film stepped into a dying building, capturing

audiences in a way that television never could. The ritual of gathering at midnight to yell obscenities at the screen was perhaps not what the socialites of the golden age of cinema would expect, but it worked. I argue that these screenings represent a generational longing for community through entertainment, actualised in a novel way.

There are three chapters within this thesis: the first, provides an overview of broad media history and situates the origin story of *Rocky Horror* within it. At its core, *Rocky Horror* is a musical that launched the idea of a true cult film, examined in this opening chapter. The second chapter will detail the intricacies of Tāmaki Makaurau’s cinemas, while closely exploring a handful of city and suburban cinemas. My third chapter is dedicated to *Rocky Horror* in Tāmaki Makaurau. This will include the stage productions that toured through the city during the same period as the midnight screenings at the Hollywood. My conclusion will end on the theme of legacy, and the continued importance of preservation. Overall, I argue for the role of *Rocky Horror* as a method of keeping cinema alive in a local context.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF CINEMA

The history of cinema in Aotearoa began far sooner than one would assume. For a nation tucked away in the Pacific Ocean, with its ties mainly to Great Britain, there is a perception of isolation. While settler colonies are often thought to be behind in technological advancements, cinema began for Aotearoa ten months after the Lumiere Brothers’ first moving picture exhibition in Paris in 1895.² On 13 October 1896, Aucklanders got a first glimpse. Presented in the Opera House on Wellesley Street in Tāmaki Makaurau’s central city district, this began a nation’s decades-long love affair with the modern art.³ Initially travelling within the vaudeville circuit, films gradually began to be screened in their own venues. This began to occur from 1909.⁴ Tāmaki Makaurau saw dedicated theatre after theatre open, particularly in repurposed venues within the suburbs. Prior to the advent of

² Bruce W. Hayward, Selwyn P. Hayward, *Cinemas of Auckland, 1896-1979*, Auckland, 1979, p.2.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Nerida Jeanie Elliot, *Anzac, Hollywood and home: cinemas and film-going in Auckland 1909-1939*, Master’s thesis, University of Auckland, 1989, p.iv.

television in 1961, flashy urban cinemas and their counterparts in the suburbs were an integral part of entertainment and nightlife in Tāmaki Makaurau.

Following a construction boom in the 1920s, the city was swarming with places to watch the latest film. Attending the cinema was an integral part of inter-war life, operating as both a place of entertainment, but also one of information. Usually edited as short preludes to the main film, people attended the cinema to watch newsreels from across the world. There were alternative news sources, such as newspapers, but the newsreels meant that audiences could see world events unfold in front of their eyes. This was also vital during the war years, as thousands of men found themselves across the world from their friends and families. When cameras were able to document real footage, it became a popular lifeline for audiences. According to David Lascelles, ‘the newsreel in its day informed and educated its audiences, it brought by way of the visual image latest news items from around the world in a very short time. No longer did we feel isolated or forgotten because every week for around eight minutes news from across the seas appeared before our eyes on the theatre screens.’⁵ The newsreel was eight minutes of documentation and learning, for people that lived worlds away on two little islands in the Pacific Ocean.

Aotearoa’s place as a dominion also meant that the initial days of cinema were laden with reminders of empire. Singing ‘God Save the King’ – or Queen - was standard practice. ‘With the first public screening of films at Auckland in October 1896 presentation of the anthem started to change, an image would be shown on the screen as the orchestra played. This ‘magic lantern’ slide could be a portrait of the current monarch, royal residences, or a union jack with bunting draped around a globe of the empire. In later years during First World War patriotic scenes were also shown.’⁶ This patriotic emotion was strengthened even more in wartime. The newsreels and national anthem could serve as a reassurance to those with loved ones fighting, to know that the war was both for the safety of the empire and to know that there were millions of others singing the same song together. Yet film also brought in a competing cultural force. The rise of cinema arguably saw a cultural shift towards the flashy world of the United States. Having been stationed in Aotearoa during the Second

⁵ Grefstad, p.150.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.155.

World War, soldiers from the United States had been given prime attention by those at home in Aotearoa. It had reached a point where cinemas began with ‘the American one consisting of the American eagle, coat of arms and flag and a large V for victory, all in glorious technicolour. This was followed by a black and white film of King George VI in uniform.’⁷

There would be British priorities such as the anthem for years, but it would not last. To call a cinema the Hollywood, as Grefstad would, is to reiterate the importance of its namesake. American media culture had a firm grip on many nations, especially as it emerged as a global superpower in the wake of the Second World War.⁸ The glitz and glamour of Hollywood, with its mythical movie stars and far-away world, tempted Aotearoa audiences practically from the beginning. According to James Belich, ‘American movies became the norm on New Zealand screens - 350 out of 400 features in 1927.’⁹ Still many cinema operators were against the push for Americanism, instead giving priority to Britain.¹⁰ Despite the efforts of those attempting to interfere, there was no stopping the reach of Hollywood. The Americans had romanticised the film – both behind the scenes and in front of the camera. Their films were transporting its audiences to different fantasy lands and were trailblazers in this new technology. They also produced celebrities, which I will touch upon shortly. Hollywood had become a place of wonder and glamour. In his book on American pop culture in Aotearoa, Geoff Lealand had this to say: ‘The consequences of so many New Zealanders spending so many hours in the darkened cinema, watching voices and absorbing the powerful perennial mythologies of Hollywood cannot be easily measured.’¹¹

Aotearoa fell in love with Hollywood, to the point where ‘every Saturday night, a large proportion of New Zealanders chose to be happily (if unwittingly) indoctrinated by the ‘voice of America’ with Westerns, comedies, war films and Disney movies the most popular types of feature films.’¹² Nearly all these genres were exclusive to the foreign creators and created a mythology for the faraway audience. The Wild West of California was not the same as the black sand and rugged coastline of Tāmaki Makaurau’s West Coast. European

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Carlyon and Morrow, p.112.

⁹ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, Auckland, 2001, p.252.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest? American Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1988, p.90.

¹² Carlyon and Morrow, p.137.

fairytale stories were the romanticised stories of choice, with it contributing to Pākehā mythology and culture.

According to Carlyon and Morrow, Aotearoa was so influenced by Hollywood that it was reflected in popular fashion.¹³ European academic Birgit Neumann, who wrote frequently on British cultural and colonial histories, argued that ‘observing fashion thus not only granted visual, often in voyeuristic pleasure, but also allowed people to participate in, construct and affirm a shared set of cultural norms, values and codes – all the more in the case of collectively shared visual practices.’¹⁴ Similar to the cinema, what people wore became an element of shared community. There is little doubt that socialites were influenced by the goddesses of the screen. The concept of the film star was new, and some actors were immediately household names. Hollywood crafted fairytales both on camera and off. Their starlets were royalty, with perfect studio portraits and mythical identities. They were aspirations for the everyman. People wanted to be just like them. Carlyon and Morrow mention two different examples of this Hollywood influence. The first was Jean Harlow, whose performance as the promiscuous Helen had influenced women to swarm beauty parlours demanding to be made to resemble that ‘girl with the lovely shimmering hair.’¹⁵ Jean Harlow was one of Hollywood’s first ‘blonde bombshells’, a sex symbol who died tragically young at the age of twenty-six. Men were also swayed by Hollywood actors, with some Māori men in Ruatoria noted to be wearing cowboy hats ‘in honour of the ‘Singing Cowboy: Gene Autry.’¹⁶ The men and women onscreen were these exotic versions of humanity; the coy American seductress and the cowboy. There were limitless possibilities, and the dreamers wanted to emulate that.

Nearly all the feature films that played in cinemas were imported. In the earliest days, New Zealand productions did it make it onto the screen. But as moviemaking became more sophisticated local content declined. In fact, only four Aotearoa-made films were released between 1939 and 1972: *Rewi’s Last Stand*, (1939), *Broken Barrier* (1952), *Don’t Let It Get*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Birgit Neumann, ‘Queen Victoria and Political Self-Fashioning: Clothing Careers’, in Eva Flicker and Monika Seidl, eds, *Fashionable Queens: Body – Power – Gender*, Frankfurt, 2014, p.22.

¹⁵ Carlyon and Morrow, p.137.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

You (1966), and *To Love a Māori* (1972).¹⁷ Unless it was for documentary or government-funded projects, there was a very minimal focus on the local film industry. Rudall Hayward was a key player in the early film world, and was a face behind the Hollywood's predecessor, the Grosvenor Theatre. Out of those four films, he directed two: *Rewi's Last Stand* and *To Love a Māori*. These films had lukewarm responses, sending the local industry into a form of 'hibernation'.¹⁸ The film industry could never rival that of the United States, and that prompted immense jealousy. Audiences could not seem to fall in love with Aotearoa the way they had with Hollywood. Geoff Lealand opened the fourth chapter of his book *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest: American Popular Culture in New Zealand* with a variety of envious quotes. 'If New Zealand had produced the movie *E.T.* the profits would have wiped out our overseas debt,' Mike Moore, future Prime Minister and then-Minister of Overseas Trade, said.¹⁹ 'A nation without a film industry is like a house without a mirror,' film producer John Barnett noted.²⁰ 'A country that makes a film like *Star Wars* deserves to rule the world,' Philip Adams, former chairman of the Australian Film Commission exclaimed. While there was a desire for a local film industry, local makers could agree that it would be nearly impossible to match the overwhelming success (and budgets) of Hollywood classics. According to Lealand, a Hollywood influence created a sense of 'exotic daydreams and 'sophisticated' entertainment.²¹

Television had begun its cultural domination during the 1960s. Whilst not completely responsible for the decline of cinema, according to Bruce and Selwyn Hayward, admissions to the cinema halved between 1961 and 1969, and by fifteen years post-television, over half of the original cinemas in Auckland had closed.²² This was not just those peppered throughout the city centre. It also included the fringes of Tāmaki Makaurau. Suburban cinemas were also 'forced out of business during the 1960s and early 1970s by the introduction of television.'²³ At the beginning of the 1960s, numbers appeared healthy. The average New Zealander went to the cinema seventeen times in the year of 1960-61, equalling

¹⁷ Trisha Dunleavy, Hester Joyce, *New Zealand Film and Television Institution, Industry and Cultural Change*, Bristol, 2011, p.72.

¹⁸ Lealand, p.83.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.78.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, p.81.

²² Hayward and Hayward, p.38.

²³ *ibid.*, p.44.

40,632,000 admissions across 545 cinemas.²⁴ By 1964-65, people were going ten times, and there were only 26,026,000 admissions.²⁵ There were those who continued to love the cinema, but it showed clear decline across the board as it suddenly became easier for New Zealanders to enjoy visual art from the comfort of their own homes. Once again, the numbers proved it. Television licenses grew rapidly. In April of 1965, 102,669 households in Tāmaki Makaurau held licenses.²⁶ By 1967, there were 142,385. Technological advancements in art draw the common eye, particularly when they are more widely accessible and less elitist. Cinema was the art for the masses at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. It was communal art, no longer restricted to the sole choice of traditional entertainment preferred by the upper echelons. Television removed communal factors and was just generally easier to use. It made sense for cinema attendance to decline. Television had become the new fixation, and with it the unravelling of the first stage of Tāmaki Makaurau’s cinema culture began.

THE WORLD ROCKY HORROR LIVED IN

The shift from film to television was not the only cultural transformation felt across Aotearoa at this time. *Rocky Horror*’s decade of screenings coincided with turbulent change. In Stephen Stratford’s 2002 book *The Dirty Decade: New Zealand in the 80s*, he argued, ‘the eighties were New Zealand’s adolescence.’²⁷ We do not have to subscribe to the progressive narrative of national maturity that ‘adolescence’ implies to understand that the decade was marked by considerable change. As previously mentioned, the nation’s initial perceived identity was colonial, deeply tied to Britain. The British Empire determined our anthem, our news, and our international influence. New Zealand was a part of the empire, then the Commonwealth. In later decades, Carlyon and Morrow argued that ‘with Britain weakened and progressively shedding her empire, it seemed to many New Zealand artists and writers that forging a more self-reliant cultural identity outside the imperial framework was now both appropriate and overdue.’²⁸ As I will now discuss, there were major moments within the late 1970s and 1980s that permanently altered the history of Aotearoa. Landmark moments in

²⁴ Grefstad, Volume 18, p.2.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.12.

²⁷ Stephen Stratford, *The Dirty Decade: New Zealand in the 80s*, Auckland, 2002, p.7.

²⁸ Carlyon and Morrow, p.73.

social history, with legal and cultural ramifications, defined this forthcoming generation. These changes both reflected and enabled the Rocky Horror phenomenon.

Once the post-war babies had reached adolescence, a startlingly clear disparity between generations emerged. This is not an unnatural consequence, with every child brought up in a slightly different world than the last. Aotearoa had three different prime ministers in office within the decade. The first was Robert Muldoon, who led the nation for just under nine years from 1975 through to 1984. A member of the National Party, Muldoon was a popular figure that will appear briefly throughout this thesis, including upon stage. He utilised the newly-realised power of television, making multiple appearances that ranged from standard media interviews to drunkenly calling a snap election.²⁹ Muldoon resonated with Aotearoa's more conservative communities, especially following the late Norman Kirk, who had proposed a push to progress and move with the times.³⁰ His campaign slogan was 'New Zealand the way you want it', which favoured the individual freedoms of the 'ordinary bloke'.³¹ Under Muldoon, there was an economic focus, particularly on farmers and single-income households, in order to 'bolster the nuclear family'.³² When recession hit in the late-1970s and into the early 1980s, Muldoon (who was also Minister for Finance at the time) held an economic-focused grip over Aotearoa. But he also held a stark opposition to social changes such as the anti-nuclear movement, which I will explain further. Carlyon and Morrow argued that there was a greater amount of social division under Muldoon, with the nation seemingly divided between the liberal university-educated youth and the older conservative generation.³³ When the time came for Muldoon's snap election, he was abruptly voted out. His successor would be David Lange, a Labour politician. Lange gained popularity through his social beliefs, particularly by being a staunch advocate for an anti-nuclear Aotearoa.

David Lange's Labour government from 1984 had become 'the first Cabinet substantially made up of baby boomers.'³⁴ This government introduced legislation that could

²⁹ Carlyon and Morrow, p.157.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.158.

³¹ *ibid.*, p.183.

³² *ibid.*, p.187.

³³ *ibid.*, p.185.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.364.

have never been dreamed of within previous Cabinets. Context makes priorities shift. Some of this legislation reflected the interests of what, from the 1960s, began to be recognised as the ‘counterculture’. American social theorists had begun using the term in the 1950s in studies of delinquent gangs, but it was Theodore Roszak who introduced *counterculture* into the vernacular when he identified the emergence of a ‘culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion.’³⁵ Nick Bollinger argued that the counterculture movement in Aotearoa was predominantly Pākehā, and that Māori and Pasifika activists were in alliance with them, not active collaborators.³⁶ Pākehā were revolting against the Pākehā institutions they grew up in, whereas organisations such as Nga Tamatoa and the Polynesians wanted such institutions to admit their racist systems.³⁷ Māori and Pasifika were involved in similar global movements, but through an indigenous lens that some Pākehā could not quite understand. For instance, the Vietnam War inspired one of the largest protests in the 1970s. While Pākehā protested war, the Polynesian Panthers echoed a solidarity with colonised peoples, in which they declared, ‘our enemy is the white man, not the Viet Cong!’³⁸ There were differences, and a level of denial, that separated two protesting sides in Aotearoa.

By the 1970s, Māori activists had begun the process of reclaiming land, language, and indigenous identity. According to Māori historian Aroha Harris, a combination of continuous racism and the government’s failure to acknowledge Māori had pushed the urge to protest.³⁹ At a time where the rest of the world was seemingly pleading for change, Māori communities were making headlines and fighting for progress. Across forty-three days in 1975, Dame Whina Cooper led a hīkoi from Te Hāpua in the Far North to the grounds of parliament in Wellington.⁴⁰ The Land March had a strong purpose — it called for ‘an end to land laws that excluded Maori cultural values and asked for the ability to establish legitimate communal ownership of land within iwi.’⁴¹ The march made headlines across the nation, and an event

³⁵ Nick Bollinger, *Jumping Sundays: The Rise and Fall of the Counterculture in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Auckland, 2022, p.21.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.298-299.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Aroha Harris, *Hīkoi: forty years of Māori protest*, Wellington, 2004, p.13.

⁴⁰ Bollinger, p.299.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

that shaped further protest for the Crown returning Māori land. 1975 was also the second year of the now-called Dawn Raids, in which Pasifika homes were raided and overstayers were violently deported. Carlyon and Morrow called the raids a ‘frightening, alienating experience,’ arguing that they were racist and created a scepticism towards the police force.⁴² As a direct response to these atrocities, the Polynesian Panthers were established. The name drew inspiration from the Black Panthers in the United States, who had become a predominant political organisation within the country through their efforts to help protect Black Americans from police brutality.⁴³ In comparison, the Polynesian Panthers were non-violent, engaged heavily in their community.⁴⁴ They were arranging social events, helping with homework and providing legal aid with the assistance of lawyer (and future leader) David Lange.⁴⁵

Another key event of the 1970s was the occupation of Bastion Point, which took place in the heart of the Waitematā Harbour in Tāmaki Makaurau. For 506 days, Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā sat upon Takaparawhau, with a singular aim – to have the sixty acres of land returned to Ngāti Whātua. It was a peaceful occupation, as ‘alcohol and drugs were banned and daily classes in Maori language, culture and history were offered for children and adults.’⁴⁶ However, the protest was disbanded with a police raid. In the article written on the morning of the eviction, Joe Hawke is interviewed saying, ‘It’s the most heavy-handed and massive police action since Parihaka.’⁴⁷ By 1978, the violent eviction of peaceful occupants of Parihaka in 1881 had still not been acknowledged by the Crown. Parihaka did not receive an official apology until 2017, 136 years later. It was formalised into law, with the Crown acknowledging ‘the serious damage it inflicted on the prosperous Māori village of Parihaka and the people residing there, its forcible dispersal of many of the inhabitants, and its assault on the human rights of the people.’⁴⁸ This apology was the catalyst to a slow process of land reparation. Four years later, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern formally apologised for the

⁴² Carlyon and Morrow, p.265.

⁴³ Bollinger, p.292.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.293.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Carlyon and Morrow, p.272.

⁴⁷ *Auckland Star*, ‘Haka, hymns, songs of protest – the bastion falls peacefully’, May 25th, 1978, p.A1

⁴⁸ Parihaka – Past, Present and Future, ‘Summary of previous Crown apologies relating to Parihaka’, , <https://parihaka.maori.nz/wp-content/uploads/Appology-Summary-of-previous-Crown-apologies-relating-to-Parihaka.pdf> (accessed 27/02/2023)

actions of the Dawn Raids, stating that ‘The Dawn Raids period cast a shadow over our shared history. Upholding immigration laws is one thing, but the Dawn Raids went well beyond that. Whole communities felt targeted and terrorised. The raids were discriminatory.’⁴⁹ As of 2021, it has been reported that Ngātiwai are due to receive an apology from the Crown regarding the forced eviction of Takaparawhau.⁵⁰ In the final years of the decade, the Māori Language Act allowed Māori to finally have their own voice in the political, legal, and national industries. In 1987, te reo Māori became an official language of Aotearoa. There would still be work to do, but the Act became a milestone in the progress of Māori reclamation.

The 1980s began with arguably one of the most significant protests in Aotearoa’s modern history. In 1981, a controversial tour of the South African rugby team prompted mass protest and as a result, race relations became a topic of national conversation. Apartheid rule in South Africa had been in place from 1948 and was defined as the policies in which, ‘the white minority forced millions of black South Africans into segregated neighbourhoods and severely restricted their political, civil and economic freedoms.’⁵¹ Over two decades, Aotearoa would be linked to South Africa in a way that attempted to defy politics and oppression – through a communal appreciation for rugby. The national team, the Springboks, would come to Aotearoa (and vice versa) on numerous occasions, to challenge the All Blacks. Protests had started with the first tour in 1960, when Māori All Blacks were excluded from playing due to these apartheid laws.⁵² The relationship between politics and sport had been on the forefront of conversation, and by the proposed Springbok tour in 1981, tensions had heightened. The organisation HART (Halt All Racist Tours) had been established in the 1970s, and the fight against apartheid presence became more official. However, the formation had ‘helped to fuel a caricature of HART as a group of long-haired lefties opposed to or uninterested in sport. In fact, many were passionate rugby supporters.’⁵³ Those who stormed

⁴⁹ New Zealand Government, ‘Government offers formal apology for Dawn Raids’,

<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/government-offers-formal-apology-dawn-raids>, (accessed 27/02/2023)

⁵⁰ Te Aniwa Hurihanganui, ‘Ngātiwai to receive formal apology for way Crown dealt with overlapping Treaty of Waitangi claim’, Newshub, July 19th 2021, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2021/07/ngatiwai-to-receive-formal-apology-for-way-crown-dealt-with-overlapping-treaty-of-waitangi-claim.amp.html> (accessed 27/02/2023)

⁵¹ Bollinger, p.174.

⁵² Carlyon and Morrow, p.196.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.197.

the pitch in Hamilton in 1981, spurring a violent riot and ending the match, had become both a public enemy and a national conversation.

Yet, there was one context that *Rocky Horror* and its subsequent theory functioned within. In 1986, homosexuality was finally viewed as a legal act. The Homosexual Law Reform Act had come about after years of protest and debate, with consensual sexual intercourse between two male partners becoming legal under David Lange's government. Male homosexual acts, namely sodomy and buggery, had been outlawed in Aotearoa since the signing of the Te Tiriti O Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, formalised into Crown law through the English Laws Act of 1858.⁵⁴ The early years of post-Treaty Aotearoa reflected colonial ideals, and social norms in the colony did not appear to acknowledge men who embraced their sexuality differently. Punishments were harsh. Flogging, hard labour and life imprisonment were just some examples listed in prominent lesbian historian Alison Laurie's essay.⁵⁵ Homosexuality was a serious offence with little legal mercy. As Laurie stated, 'consent was no defence.'⁵⁶ Interestingly, sexual acts between two women had never been outlawed, while decades of official discrimination persisted against gay men.⁵⁷ The law had altered throughout forthcoming governments, notably the Crimes Act 1961, but society had begun to shift towards change and reform in the 1970s and 1980s. Gay liberation had emerged as a vocal and celebrated movement, existing within Nick Bollinger's definition of 'countercultural happenings.'⁵⁸ Movements had emerged against years of homophobic rhetoric and significant events, both locally and abroad. In the United States, the violence and conservation that rose from the events of the Stonewall Riots in 1969 had catapulted their gay liberation movement into the public eye.⁵⁹ Five years earlier in Aotearoa, thirty-five-year-old Charles Aberhart had been brutally murdered in Hagley Park, Ōtautahi (Christchurch). Aberhart had been cruising, or publicly looking for sex, when six teenage boys beat him and left him to die.⁶⁰ His murderers were acquitted, and a 'moral panic' set in throughout

⁵⁴ Alison J. Laurie, 'The Aotearoa/New Zealand Homosexual Law Reform Campaign, 1985-1986', in Alison J. Laurie and Linda Evans, eds, *Twenty Years On: Histories of Homosexual Law Reform*, Wellington, 2009, p.15.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Bollinger, p.118.

⁵⁹ Carlyon and Morrow, p.241.

⁶⁰ Tony Simpson, 'Looks like it's open season on queers', *Homosexual histories*, in Alison J. Laurie and Linda Evans, eds, *Twenty Years On: Histories of Homosexual Law Reform*, Wellington, 2009, p.30.

Aotearoa, in which discretion was encouraged.⁶¹ A heinous crime such as this had placed the blame on the victim, and subsequently further oppressed the community.

Following this crime, social historian Tony Simpson penned an essay entitled ‘Looks like it’s open season on queers’. The title stemmed from the Aberhart murder, referring to a personal conversation between himself and a friend the day after the acquittals. At the time Simpson was a young gay man studying at Canterbury University and had been deeply affected by the murder. As his friend had said, the acquittals had created a societal ‘open season’. Gay people were not protected or favoured in a court of law, let alone by the wider society. He argued that ‘no-one was willing to say that homosexuals should have the same human rights as anybody else.’⁶² Through the eyes of gay liberation activists, Aotearoa had a lot of reform to do, and voices had to be elevated. Alison Laurie became an often-quoted activist, writing for the short-lived Aotearoa edition of *Rolling Stone* magazine, stating that homosexuality was viewed as an act of ‘political defence against the nuclear-marriage, ‘and subsequently a threat to the rise of modern consumerism and manipulation of traditional gender roles.’⁶³ The HIV/AIDS epidemic had also been manipulated into global anti-homophobic rhetoric, but activists prevailed. In 1985, Labour MP Fran Wilde put forward a Homosexual Law Reform Bill, which would later turn into a lengthy debate and eventually, the Homosexual Law Reform Act.⁶⁴ This was a milestone that brought Aotearoa’s social progression forward. Of course, there were still threads of disparity, such as transgender rights being side-lined, and same-sex marriage not being legalised until Labour MP Louisa Wall brought forward a private bill in 2013.⁶⁵ There will always be room for further change. As Bollinger argued, ‘though the counterculture challenged traditional attitudes to sex and gender, clothing, appearance and conformity in general, it was disconcerting how suddenly it could revert to a display of old-fashioned hostility towards a perceived outsider.’⁶⁶

On the first of March 1985, Prime Minister David Lange stood to speak in a televised Oxford Union debate. There was a significant amount of international pressure, as an alliance

⁶¹ Carlyon and Morrow, p.241.

⁶² Simpson, p.31.

⁶³ Bollinger, p.118.

⁶⁴ Carlyon and Morrow, pp.244-245.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.246.

⁶⁶ Bollinger, p.119.

with the United States hung supposedly by a thin string. On the grounds of this old building, Lange was faced with his American opposition asking for an answer to his question. Seemingly ignoring this international pressure, he joked: ‘And I’m going to give it to you, if you hold your breath just for a moment... I can smell the uranium on it as you lean towards me!’⁶⁷ Lange was a stalwart in the anti-nuclear movement, defending Aotearoa’s beliefs on the most public level. The anti-nuclear sentiment had been felt in Aotearoa for years, yet it had only strengthened in the era of Muldoon. Richard Prebble, ex-Member of Parliament, brought forward the Nuclear-Free New Zealand Bill in June of 1984, which was narrowly defeated 40 votes to 39.⁶⁸ Prebble, who would go on to be one of the earliest members of the ACT Party, had been able to persuade politicians from Muldoon’s party to support the Bill. As I had mentioned earlier, Muldoon staunchly opposed the anti-nuclear movement. A large part of Aotearoa promptly ignored that and criticised his viewpoint, continuing to protest. When Lange came into power in July of 1984, anti-nuclear was at the forefront of his agenda. Some months after Lange’s Oxford Union debate, his opponents made a physical interjection. On the tenth of July 1985, the *Rainbow Warrior* was bombed at its berth in the Ports of Auckland. The vessel was owned by Greenpeace and had been attacked by two Frenchmen who opposed *Rainbow Warrior*’s purpose as a protest ship. Instead of giving in to the demands of his opponents, Lange only pushed further. By 1986, the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, or Treaty of Rarotonga, had been signed and put into action. The preservation of the environment and its peoples were the top priority for Aotearoa and neighbouring islands. Regarding national identity, Carlyon and Morrow suggested that the period of anti-nuclear became solidified in public memory. To an entire generation, Aotearoa standing up against superpower nations was the epitome of patriotism.

What makes this context important to my thesis is the concept of identity and its many different forms. More specifically, it helped to distinguish between the political background and the cultural psyche. Politics and entertainment exist within the same realm but are oftentimes treated as entirely separate entities. The truth of the matter is, without the constant growth of political and social awareness, cultural movements would not be as well-understood. That is not to say all art is political, but instead suggest that contextual

⁶⁷ John Carlaw, *Revolution - The Grand Illusion*, NZ on Air, 1996, <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/revolution-the-grand-illusion-1996> (accessed 26/02/2023)

⁶⁸ Carlyon and Morrow, p.208.

circumstances allow for the success of specific art. *Rocky Horror*'s initial success emerged at the right time internationally, as did its delayed success in Aotearoa. Audiences were able to fully embrace the phenomenon.

Amongst all the world-changing affairs of the 1980s lay *Rocky Horror*. A cultural phenomenon was simultaneously an outlier to this new world yet suited it perfectly. It would speak to elements of the counter culture, and at the same time, the escapism of *Rocky Horror* became one of its greatest selling points. People needed to evoke nostalgia in a time where the world was constantly changing. Art has always been a method of escapism. Richard O'Brien brought his upbringing in Aotearoa to the creation of the show, albeit subconsciously. There have been rumours throughout the decades that Richard O'Brien took inspiration from Aotearoa. This claim, particularly when analysing the history of gender fluidity and entertainment throughout the era, introduces a new perspective of Aotearoa identity. One thing that *Rocky Horror* does not shy away from is its sexuality. As I will discuss further in my first chapter, Frank 'N' Furter is Brad and Janet's sexual catalyst. In his world, there were no shame or judgement when, as the song goes, giving yourself into absolute pleasure.⁶⁹ Richard O'Brien, who had spent many years in Aotearoa, was writing a sexually liberated character despite spending his formative years in a nation where Frank's actions would have been illegal. It would not be until thirteen years after the first premiere of *Rocky Horror* that consensual homosexual sex was no longer a crime. O'Brien, an avid lover of the nation (and eventual citizen), spent time as a teenager in the Waikato region, namely Kirikiriroa (Hamilton). He proudly talked of his early years in Aotearoa and continued to do so. During an interview with *Craccum* magazine in 2010, O'Brien spoke of his first experience with drag performers. He had not realised it at the time, but the first seeds of Frank had been sowed through this experience. Despite Aotearoa being conservative through its law against homosexuality and the general distance between activists and the transgender community, there would be no stopping true entertainment. O'Brien said that: 'oddly, the Embassy theatre... and I never thought about this to very, very recently, and I forgot the guy's name, and that was where I saw my first drag act as well or female impersonator in New Zealand – very big guy, must have been 6ft1, huge guy – and I saw him on stage because the Embassy was also then a theatre. So, there I used to watch the double features

⁶⁹ Richard O'Brien, *Rose Tint My World*, 1973.

and saw my first drag act, and that hadn't occurred to me until quite recently, about 5 years ago that crossed my mind, and I thought that's interesting isn't? That Frank N Furter and the double features came out of the Embassy Theatre.'⁷⁰ Without knowing, Aotearoa had influenced the phenomenon.

ROCKY HORROR IN THE ACADEMY

*'Rocky Horror, it must be acknowledged, is the oddest of things: a relatively low-budget gender-bending mishmash of genres that somehow manages to provoke a response - famously from its audience, which dances, talks back to the film, and acts out the action along with the characters - but also from the critics and from American culture in general.'*⁷¹

A film rife with aliens, transvestites, and sins of the flesh was bound to spark controversy amongst its observers. It is important to acknowledge that most of the academic criticism, same with social critique, emerged from the United States. Many academics focused on the sexual promiscuity of the film over any other theme. This was an example of American conservatism and its place in everyday society and academia, as well as the rise and recognition of LGBTQ+ histories. Of course, by 2023, Rocky Horror is no longer the shocking spectacle it would have been in the 1970s. Media has become far more violent, more sexualised, and almost as rock'n'roll. In the 1970s and 1980s, these various academics had never seen anything like this on screen. To many academics, the film's core theme was the corruption of innocent conservatism.

Ron Rosenbaum was just one of the many who shared an interesting take on *Rocky Horror*. Rosenbaum is a literary journalist and critic based in New York. In his work *Gooseflesh*, he suggested that the midnight screenings were no different from extreme religion. He said it was 'a mutant form of organized religion... a midnight mass that was less satanic than sophomoric, but utterly serious for all that. The pre-scripted lines the audience called out were like the responsive readings of a congregation to a holy text. The absurdity of

⁷⁰ James Wenley, 'EXTENDED INTERVIEW: Rocky Horror's Richard O'Brien', *Craccum*,

2011, <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/extended-interview-rocky-horror%E2%80%99s-richard-o%E2%80%99brien/>

(accessed 11/12/2022)

⁷¹ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'It's Just a Jump to the Left: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture', in *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, ed, New York, 2008, p.2.

the passion play on screen was less important than the state of ecstatic communion the audience worked itself into while watching.⁷² In the first chapter I will discuss the concept of cult cinema and *Rocky Horror*'s place in that sphere, so the assumption of passion play and congregational singing perhaps bears some relevance. *Sweet Transvestite* is not a hymn, yet everyone knows the words. There was no written scripture, yet everyone can recite the call-backs. He also defined *Rocky Horror* as 'a strange amalgam that employs the grotesque artifacts of the 'creature features' of the Fifties to pervert and parody them in the decadent bisexual "glitter rock" style of the early Seventies.'⁷³ Rosenbaum described the film quite accurately. It may have been intended as an insult but would be something that devotees of the *Rocky Horror* 'cult' would agree with.

Another academic compared *Rocky Horror* to Greek mythology, not as a critique, but rather to deepen the context of the plot. Amittai F. Aviram, when talking about the concept of cult, suggested not that he was talking about it 'not in its banal media-hype sense but rather in its classical sense, the celebration of mystic rites pertaining to a divine being or divine beings and to the appropriate secret lore.'⁷⁴ Dionysus, the Ancient Greek god of fertility and wine, is called upon in Aviram's work. He suggested that *Rocky Horror*, for all its chaotic misdemeanours, was merely a bacchanal celebration of ancient proportions - a wild and untamed thing. I found Aviram's comparison useful, while also maintaining my position that scholars often took the themes of *Rocky Horror* further than its creators intended. To him, the ill-choreographed and un-coordinated movement to these iconic shows are 'wild, orgiastic dance music,' which in turn 'is one of the giveaway signs of Dionysus.'⁷⁵ Frank is a god, leading his creatures to a night of pleasure and consumption. Some lyrics do highlight this deepening into an ancient world of mythic partying. The creation of Rocky prompts his solo, *The Sword of Damocles*. The title is based on a Greek story, where a politician (appropriately named Dionysus) is one of its central characters. The character of Damocles represents the perilous nature of politics and power. That power has been given to Frank, and that in part created his downfall.

⁷² Ron Rosenbaum, 'Gooseflesh', *Harper's*, 259, 1552, 1979, p.86-87.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Amittai F. Aviram, 'Postmodern Gay Dionysus: Dr Frank N. Furter', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 26, 3, 1992, p.183.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.185.

Religion, be it ancient or modern, was often brought into academic arguments from American scholars, and led to a concentration on readings emphasising religion and politics. Throughout my readings I have established this theme occurring quite often. Both Mark Siegel's work '“The Rocky Horror Picture Show”: More than a Lip Service', as well as Rosenbaum's, illustrate this idea. One of Siegel's arguments was: 'Curry, perhaps in reference to his double role, later sings 'By light of day I'm not much of a man, but by night I'm one *hell* of a lover.' There is a good deal of apparently gratuitous Christian symbolism in this scene, I believe because the film identifies 'straight' sexual repressiveness with Christianity, and the 'dead' sexual mores suggest a dead religion. Curry's emphasis on 'hell' underscores his transsexual vitality. The lack of any kind of vitality in Christianity is parodied by Brad's proposal beginning in the graveyard and continuing into the church accompanied by a casket.'⁷⁶ Whilst such symbolism may be applicable, I am not persuaded that Richard O'Brien intended to reference Christianity, except perhaps as parody, when writing the lyrics to *Sweet Transvestite*, Frank-N-Furter's introductory song. In a 2013 interview with *The Guardian*, 'my eldest brother, Robert, lives in Australia, and I don't see much of him because I find born-again Christians are difficult people to spend time with.'⁷⁷ Despite any personal antagonism that O'Brien may have, Siegel's claim is slightly overexaggerated. Sex and sexuality should not be associated with religion by proxy. Frank N' Furter is even more promiscuous when night falls, but that is not him preaching to Siegel's 'dead' sexual. The songs are meant to be raucous and wild, blatantly talking about sexual deviance and the joy it might bring. This may conflict with moral conservatism, but it is not necessarily a studied critique of Christianity.

Siegel also argued about sexual orientation in *Rocky Horror*. It appeared to fascinate audiences of the 1970s and 1980s. Many scholars looked upon it deeply, with either curiosity or pride. One thing that Siegel mentioned was that 'I am not suggesting that The Rocky Horror Show is a clear indication that American society is headed for complete bisexuality,' nor is he 'suggesting that we might precipitate some kind of millennium by dressing in transsexual garb and holding an orgy.'⁷⁸ Whether or not it is intended, Siegel is critiquing the

⁷⁶ Mark Siegel, '“The Rocky Horror Picture Show”: More than a Lip Service', *Science Fiction Studies*, 7, 3, 1980, p.308.

⁷⁷ Caroline Rees, 'Richard O'Brien: My family values', *The Guardian*, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/jan/25/richard-obrien-rocky-horror-show> (accessed 25/02/2023)

⁷⁸ Siegel, p.310.

wider society through a close reading of the film. In a stark comparison, I.Q. Hunter suggested that the blatant promiscuity emerged from the sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s. To him, Brad and Janet had been ‘seduced by Frank-N-Furter’s bisexuality and the sexual free-for-all of the 1970s.’⁷⁹ However, the way he furthered that argument was by saying that this was one of the reasons why the film ‘becomes a celebration of polymorphous sexuality and a performance stage for outcasts.’⁸⁰ Instead of commenting on the new trend of bisexuality, as Siegel hinted at, Hunter was applauding the way that *Rocky Horror* brought people together to be proud of their differences, even though he termed them ‘outcasts’.

Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich theorised that *Rocky Horror* was ‘also a form of cinematic pastiche, playing upon themes of heterosexual romance, monogamy, sexual stereotypes and identifications, virginity, and in general, middle American morality.’⁸¹ I would argue that Richard O’Brien would have most likely been poking fun at middle America and 1950s conservatism, but I do not believe he wound that theme in tight enough for it to be deliberate commentary. As O’Brien is British and lived in Aotearoa, his exposure to would America was mediated. He was an observer through film, as was the norm for people in Aotearoa. The ‘exotic daydream’ of Hollywood was the only gateway into another world. Richard O’Brien certainly entwined some themes that academics continued to discuss into the creation of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. However, many American scholars read between lines that were never originally there. Some of their conclusions were prompted by the shock of sexual promiscuity. O’Brien’s main message, if any, is liberation. The liberation of oneself, free from any societal norms or sexual oppression, rang true in one of the film’s final numbers, *Don’t Dream it, be it* (often titled under *Rose Tint My World*). As I will continue to discuss throughout my thesis, this was the main sentimental theme. Besides that, the film is largely fun, satirical, and mad. *Rocky Horror* exists without boundaries, which I believe is what shocked critics and enticed the masses.

THE CULT OF ROCKY HORROR

⁷⁹ I.Q. Hunter, *Cult Film as a Guide to Life: Fandom, Adaptation, and Identity*, New York, 2016, p.12.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Patrick T. Kinkade, and Michael A. Katovich, ‘Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading ‘Rocky Horror’’, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 33, 2, 1992, p.199.

*'In other words, films become rather than are born cult.'*⁸²

I.Q. Hunter was not entirely wrong when making this brash claim in 2016. The phenomenon of cult film cannot be explained by a linear process, nor predicted by the most skilled critic. A film becomes a cultural movement by chance. Patricia Quinn, who played Magenta in the film, said in an interview with Australian broadcaster SBS: 'I never knew what a cult film was until we became one. Because there wasn't one.'⁸³ *Rocky Horror* transformed cinema. Amongst the dying embers of the golden age came a musical unintentionally designed for communal enjoyment.

Michael A. Katovich and Patrick T. Kinkade suggested that 'cult films reflect strains within the dominant social structure,'⁸⁴ which I would argue to be a slight generalisation. Underground art may often counteract the mainstream culture they live amongst, but cult films are not necessarily born to be politicised or viewed only by an audience that fit into a strain of society. *The Room* (2003) was a passion project of Tommy Wiseau, *Rocky Horror* is an ode to 1950s B-movie horrors, *Dazed and Confused* (1993) is the stoner film with an abundance of quotable lines. *Rocky Horror* is Richard O'Brien's ode to rock 'n' roll and science-fiction cinema of days gone by. However, there are still some of those films that slip through the cracks and gain cult status by being ahead of its time. *Jennifer's Body* (2009) is a cult film that was overlooked during its release. Now this film about a possessed high schooler murdering boys at her school has become a feminist classic over the subsequent decade. Cult films are either be salves for lesser-represented groups of society or simply be nonsensical fun. Cult film is communal, revelling in the joy of others and their experience. Art is allowed to be fun.

A cult film does not fit in the roster of mainstream blockbusters. Barry K. Grant suggested that 'cult movies, like splatter films, both of their transgressive qualities through excesses of style or content, treating normally taboo subjects or violating commonly accepted

⁸² Hunter, p.3.

⁸³ SBS Australia, 'What is the greatest cult movie of all time and why is it "The Rocky Horror Picture Show"?' TIME WARP: THE GREATEST CULT FILMS | Now on SBS On Demand, August 4th, 2022. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS8PSE1c/> (accessed 3/02/2023)

⁸⁴ Kinkade, and Katovich, p.197.

standards of taste.⁸⁵ *Rocky Horror* could now be considered mainstream. The stage show, apart from its brief Broadway debut, did exceptionally well. Once the film had been transformed into a midnight movie, it became a hit. Vera Dika also suggested this in her book *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia*.⁸⁶ But, I do not believe it is possible to consider *Rocky Horror* mainstream. While certain songs from the film, namely *Time Warp*, have become subsequently more popular, and Tim Curry has maintained a level of household fame as Frank-N-Furter, the film is still largely alternative Hollywood. As argued by Dika, ‘the story of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* depicts flagrant homosexuality, bisexuality, transvestitism, and cannibalism, while its form is a strange admixture of classical horror and musical genre conventions presented in a highly ironized and discontinuous manner.’⁸⁷ *Rocky Horror* was a milestone for cult and queer cinema and does not exist to fit within the mainstream. I would argue that modern film has been more sanitised, and a film such as *Rocky Horror* would not succeed to the same extent in the twenty-first century. Movie musicals often creep into the list of cult classics, although some are more mainstream than others. *Rocky Horror* was not the only musical to reach such levels. *The Red Shoes* (1948), while not a musical, is a dance-heavy film with a cult legacy. *The Sound of Music* has a following and sing-alongs but is too mainstream and beloved to be considered a cult classic.⁸⁸ *Rocky Horror*, to put it informally, is weird.

The term ‘cult’ defines the world of *Rocky Horror*. As described by Amittai F. Aviram, cult is used ‘not in its banal media-hype sense but rather in its classical sense, the celebration of mystic rites pertaining to a divine being or divine beings and to the appropriate secret lore.’⁸⁹ To the observer, the ritualistic performance and communal yelling is not dissimilar. Those writing about the specifics of cult film would define it differently. Hunter declared that ‘cult meant oddball films watched by oddballs at ungodly hours in dingy cinemas.’⁹⁰ To Kinkade and Katovich, cult films were a phenomenon in which ‘the document

⁸⁵ Barry K. Grant, ‘Science fiction double feature: Ideology in the cult film’, in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, *The Cult Film Reader*, New York, 2008, p.87.

⁸⁶ Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia*, Cambridge, 2003, p.104.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Hunter, p.144.

⁸⁹ Aviram, p.181.

⁹⁰ Hunter, p.xi.

is a commercial product in a profane marketplace that nevertheless is made to transform its seemingly profane origins.⁹¹ To them, the leader of the cult was consumerism.

A film becomes a cultural movement by chance. *Rocky Horror* arrived at a particular cultural moment, not only internationally but in Aotearoa. At a time where nostalgia fuelled Cinema, and its audiences were too. Unexpectedly, a film about alien tranvestites found an audience in Tāmaki Makaurau and a home at the Hollywood. The midnight screenings began during the first staged tour, meaning that Aotearoa audiences were exposed to *Rocky Horror* all at once. By 1978, the world had already caught onto the phenomenon. People had been influenced by the allure of the midnight screening, and suddenly, a new form of cinema emerged. Consumption could be exciting, controversial, and timeless. The cult status was cementing itself into the history of film, and Tāmaki Makaurau was able to focus on the brilliance, as opposed to the newness. The development of this brilliance is the focus of my first chapter. To understand why the phenomenon became worthy of decades of discussion, it is crucial to recognise its origin story.

⁹¹ Kinkade and Katovich, p.203.

CHAPTER ONE

'It was great when it all began.'

All great art has an origin story. Be it a chance success or a carefully calculated masterpiece, there is always a tale to be told. As I will discuss in this chapter, *Rocky Horror Picture Show* has one of these great stories. From a wild idea to a London hit, to a Hollywood flop, *Rocky Horror* emerged as one of the most iconic cult films of all time. In a 2013 interview with newspaper *The Scotsman*, Richard O'Brien touched on 'why' Rocky. 'I wanted to bring the excitement of a rock 'n' roll concert into the theatre,' he said. 'I wanted a rock 'n' roll show with a storyline and childish, teenage, silly things that I like.'⁹² Nostalgia is one of the core elements of *Rocky Horror*, and one of the reasons for its success. Amongst the bleak context of the world, *Rocky Horror* provided a reason for audience members to either return to the B-movie or experience the chaos for the first time. O'Brien strategically reinvented a lost generation, one that appealed as a form of escapism. *Rocky Horror*, in all its glory, is a representation of brutal joy.

Rocky Horror's time as a stage show began in a small London theatre. Largely untraditional, it appeared at a time where the West End had begun to expand their musical theatre genres. Michaels and Evans argue that '*The Rocky Horror Show* could never have been created and developed by anyone from the British theatrical tradition. *Rocky* would have been too visceral, too raw and confrontational to have been entertained by any of the London managements of whatever colour.'⁹³ The right people needed to believe in *Rocky Horror* enough to produce it. Richard O'Brien had not written the show with the idea of world-changing in mind. According to him, *Rocky Horror* came about because 'someone asked me to entertain the Christmas staff party at EMI Film Studios, so I wrote a song (*Science Fiction Double Feature*) and, with the help of some jokes, performed it to much laughter and applause. I wondered whether it might serve as prologue to the germ of an idea I had for a musical. I shared that thought with Jim Sharman, who had directed *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

⁹² Claire Black, 'Interview: Rocky Horror creator Richard O'Brien', *The Scotsman*, 2013, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/theatre-and-stage/interview-rocky-horror-creator-richard-obrien-1588723> (accessed 2/01/2023)

⁹³ Michaels and Evans, p.25.

He liked the concept and away we went.⁹⁴ *Rocky Horror* slotted into the underground music scene and started to transform the perception of live theatre. Ironically, *Rocky Horror* ‘first played to a converted movie house seating 270 on King’s Road, and then to the five-hundred-seat King’s Road Theatre – where it would play for seven years.’⁹⁵

There are numerous reasons for its longevity. Its origins were perfectly timed, as it ‘began as a British stage show in 1973 during the period of ‘gender-bending’ glam rock.’⁹⁶ In the book *Rocky Horror: From Concept to Cult*, designer of the show Brian Thomson noted that *Rocky Horror* ‘did pick up with what was happening in music at the time – the New York Dolls, Lou Reed, David Bowie.’⁹⁷ Instead of drawing upon classical theatre tropes, O’Brien turned to the world of music around him. In the 1970s, there were an alternative genre that had emerged on the music scene. This included glam rock, heralded by the three artists listed above, but predominantly David Bowie. Bowie’s album *Aladdin Sane* had been released in 1973, fully cementing the Ziggy Stardust era of his career. Ziggy Stardust was his ‘alien rock-superstar alter ego.’⁹⁸ Bowie and *Rocky Horror* co-existing made perfect contextual sense. In the British scene, the wild nature of O’Brien’s musical was simply another part of the scene. In the words of Elizabeth L. Wollman, glam rock was ‘a response to the highly machismo posturing found among performers of hard rock,’ with performances that were ‘executed live in a highly theatrical manner by performers in either androgynous or overtly feminine costumes.’⁹⁹ Glam rock was a cultural movement, an aesthetic that *Rocky Horror* attached itself to. Tim Curry in fishnets and a corset was not an unusual sight to those in the glam rock world.

Glam rock was just one of many rock subgenres that emerged in the 1970s and is reflected in *Rocky Horror*. While glam rock was a reaction to strict masculine conventions, punk rock was a reaction against politics and a changing industrial world. There were two

⁹⁴ Reporter, ‘The support for the LGBT community was unintended but it is a very welcome addition’: Life according to Rocky Horror star, Richard O’Brien, *Sunday Post*, 2023, <https://www.sundaypost.com/fp/richard-obrien/> (accessed 24/02/2023)

⁹⁵ Weinstock, pp.3-4.

⁹⁶ Hunter, p.11.

⁹⁷ Michaels and Evans, p.73.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical: from Hair to Hedwig*, Michigan, 2006, p.77.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.183.

pockets of punk, in the United States and Great Britain. In the United States, bands like the Ramones and the Dead Kennedys emerged in urbanised states. Punk was more than a genre; it was a culture. In the United States, punk rock was 'performed in back-alley clubs and celebrated in parties in abandoned buildings, communal-living apartments, and illegal squats, provided a network of physical places and cultural space that made coherent sense to youth facing a post-industrial landscape of neglect and a government that favoured business over people.'¹⁰⁰ The conversation around countercultures emerges once again, this time across the world from Aotearoa. To some, according to Michael Nevin Willard, the 1970s was the betrayal of the peace-loving, unifying 1960s.¹⁰¹ As Willard rightly notes, it was indeed a decade of conflict, but also one in which major social and political change continued to happen.¹⁰² For the United States, the 1970s was the decade of the Watergate scandal, the end of the Vietnam War, the protection of abortion rights with *Roe v Wade* and the continued fight for civil rights. Most Western countries, such as Aotearoa, were affected by economic stress and the rise of neoliberalism. Punk emerged at a time where the conventional was no longer appropriate. However, to the American musicians, punk appeared to be anti-corporation or simply just a lifestyle centred around a new form of rock 'n' roll.¹⁰³ In the United Kingdom, bands were anti-monarchy. Arguably, the most notable band of British punk rock were the short-lived Sex Pistols, who released a song in 1977 titled *God Save the Queen*. Lyrics included, 'God save the queen / The fascist regime / They made you a moron / A potential H bomb,' and 'We're the poison / In your human machine.'¹⁰⁴ The British punk genre travelled to fashion, with Vivienne Westwood's career beginning in the mid-1970s.¹⁰⁵ Amongst it all, *Rocky Horror* sat, essential for all those who had been swayed into these two worlds of alternative rock. Richard O'Brien himself had been surrounded by these worlds, stating that, 'glam rock and overt sexuality were around, gay people were coming out, and there was a buzz in the air.'¹⁰⁶ His world was filled with the new and exciting societal scene, and there was no better way to replicate it than through art.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Nevin Willard, 'Cutback: skate and punk at the far end of the American century', in Beth L. Bailey and Dave Farber, eds, *America in the Seventies*, Kansas, 2004, p.202.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.181.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p.182.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.197.

¹⁰⁴ Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen*, 1977.

¹⁰⁵ Michaels and Evans, p.140.

¹⁰⁶ Reporter, *Sunday Post*.

In *Rocky Horror: From Concept to Cult* authors Scott Michaels and David Evans opened with a claim that *Rocky Horror* is fundamentally punk rock. They believed that, ‘coupled with the sexual fetishism, which was only later picked up by the sexually unadventurous Vivienne and Malcolm as a sales point, it would seem that *The Rocky Horror Show* was a more than significant ancestor in the family tree of punk.’¹⁰⁷ They then go on to argue that some corners of British punk were outwardly abused for their anti-establishment ‘look’.¹⁰⁸ The film became a safe space for queer communities, and Michaels and Evans’ example shared the possibility that those outcasts (or Hunter’s ‘oddballs’) found a safe space in entertainment. *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Cabaret* were reportedly enjoyed by punk communities.¹⁰⁹ As I will show, *Cabaret* helped to signal a departure from the classic romance of the Golden Age movie musical, paving the way for the unlikely success of *Rocky Horror*. The film was brutal and not ashamed to be, discussing abortions, sex and bisexuality amongst the rise of fascism. *Cabaret*’s ‘promise of careless sexual abandon and illicit wanton fulfilment appealed far more deeply and widely to the core of the human psyche than its creators could have imagined.’¹¹⁰

The context of the 1970s appeared in *Rocky Horror*, but in a way that would have appealed the tired punks of the United States. Michaels and Evans’ idea of *Rocky Horror* as an ancestor of punk is evident in the character development of Brad and Janet. Indeed, the influence of punk and glam rock helped to craft the storylines of Brad and Janet. In the *Rocky Horror* film, clues appear around who they are supposed to be (and become). As suggested by Grant, the flat tire that brings them into Frankenfurter’s sphere, is ‘emblematic of the breakdown of Brad and Janet’s bourgeois values, an idea reinforced by both a visual reference to Grant Wood’s famous ‘American Gothic’ painting during the opening wedding scene and by Nixon’s resignation speech, heard on the car radio just before their tire deflates.’¹¹¹ Watergate was, as previously mentioned, one of the decade’s defining moments. The inclusion of the detail in the film helped to fit Brad and Janet into the stereotypical mould of the naïve Americans. O’Brien wrote stereotypes, and he has admitted it. In his interview with *Craccum*, he said, ‘Well all of them are stereotypical, all the characters are stereotypes, that’s

¹⁰⁷ Michaels and Evans, p.15.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p.18.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Grant, p.82.

why the actors have to play them as if they are incredibly serious and deeply written characters because the more seriously they play them the funnier it all becomes.’¹¹² Both Nixon and *American Gothic* are quintessential American symbols. Sue Matheson drew an interesting theory, particularly focusing on the fact that Nixon’s speech took place on the eighth of August 1974.¹¹³ Matheson is suggesting that ‘because the ‘normal’ young couple’s adventure takes place not in August but during a dark November evening, Nixon’s resignation suggests to viewers that Brad and Janet are in a time warp.’¹¹⁴ Science-fiction is present before the real plot begins. This idea also comes into play during the opening wedding, where a variety of the wedding guests are Transylvanians in disguise (including Riff Raff and Frank). By the time Brad and Janet enter the castle, the audience is under the assumption that the world existed around them all along. It is incredibly eerie. Matheson also suggests that by making Brad and Janet symbols of the 1950s American Dream, they are already outdated.¹¹⁵ The punk and glam world of the Transylvanians are a sign for them to simply evolve with the times.

Music was not the only influence on *Rocky Horror*. Most importantly, inspiration came, very obviously, from the tale of Frankenstein. The 1818 novel by Mary Shelley became a staple of the B-movie horror phenomenon in the early decades of cinema, with film adaptations such as *Frankenstein* (1910), *Frankenstein* (1931), and its sequel *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). In *Rocky Horror*, Frank is naturally the mad scientist, a nymphomaniac equipped with scientific genius reminiscent of Victor Frankenstein or Dr Jekyll. Rocky is Frankenstein’s monster. Riff Raff is Igor, the hunchback butler who turns on his master. In the interview with *Craccum*, O’Brien mentioned that Riff Raff ‘is so resentful, such a misery guts, and so resentful of the other, harbouring all that discontent and loathing.’¹¹⁶ By using and exaggerating these tropes, *Rocky Horror* generates a nostalgia that celebrates the long-lost genre of the B-movie horror. From the moment that Patricia Quinn’s iconic red lips grace the screen, the audience is aware of the homage to the kooky, cheaply made monster films.

¹¹² James Wenley, ‘EXTENDED INTERVIEW: Rocky Horror’s Richard O’Brien’, *Craccum*, 2011, <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/extended-interview-rocky-horror%E2%80%99s-richard-o%E2%80%99brien/> (accessed 11/12/2022)

¹¹³ Sue Matheson, ‘Rocky Horror Glam Rock’, in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, ed, *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture*, New York, 2008, p.19.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.20.

¹¹⁶ Wenley.

The song *Science Fiction/Double Feature* references an abundance of classic films, even the title paying tribute to the older cinema practice of back-to-back screenings. *The Invisible Man* (1933), *It Came From Outer Space* (1935), *Dr. X* (1932), *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Flash Gordon* (1936), *King Kong* (1933), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *The Day of the Triffids* (1962), *Night Of The Demon* (1957), *When Worlds Collide* (1951) and *Tarantula* (1955), are all films referenced in the song. These films had reached a new audience by the 1970s. This is important to note, as it was an early example of the cyclical nature of film and nostalgia. The beauty of film is that it will always be timeless to someone. Film will never truly die, knowing that people will find joy in art at any given moment.

Rocky Horror is emblematic of societal nostalgia. The world in the 1970s and 1980s was increasingly volatile. Social milestones were achieved amongst a backdrop of violence and rebellion against conservatism. When everything is changing, it is unsurprising for the human condition to crave nostalgia. On the surface, *Rocky Horror* does not seem like the beacon of joy. *Rocky Horror* is shocking and crass. Topics such as cannibalism, adultery, murder, and torture are just some of the brutal threads of the show. However, once these topics are moved to the background, the predominant theme is nostalgia. From the films listed in *Science Fiction, Double Feature*, to the stereotypical caricatures of every character, *Rocky Horror* captured the nostalgia of B-movies. *Rocky Horror* provided much-needed escapism for both those who saw the B-movies when they premiered and those who enjoyed reruns (and double features). Anyone who loved Frankenstein in any form would be able to enjoy the sensual homage to the classic tale. O'Brien created an ode to the golden age phenomenon of 'weird'. Brad and Janet, when examined deeper than their stereotypes, can represent the viewer stepping away from reality, if just for a moment. As mentioned earlier, the film does have moments that ground the viewers into their reality, such as Nixon's resignation, which compromises the escapism that the stage show has. The powers of immersion remain the same, however, and the audience member is transported to an alien environment. The rules of existence are different in the Frankenstein Place.

One of the most important figures in the development of *Rocky Horror* from show to film is American film and music producer Lou Adler, perhaps best known for his work with talent like the Mamas and the Papas and Carole King. Adler came to the production through his girlfriend at the time, Britt Ekland. Ekland was a Swedish actress, often starring in crime or spy films throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Most memorably, Ekland would go on to play

Mary Goodnight in *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974), the Bond girl in Roger Moore's second film as the iconic spy. Ekland, 'saw the London production multiple times [and], apparently enjoyed the production so much that she convinced her beau... to accompany her to a performance and he reached an agreement with Michael White to produce an American production at his Los Angeles rock club, The Roxy, less than two days after taking in the performance in October 1973.'¹¹⁷ This international transfer was not only the start of the working relationship with Lou Adler, but the first glimpse of *Rocky Horror* as a global phenomenon.

Adler backed the show to become a musical film. The movie musical has been around as long as films have had sound, when Al Jolson uttered 'you ain't heard nothing yet!' in his musical drama *The Jazz Singer* (1927). The film helped to usher in 'talkies', moving away from the silent films that audiences had grown accustomed to. Suddenly, sound left the hands of the cinema organist and emerged from the screen itself. The Golden Age of Hollywood was peppered with musicals of increasing budget and skill, and the translation from the stage to the screen appeared seamless. However, the desire for musicals ended the careers of many silent film stars. There were two common reasons for the demise of a Hollywood career in the advent of 'talkies': first and foremost, a singing ability became necessary, and secondly, some actors 'couldn't adjust to the fact that acting styles had to develop with the advent of sound, moving away from a world of grand theatrical gestures and eye-popping reactions and nearer a more restrained realm of subtlety, inflection, and tone.'¹¹⁸ Consequently, Hollywood studios intentionally created stars from its movie musicals. Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Judy Garland, Shirley Temple and more were all known best for their singing or dancing. The 1930s saw the rise of auteurs in movie musicals, such as Busby Berkeley. Amongst the consequences of the Great Depression, Berkeley's 'incredibly elaborate and geometric dance numbers, and near military-style symmetrical precision,' became a glistening form of escapism.¹¹⁹ They continued throughout the Golden Age, where these stars became cultural icons. Fred Astaire for example had a career that spanned decades. Joss Whedon, known for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *The Avengers* (2012), said of Astaire, 'I believe all

¹¹⁷ Weinstock, p.4.

¹¹⁸ John Kenneth Muir, *Singing a New Tune: The Rebirth of the Modern Film Musical from Evita to De-Lovely and Beyond*, New York, 2005, p.20-21.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.22.

film in the history of cinema aspires to be Fred Astaire. I think he is a single greatest phenomenon in the history of film.’¹²⁰

The most common formula for movie musicals is to adapt a piece of work that already existed as a stage show. From early days of cinema to present-day, this has been the case. Adaption is one of the most common practices of film. The work of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, otherwise known as Rodgers & Hammerstein, led the musical adaptations of the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, *Cinderella* (1957) is an example of a musical for television, but there were many significant works prior. Films such as *The King & I* (1956), *Oklahoma!* (1955), *South Pacific* (1958) and *Carousel* (1956), all appearing on screen within a short time span, were epic musicals with extravagant song and dance. They had all previously been on Broadway, but quickly received the film treatment. Some delved into more serious topics, with *Carousel* touching upon domestic violence between the two main love interests and *South Pacific* focusing on racism. However, they were still relatively formulaic and heavily reliant on traditional tropes. Their songs did not retain their memorability, with John Kenneth Muir suggesting that they are only known when referenced elsewhere. Muir’s example was *The Surrey with the Fringe on Top* from *Oklahoma!*, which was referenced in romantic-comedy *When Harry Met Sally* (1989).¹²¹ Despite all this, there is one movie musical that has stood the test of time. *The Sound of Music* (1965) is arguably Rodgers & Hammerstein’s most memorable work. Set in Austria amidst the rise of the Nazi Party, the film followed disgraced nun Maria (played by Julie Andrews), as she nannies the seven children of a wealthy baron. In the years following its release, a major fanbase has accrued. The filming locations in Vienna and Salzburg have become ‘sites of pilgrimage’ for fans, and it frequently referenced in popular culture.¹²² In the movie musical *The Last Five Years* (2014), female protagonist Cathy sings part of *A Summer in Ohio* running through a field, referencing the famous shot of Julie Andrews singing *The Sound of Music*.

In the 1970s, the tone of movie musicals shifted. The context in my introduction, while referencing Aotearoa, suggested a societal shift away from the glittering epics with songs about love and hope. The world was harsh, or perhaps filmmakers were finally given

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p.27.

¹²¹ Muir, p.39.

¹²² Ernest Mathijs and Xavier, ‘Introduction: What is cult film?’, in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, *The Cult Film Reader*, New York, 2008, p.3.

the chance to be bold. Films that existed in the 1970s reflected a darker tone. *Cabaret* (1972), based upon a Kander and Ebb stage show adaptation of novels by Christopher Isherwood, follows a cabaret singer in Weimar Germany. Abortion, bisexuality, promiscuity, and the rise of Nazism are just some of the significant themes of the story. *Cabaret* was an entirely different style of movie musical, with the music never leaving the fictional Kit Kat Club. It was a deliberate choice by director Bob Fosse to keep everything tightly in one space, blurring the lines of what a musical could be.¹²³ That meant that Sally Bowles was never singing under her breath in her shared apartment, nor was the Emcee ever removing his garish stage makeup. Movie musicals in the 1970s were simultaneously celebrations, critiques, and a reimagining of what a musical could be. A happy ending led by a company-wide reprise was not the only way to draw the curtain. While the stage production of *Cabaret* has had numerous interpretations of the ending, the film ends with a distorted mirror facing the audience of the Kit Kat Club. The audience sees the usual fancy-dress of cabaret-goers, then one Nazi uniform, then another. The ending is left ambiguous, yet served as a harsh reminder that this was the reality of 1930s Germany. The complexity of musicals in the latter half of the twentieth century allowed for the art form to be taken seriously. Musical could have as much depth as literature.

Cabaret was followed by movie musicals unafraid to go deeper. The days of Rodgers and Hammerstein were truly gone by the 1970s. The first screen adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1973 does not shy away from the Biblical tale of Jesus Christ, detailing the hanging of Judas Iscariot and Jesus hanging from the Cross. *Hair* (1979) is about draft-dodging hippies and the 1976 remake of *A Star is Born* never wanes from its core themes of addiction and suicide. 1979's *All That Jazz*, a semi-autobiographical film by Bob Fosse, depicts a troubled theatre director. One of the more joyful movie musicals of the decade was *Grease* (1978), and even this covered teen pregnancy, sex, and adolescent gangs. Compared to early musicals, these films are more open-minded to the tragedy of the world.

Despite these important films, by the time that *Rocky Horror* had been released in 1975, musicals had all but disappeared from the public roster. Richard Barrios, in describing the trend, believed that 'at the very beginning of the sound era, back when no one was sure exactly what a musical film was or would be, they were highly respected. Then the public

¹²³ Barrios, p.76.

became oversaturated—musicals, remember, seldom leave well enough alone—and began to look at them with a condescension that has never entirely gone away.’¹²⁴ As with all genres, the popularity of the movie musical ebbed and flowed with demand or critical reception. It also could develop against the cultural mainstream. This is where philosophical theories of art and consumption can be applied. Art can exist in a realm beyond practical examination or common sense. That is the very essence of Camp.

‘Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character.’... Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp’, they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.’¹²⁵

Susan Sontag famously wrote ‘Notes on Camp’, a detailed essay on an aesthetic with a firm grip on Western culture, in 1964. In it, she highlighted the deeper philosophy behind a style with a purpose to celebrate bad taste. Camp has the ability to transcend across politics and gender, often androgynous in its portrayal.¹²⁶ Of course, similar to the concept of a cult classic, very few works are orchestrated to be deliberately Camp. Instead, they become Camp. Sontag listed a variety of different pieces of art (or simply just objects) that have been considered Camp in her essay. All of them could be viewed as normal, were it not for the communal decision suggesting otherwise. As featured in her essay, these are some of Sontag’s physical ideas of Camp:

‘Random examples of items which are part of the canon of Camp:

Zuleika Dobson

Tiffany lamps

Scopitone films

The Brown Derby restaurant on Sunset Boulevard in LA

The Enquirer, headlines and stories

Audrey Beardsley drawings

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p.52.

¹²⁶ Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on ‘Camp’’, 1964, p.13.

Swan Lake

Bellini's operas

Visconti's direction of *Salome* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

Certain turn-of-the-century picture postcards

Schoedsack's *King Kong*

the Cuban pop singer La Lupe

Lynn Ward's novel in woodcuts, *God's Man*

the old Flash Gordon comics

women's clothes of the twenties (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.)

the novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett

stag movies seen without lust'¹²⁷

No piece of art that Sontag listed would have been constructed with its Camp legacy in mind. The beauty of Camp is that it is never intentional. Nothing can choose to be Camp. Something just is Camp. As suggested by Sontag, 'the pure examples of Camp are intentional; they are dead serious.'¹²⁸ Tommy Wiseau was seemingly convinced that his film *The Room* was the best art in existence, when instead it is often considered one of the worst films of all time. This is one of the key reasons why *The Room* is undeniably Camp. It is also why Camp is near-impossible to define, and therefore becomes hard to predict or analyse. Camp also transcends the cultural binaries of gender. It is not attached to masculinity or femininity; instead, it floats between both. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* celebrates fluidity and sexual liberation through their fantastical plot points of monsters and aliens. Camp shames the concept of taste. Objects exist for practicality or entertainment, so why must societal bounds decide what is worthy and what is not? Enjoyment is generated from the individual's own evocation of joy; therefore, society should never have implemented any rigid structures in its creation. *Rocky Horror* does not care about what the mainstream are thinking. The film and the show do not exist within boundaries. That alone is Camp.

Those who had high hopes attached to the film adaptation of *Rocky Horror* were not considering its position as Camp when awaiting the film's premiere. With so much success in Great Britain, as well during its stint at the Roxy, it seemed inevitable that the film would be

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p.2-3.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p.66.

a hit. Gordon Stulberg, the chief operating officer of film studio 20th Century Fox, was invited by Adler to a performance at The Roxy and loved it so much that he invested a million dollars towards a film adaptation.¹²⁹ Everything seemed to fit into place. Adler wanted a Broadway transfer before the film, anticipating as big of a success as *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Grease*.¹³⁰ It would have made perfect sense for the show to be a success. In every venue, *Rocky Horror* had been adored. Sold-out theatres, celebrity audience members and extended runs were all the producers had needed as evidence for success. Unfortunately, the informal term ‘flop’ best described the Broadway run. According to Weinstock, *Rocky Horror* on Broadway ‘was an unmitigated critical and popular disaster,’ that ran for a dismal fifty performances before closing.¹³¹ There was still hope - the film would hopefully be reaching the audiences that loved the show originally. But alas, ‘anxious executives were not soothed when the film version of *Rocky Horror*, entitled *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, previewed to poor response in Santa Barbara, California, in July 1975.’¹³² Everything that O’Brien, Adler and Stulberg had hoped for seemed to crash before them. The magical intimacy of *Rocky Horror* in nightclubs and quaint English theatres had seemingly ended. That was, until a staff member had an idea to change the way they presented the film.

Though originally intended for mainstream release, now it seems as if *Rocky Horror* is a film that is only acceptably viewed after dark. While the concept of a midnight screening may be forever associated with *Rocky Horror*, it was not the first to attract late-night movie goers. Midnight movies have existed since the 1920s.¹³³ Over the decades, it became a space for horrors or variations in the art-house genre, drawing in film lovers from all walks of life. The midnight movie had not just been an American phenomenon, either. Parisian cinemas in the Latin Quarter screened midnight films in the 1960s, some showing grisly horrors and decorating their theatre to match.¹³⁴ In London, various cinemas ‘offered double bills that stretched into the early hours.’¹³⁵ But the United States is perhaps the best known for embracing the midnight film. A notable film on the American midnight circuit was *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), an independent horror directed by George A. Romero about flesh-

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

¹³¹ *ibid.*, p.5.

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ Hunter, p.8.

¹³⁴ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, New York, 1983, p.3.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

eating ghouls. It was ‘played at the Waverly on Sixth Avenue as a midnight screening on Friday and Saturday nights, starting in 1971.’¹³⁶ In 1976, Fox executive Tim Deegan pushed for *Rocky Horror* to replace *Night of the Living Dead* on the Waverly Cinema’s midnight circuit.¹³⁷

Yet *Rocky Horror* was more than a midnight movie. It also prompted audience participation. It is claimed that the first person to yell at the screen was a quiet schoolteacher by the name of Louis Farese Jr.¹³⁸ At the Waverley in 1976, he was frustrated by the pauses between the dialogue, so yelled at the screen ‘Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!’¹³⁹ People thought it was more amusing than irritating, and thus began a nearly-fifty-year-old obsession with yelling obscenities together. Whenever Brad’s name is mentioned, people often yell ‘asshole!’, and with Janet, ‘slut!’. Another example is during the pause between ‘I see you shiver with antic..pation’, when audience members yell ‘Say it!’.¹⁴⁰ And then, people started taking it to the next level. *Midnight Movies* argued that ‘quite independently of one another, members of the audience had begun turning up dressed like some of the screen characters—a phenomenon which started only a few weekends after Farese had shouted out his first witticisms.’¹⁴¹ People wanted an event, an extravaganza to look forward to every week.

Ron Rosenbaum, who wrote a rather scathing article about the *Rocky Horror* phenomenon, compared the midnight screenings to the actions of a cult. This idea has circulated throughout my thesis, and I maintain that fan culture could not quite reach the dedication required of religion. These devotees would dedicate two evenings a week to the film but had normal lives outside of the cinema. There were rituals that were vital to each event, but ultimately, there was more focus on fun than scripture. Rosenbaum said about the audience:

‘Most of the audience is college-age, white, suburban. They look more like future computer programmers than like a decent subculture. Before the performance I attended, a chubby young man wearing the leather-and-feather costume of the movie’s ‘transvestite transsexual from Transylvania’ got up to welcome the faithful and the newcomers. With quiet pride he announced that this was the

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹³⁷ Michaels and Evans, p.331.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p.176.

¹³⁹ Dika, p.105.

¹⁴⁰ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p.176.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.177.

197th time he'd attended the movie, citing several previous theaters he'd haunted until assuming the master-of-ceremonies post here. Then he introduced several other of the devout who were marking milestones - two 150ths, three 100ths - and had them stand up in their costumes, to much applause.'¹⁴²

It was a cause for celebration to be a repeat offender. However, the comment about the 'future computer programmers' was something interesting to note. There is a natural expectation and assumption that everyone in the audience will dress up. The corsets, fishnets and makeup are standard practice, but there are more conservative options available. Brad and Janet, the Narrator, Dr Scott, and even the suits and colourful cummerbunds of the Transylvanians, are all relatively simply costumes and draw from items found in a standard wardrobe. However, some attendees for just there for fun, not dressing up. A *Rocky Horror* screening is fun regardless of outfit.

The fans of Rocky Horror adored the culture that had been established with it, to the point in which they began a community of devotees. Fan culture was not new, with former communities such as Beatlemania coming to mind. The midnight screenings solidified that fanbase, and what would emerge from it would be generations of dressing up, dancing and taking the screenings seriously. One example is of a set of faux commandments, playing into the academic idea of the religious cult. This idea was disputed by the most prominent Rocky Horror fans, namely Sal Piro, one of the original diehard regulars. He said, 'I mean, I'm still a devout Catholic. My religion is Catholicism— Rocky Horror is like my way of life.'¹⁴³ However, he knew that not every fan separated the fiction from the religion. Lori Davis declared:

'The Ten Commandments of Rocky Horror

1. Thou Shalt Not Use Frank's Name in Vain.
2. Remember Friday and Saturday and Keep Them Holy.
3. Honor Thy Transvestite and Transsexual.
4. Thou Shalt Not Put Any Other God Before Him.
5. Thou Shalt Make the Sign of the Cross Before Entering Pews.
6. Thou Not Bear False Witness Against the Master Frank-N-Furter.
7. Thou Shalt Not Miss The Rocky Horror Picture Show.
8. Thou Shalt Follow the Master's Ways in Body and Mind.
9. Thou Shalt Always Bless the Ground the Master Walks.
10. Thou Shalt Always Remember to Show Love For Frank-N-Furter.'¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Rosenbaum, p.87.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p.178.

¹⁴⁴ Lori Davis, *The Transylvanian*, in *Midnight Movies*, eds J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, p.174.

As this list suggests, *Rocky Horror* also appealed to distinct communities, whose activities in this era were socially circumscribed. When Deegan championed the film, and its late screenings he believed ‘that it was certainly a film that a predominantly gay audience would have been likely to appreciate, as well as other creatures of the night.’¹⁴⁵ Indeed, one of the distinguishing features and lasting legacies of *Rocky Horror* is its ties to queerness and sexuality. From the moment Frank-N-Furter’s cape falls below his knees, until everyone dons his uniform of fishnets and corsets, the film is laced with an overarching theme of the liberation of sexuality. As Scott Michaels and David Evans suggested, there were four themes to *Rocky Horror*: ‘Fashion and style; sexuality and fetishism; music; celebrity and stardom.’¹⁴⁶ IQ Hunter noted the queerness of *Rocky Horror*’s initial fanbase when saying, ‘The audience was, as you might expect, at first chiefly gay, responding to the film’s camp excess and the screenings’ safe spaces for outrageous self-expression.’¹⁴⁷ The idea of a ‘safe space’ is crucial when trying to understand the significance of *Rocky Horror* to queer audiences. The theme of *Don’t dream it, be it*, an anthemic song from the film’s conclusion comes into play.

This, of course, has ties to the context of the era. As touched upon in the introduction, the latter half of the twentieth century saw reformed legislation for sexual orientation. Whilst Aotearoa did not reform laws against homosexuality until 1986, England and Wales issued the Sexual Offences Act 1967, in which private same-sex acts between men over twenty-one were decriminalised.¹⁴⁸ Northern Ireland and Scotland would not follow with legislation until the 1980s. While sexual acts were decriminalised, legal marriage between same-sex couples was widely illegal until the 21st century. *Rocky Horror*’s fantastical world made these otherwise-prohibited acts normal. When Frank and Rocky walk down to their nuptial chambers, it is tradition for the audience to throw confetti and cheer. When Brad removes the wig to reveal Frank in his bed, he is aghast. Then, he relents and lets himself enjoy the experience. There is shock, but no judgement. It is heavily implied that he enjoys it. As Barry

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Scott Michaels and David Evans, *Rocky Horror: From Concept to Cult*, London, 2002., p.19.

¹⁴⁷ Hunter, p.11.

¹⁴⁸ UK Parliament, Regulating sex and sexuality: the 20th century <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/sexuality20thcentury/#:~:text=In%201967%20the%20Sexual%20Offences,for%20Northern%20Ireland%20until%201982>. (accessed 3/01/2023)

K. Grant suggested, ‘the seduction scenes are photographed in the same manner and the dialogue identical in each, suggesting the common nature of desire with a hetero- or homosexual. Such an attitude is in direct opposition to the dominant heterosexual monogamous values of Western culture.’¹⁴⁹ One thing that *Rocky Horror* does well is the normalisation of sexual freedom. While Brad and Janet are often in shock, there is never any disgust or hatred. Brad is not cast aside for expressing interest in a same-sex encounter. When considering the contextual factors of the era, this was unusual. The film is not a protest against the context, but rather an argument for the beauty of normalisation.

Musicals and the theatre have quite regularly been associated with queerness. Richard Barrios wrote in regard to movie musicals: ‘Musicals could also be a haven—some might say a benign closet—for another group usually left in the shade.’¹⁵⁰ Gilad Padva suggested that classical musicals are ‘queer nostalgia.’¹⁵¹ There are aspects of pop culture that resonate with specific communities, and movie musicals have that become a safe haven for some in the queer community. Classic musicals are often viewed as queer nostalgia due to their utopian nature. This can include musicals such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet Me in St Louis*, *An American in Paris*, *Oklahoma!* and *The Sound of Music*.¹⁵² Some of these films are award-winning, but all of them were commercially successful. Two Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals, *Oklahoma!* and *The Sound of Music* make Padva’s list and are the only two films adapted from a stage show. But interestingly, all of them are adapted from a form of media. *The Wizard of Oz* is inspired by L. Frank Baum’s 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Meet Me in St Louis* taking from work by Sally Benson, and *An American in Paris* from a composition by famed composer George Gershwin. Padva suggested that the protagonist’s ‘optimistic struggle is usually manifested by songs, dances, colourful outfits, flamboyant settings, and light effects aimed to please the audience. Musicals are usually a conformist quest for some happiness, some consolation, some excitement, and some marvellous sights and sites. They mostly reconfirm the social order and its traditional attitudes toward capitalism, patriarchal order, gender binaries, and the interrelations between class, race and sexuality.’¹⁵³ As I mentioned in my section on the movie musical, very few of these films

¹⁴⁹ Grant, p.82.

¹⁵⁰ Barrios, p.205.

¹⁵¹ Gilad Padva, *Queer Nostalgia: In Cinema and Pop Culture*, London, 2014, p.139.

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, p.144.

touch upon extreme topics. This helps to evoke the feeling of utopia and escape for those who cannot feel it completely in the real world. The movie musical's desire to be flamboyant, bold, and mostly importantly, true to its artistic beliefs, has subsequently created a community in which queer folk have found comfort.

The Wizard of Oz has been considered an iconic queer film for years. Judy Garland has been labelled a gay icon, and the film constantly associated with queer men, via the characters of the scarecrow, lion, and tin man from the film's release in 1939 onwards. In his book *Gay Men at the Movies: Cinema, Memory and the History of a Gay Male Community*, Scott McKinnon described the Oz phenomenon: 'Although of uncertain origins, the identity label 'Friends of Dorothy' was used to describe homosexual men in the 1940s and may well have originated with this trio. Certainly, their travels with Dorothy have been adopted by many gay men as a metaphor for the journey from the straight world of childhood to the gay community of adulthood, or from potentially homophobic rural spaces to the bright lights and acceptance of the big city.'¹⁵⁴ The film had taken on a larger identity than expected. It is arguably one of the first film examples of Padva's queer nostalgia theory – Dorothy stepping into Oz is the epitome of the optimistic, colourful and flamboyant struggle.

Padva used the movie musical *Were the World Mine* (2008) as an example of modern queer nostalgia. The film centres around teenager Timothy, who is bullied for being gay in an extremely conservative, narrow-minded community. He then conjures up a love potion that magically turns everyone gay. To Padva, the film 'stands up for the gay teens' right to have youth nostalgia. It insists on magically turning the traumatic into the fantastic.'¹⁵⁵ More than anything else, Padva wanted to present the idea that queer nostalgia is the result of vicious bullying and a desire for a magical youth.¹⁵⁶ Padva continues to argue for the subversive nature of the movie musicals.

On a more general note, Padva argued that 'In a heteronormative world, masculinity is typically associated with interest in cars, motorcycles, football, sex with women, and violent sports, including boxing and rugby, and the iconic liquids are gasoline, semen, sweat,

¹⁵⁴ Scott McKinnon, *Gay Men at the Movies: Cinema, Memory and the History of a Gay Male Community*, Chicago, 2016, p.25.

¹⁵⁵ Padva, p.147.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

and blood. In contrast, an explicit male interest in musicals - colourful, flamboyant, stylized, and fabulous as they are - is often perceived by most straight men as transgressive, possibly indicating the musical admirer's effeminacy and gayness.¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately yet unsurprisingly, there were those who opposed the celebration of sexuality. Notably, it was an academic who applied the context of American society to a largely British creation. They argued that, 'the antagonism toward homosexuality in the US has understandably resulted in a good deal of resentment of heterosexuals by homosexuals in response, and there are some homosexual 'separatists' who do their share, consciously or not, to prevent social reunification.'¹⁵⁸ This academic take, made by Mark Siegel in 1980, appeared to suggest that there was purposeful division created by the community that had been oppressed, and they were expected to be the ones to re-unify with the oppressors.

If so, there are some realities behind Kinkade and Katovich's statement that cult films reflected 'strains within social structure' when this idea is applied to *Rocky Horror*. As many academics argued, Brad and Janet enter the castle as a heterosexual, wannabe-American Dream. Staunchly monogamous and conservative in appearance, they are the kind of characters that a non-American audience would know through their consumption of Hollywood film. By the time they are clambering around the rubble, clad in makeup and corsets, they are changed forever. However, they still find themselves together. Barry K. Grant believed that *Rocky Horror* was built upon two central themes. His argument plays into this idea of the staunchly monogamous. Grant argued that, 'The musical traditionally develops two central themes: constructing a sense of community and defining the parameters of sexual desire. These themes are, of course, intimately related, since unchanneled desire poses a threat to the dominant ideology of heterosexuality and monogamy so insistently represented in classical Hollywood cinema. *Rocky Horror* shows just how close the musical and horror genre really are. And just as classical musicals inevitably end in the valorized union of the monogamous couple — *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) is the ultimate example — so Brad and Janet, with the elimination of the Furter between them, can come together as promised at the beginning when Janet catches the bridal bouquet at the wedding.'¹⁵⁹ As I mentioned earlier, the movie musical had changed forever in the 1970s.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.139.

¹⁵⁸ Siegel, p.308.

¹⁵⁹ Grant, p.82.

There was seemingly no room for gleeful tunes. The musical that Grant mentioned, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, is an important example of the contrast between the Golden Age and the 1970s. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* has a self-explanatory title. The lead bride Milly, played by Jane Powell, has been given the task of teaching her new husband's six brothers manners. Eventually, all well-behaved men end up with a bride each. Playing heavily into gendered stereotypes, the film is a poorly aged time capsule. Set in the mid-1800s, the film reflected conservative American ideals. *Rocky Horror*'s Janet, with her thrill over being engaged, mirrors an energy that could be found amongst these eager brides. However, her character development is focused on her expanding the parameters of her own sexual desire, as Grant suggested.

At its surface, the characterisation of Brad is an exploration into the intricacies of masculinity. Brad's verse in *Rose Tint My World* is an ode to his awakened state of being. At the wedding, the last thing he could have imagined was breaking free from the American Dream. He appeared hesitant or overwhelmed during the proposal, and then through *Damn It, Janet!*, possibly hinting to the storyline he would soon follow. While shaky on his feet, *Rose Tint My World* is an exciting suggestion that he has come into himself. The rigid forms of conservative masculinity were not for everyone, and Brad appeared relieved to be free of these expectations, if just for a brief evening. What Brad could represent is that common breadwinner, embracing their wildest desires. There is no singular guide to human existence, and every character proves that throughout the film. Brad sings:

*It's beyond me
Help me, Mommy
I'll be good, you'll see
Take this dream away
What this, let's see
I feel sexy
What's come over me?
Woo! Here it comes again*¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ O'Brien, 1975.

At the end of the movie, there is no telling where Brad and Janet will go. It is possible that they could pretend as though they had encountered a drug-fuelled dream, then return to a normal life with a white picket fence. They had, as Grant had argued, fallen back into a position where they could fulfil Janet's initial dream of monogamous marriage. This would have been the safe option. Or they could whole-heartedly embrace what the Transylvanians had taught them.

One interesting argument is that 'In other words, the overtone of theatricality in musicals often exposes and criticizes the bourgeois straight society and its heterocentric imperatives. In this manner, musicals are much more than joyful entertainment. They are popular yet subversive texts that critically perform (and often mock) the notorious categorizations in contemporary society regarding gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and culture.'¹⁶¹ I believe that the queer community have been able to elevate the joyful nature of a classic movie musical to mean much more than its intended purpose. I would also argue that a significant number of classic movie musicals did not create a third dimension to many of their characters. This leaves plenty of room for interpretation.

I argue that *Rocky Horror* was a product of a very specific time in pop culture history. It resembled a part of society that was growing in popularity but could not quite reach a level of mainstream. The failure on Broadway and the film's initial run are not surprising, as the stage show had managed to capture the right audience in the right venues. *Rocky Horror* captivated the more artistic, flamboyant audiences, who then boosted its popularity through the stroke of genius that was the midnight screening. Suddenly, there was a new activity for young people to do with their friends. Louis Farese made it something that did echo the academic conclusions of religious activity. *Rocky Horror*'s popularity travelled solely through word-of-mouth, and by the time it reached Aotearoa (both on stage and on midnight screen), *Rocky Horror* was an embryonic phenomenon. Even Richard O'Brien believed that the success was a stroke of luck. In an interview with the *Sunday Post* in 2023, he said that 'timing is very important, as is luck. Zeitgeist sums it up. There are lots of variables. Would it have been as successful if someone other than Tim Curry had played the lead?'¹⁶² No one can predict success. O'Brien is right in claiming luck. Despite the few commercial failures,

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.141.

¹⁶² Reporter, *Sunday Post*.

everything else fell into place. This luck travelled further than the film, too. Tāmaki Makaurau desperately needed a beacon of hope for a dying art. The Hollywood was the right cinema at the right time.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Creature of the night.’

‘We visualise and dream of a magnificent amphitheatre, to be under a glorious moonlight sky, in an Italian garden in a Persian court-in a Spanish patio- -or in a mystic Egyptian temple yard, all canopied by soft moonlight sky. The masses may not know Art, but they feel it and, therefore, from the ‘ancient classic and definitely established architecture, is brought the shape, form and order of house, garden, logia or garden wall with which to convert the theatre auditorium into a meeting-place surrounded by Nature’s setting.’¹⁶³

- Charles Bohringer, 1929.

THE CITY IN THE GOLDEN AGE

Cinemas used to line the streets of the central city. During the golden age of cinema-going, one would not need to walk far up Queen Street, the city’s spine, to come across a theatre. From regal and momentous, to the few individually owned, there was something available for every audience to enjoy. For a few decades, the residents of Tāmaki Makaurau were obsessed with attending the theatre. Entering the central city was exciting with entertainment on nearly every doorstep. I have selected a small selection of city cinemas to examine, with most of the evidence coming from Jan Grefstad’s detailed volumes of *Auckland Cinemas*. His histories are an untouched gem tucked away in public libraries. His research is vast and passionate, and aids in the pursuit of preserving Tāmaki Makaurau’s cultural background. So much of this history has been forgotten or side-lined, and in this chapter, I am determined to capture the spirit of the cinemagoer, while also arguing for the change in perception regarding the theatre. To begin this chapter, I will examine the golden age of cinema. As defined in my introduction, the ‘golden age’ in my thesis has been placed between the 1920s through to the 1960s. During that time, attending the cinema was a cultural phenomenon. However, as all phenomena go, consumption evolved to suit the requirements and demand of their audience. The desire for entertainment never waned, but

¹⁶³ *Auckland Star*, Volume LX, Issue 296, 14 December 1929, p.22.

the medium of consumption does. While initially, as I will discuss, the city was a haven for brilliantly lit theatres and the latest releases, the allure eventually faded. Cinema had to change to survive. The vast majority of historiography, as well as the research by Grefstad, focused solely on the golden age and treated the decline as the ‘death’ of cinema. This thesis, predominantly within this chapter, aims to disprove that. There was more to cinema than its era of glamour and did not completely die when the final city theatre shuttered their doors.

Tāmaki Makaurau adored the cinema. According to Bronwyn Labrum, ‘New Zealanders were among the most regular cinemagoers in the world at the beginning of the 1950s. Until the arrival of television in 1960, the ‘pictures were considered an essential part of life. In 1946, New Zealand had 568 picture theatres - meaning, in effect, one seat for every six people, compared with one for every twelve in the United States. New Zealand’s West Coast had the highest rate of attendance per head of population. Going to the movies was more popular than going to church. Admission to picture theatres was cheaper in the suburbs and provinces than it was in the city, although theatres required Price Tribunal approval for their admission charges in the 1950s.’¹⁶⁴ If *Rocky Horror* attendees were a part of a cultural fanfare, the masses in the golden age were the ones who laid the groundwork.

Theatres in the golden age were opulent. The spectacle was their strength. In providing an experience, audiences were drawn in. The architects deliberately designed their theatres as such, in a feat to create something that took film as seriously as the opera. The new technology had to be accompanied by comfort and style. There were two cinemas that adhered to this concept of design brilliance – the Civic and His Majesty’s Theatre. The two were incredibly different approaches to architecture yet both evoked a sense of artistic superiority. Overall, there were two main elements in the golden age of cinema. The first is the design element. The second was the exhibition of the newest technological advances.

His Majesty’s was the epitome of glamorous theatre. It was also one of the first. Opening in 1902, it was a space in which ‘the socialites of the town dressed in their finery and rolled up in their carriages to be greeted by a uniform commissioner.’¹⁶⁵ Reportedly, the theatre was beautiful. It was ‘as stunning as any show that graced its vast stage (62ft wide

¹⁶⁴ Bronwyn Labrum, *Real Modern*, Wellington, 2018, p.317.

¹⁶⁵ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.8.

48ft deep); marble staircase, deep carpets, a ceiling dome decorated with floral paintings and lighted by 100 incandescent lamps and above the proscenium three classical paintings representing music, comedy and dancing.’¹⁶⁶ While it was not themed or designed to be outwardly unique, His Majesty’s was still a luxury example of true British-influenced theatrical beauty. It was adored by a *Weekly News* journalist attending the opening night, who ‘was delighted with the colour scheme; ornamental balconies and private boxes painted in light blue, crushed strawberry, pink and gold; circle seats upholstered in peacock blue plush and a rich peacock blue curtain embroidered with gold fringe and centre motto.’¹⁶⁷ The socialites of Tāmaki Makaurau were treated well by this fine theatre that paid homage to the Victorian aesthetic.

The Civic was very different. The *Auckland Star* reported on the build of the Civic in 1928, emphasising an over-the-top capacity of five thousand.¹⁶⁸ This was later corrected as three-and-a-half thousand, which was correct.¹⁶⁹ The Civic, an assumed ‘temporary name’, was to be ‘a revelation in style.’¹⁷⁰ A multi-functional space, with room allocated for tea rooms and orchestras, it was an atmospheric approach to entertainment.¹⁷¹ The design and architecture were what set the Civic apart from its city neighbours, as it focused on honing in on exotic, foreign themes. The style of the ‘inside architecture of the theatre will be Venetian and Oriental in style, the outside being on classic lines.’¹⁷² The architects, Charles Bohringer and William Leighton, crafted a cinema so unlike anything that Tāmaki Makaurau had seen. Its ‘Indian-inspired motifs for its public foyer, including seated Buddahs [sic], twisted columns and domed ceilings,’ draw the theatregoer into the world of the theatre. These foyer elements, including elephants and ornaments, were set in plaster to resemble ivory.¹⁷³ A deliberate atmospheric design meant that there was a heavier focus on the art being presented, as there were no cultural reminders that the audience was in Aotearoa. The main theatre itself was a dome, adorned with twinkling ‘stars’ to create an endless night sky. It helped woo attendees into the world of the film, be it the deserts of *Morocco* (1930), or *Casablanca*

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁶⁸ *Auckland Star*, July 9th, 1928, p.10.

¹⁶⁹ Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.11.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p.8.

(1942). The overall style was influenced by American designer John Eberson and was ultimately an ode and celebration to the richness of the stage and film world.¹⁷⁴ The build was expensive, as one would expect of a towering theatre with ornate details and retail spaces. However, every shilling put towards it seemed to be understood as worth it. Thomas O'Brien, the owner and developer, stated that: 'It is all going to cost a lot of money, but I have found that Aucklanders have always shown a readiness to pay for good entertainment.'¹⁷⁵ Comfort and fun were the two largest factors in mind for the build.

Its design was one of the goals of Charles Bohringer, who was interviewed in the *Auckland Star* in 1929. There is a passage that stood out, where he discussed why he diverted his creativity away from the traditional Western design ideals. There were others that had themes, such as the St James. It was designed in a way that mimicked a Spanish mission house, with two royal boxes slotted neatly on either side. To Bohringer, entertainment was richer through variety, and that the public yearned for that. Thomas O'Brien wanted to 'build a theatre in Auckland like the Roxy in New York which had an orchestra and dancing girls,' and Bohringer was happy to push his creative desires into designing.¹⁷⁶ This lengthy passage is a true ode to theatre design, as well as commentary on the social desire for change. His words are too passionate to condense, and therefore must be displayed fully:

'Why should it come to pass that, only accepted lines, style and treatment be followed in theatre-designing? We have the French Baroque, the colonial designs expressed in the Adam style, and a few scattered examples of Greek and Pompeian architecture serving us as the standards and basic ground for the creation of hundreds of picture houses of unavoidable similarity. All too often stock pattern lines must groan under the yoke in the necessity of establishing individuality for the particular theatre, through no other means than the efficient and splendid expenditure of money. Thus, yesterday's theatre is old-fashioned to-day, and to-day's average theatre is virtually a replica of yesterday's, except that it is more elaborately dressed up with more marble, more intricate enrichments, more draperies, more cut-glass chandeliers in foyer and lobbies, all bowing correct architectural comparison and character of design. Since variety is the primary demand of an amusement-loving public, and we mean decisive variety, it is only reasonable to assume that such variety will be appreciated in the places of entertainment as well as in the entertainment itself. The opening performance in one of our gorgeous picture palaces of gold, rich ornament and elaborate decorations is truly an inspiring sight, but it must be observed that the rapture of the audience and the overawing effect on the masses often fails to be particularly lasting the surroundings soon become something akin to oppressive and embarrassing to the average steady patron who is not accustomed to live in such gorgeous surroundings.'¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.31.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.14.

The unique experience of live theatre and cinema ensured the popularity of both forms. The three cinemas were purpose-built to be theatrical venues, staging a variety of performances alongside their film roster. His Majesty's was first and foremost a theatre. As the St James was being built, the ability to present performances of vaudeville and traditional theatre were prioritised. This prompted the construction of a stage that was slightly larger than a standard cinema.¹⁷⁸ J.T. Julian & Son Ltd were the builders behind the St James. They were not unfamiliar to Tāmaki Makaurau, having built the Majestic Theatre, Everybody's Theatre and even the Auckland Railway Station on Beach Road.¹⁷⁹ Because of the push to include a larger stage, it was incredibly fitting that the first attraction to the St James was the musical comedy *Archie*, a stage show.¹⁸⁰ His Majesty's was christened with a performance of *The Runaway Girl*, a musical comedy written in 1898 by Seymour Hicks and Harry Nicholls. It is a mischievous story about a woman joined a band that turn out to be thieves. His Majesty's had chosen the right piece to open with, as the show is a 'very gorgeous, very radiant, very tuneful and extremely absurd sample of a form of entertainment so universally popular that even those critics who were won't to be captious and crave something more substantial.'¹⁸¹ His Majesty's was home to both film and theatre, a balance that worked well when emphasising the golden age glamour of the cinema. Both mediums were on the same level of status when displayed in the same beautiful venue.

Modernity promptly accompanied nostalgia. Technology, be it sound or the film itself, was either flaunted in some cinemas or simply a thread of their entire fabric. This aspect made the popularity of cinema expand beyond the cultural simplicity of art consumption. The 'golden age', as it was so often discussed, was the beginning of an entirely new form of entertainment. The world changed with the introduction of photography, then film. The building of the Civic coincided with the introduction of 'talkies. Thomas O'Brien was quick to install the proper technology, although was not an avid fan of 'talkies. While acknowledging the fact that they would be the future, he said: 'The personalities of the players seem to be projected from the screen. The great disappointment, however, although you soon forget about it, is that the talking pictures are no better in tone than a gramophone

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.1.

equipped with an amplifier. There has been no improvement in the quality of the tone.’¹⁸² Despite this, by December 1929, the apparatus to allow sound was installed. This included five loudspeakers behind the screen, as well as a ‘system for telephone communication between the operating box and every section of the auditorium so that the volume of reproduced sound can be perfectly regulated.’¹⁸³ The intricate system was to ensure that the Civic was linked with the changing times of the motion picture, with O’Brien also ensuring that a supply of outstanding films were ready to be enjoyed by his audience in full sound.¹⁸⁴ Once the equipment was ready, the theatre was opened. The theatre’s first screening was of *Three Live Ghosts* (1929).¹⁸⁵ The ‘talkie’ was both an adaptation of a play and a remake of a 1922 silent film, about three soldiers who return to London after the war, only to find out that they have been listed as dead. From December 26th, 1929, the St James also showed talkies. They began with the Aotearoa and Australian premiere of the film *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929), a flashy Technicolor spectacle featuring showgirls and grand musical numbers.¹⁸⁶ Said spectacle was advertised as such in newspapers, emphasising the idea that the St James was helping to usher in an even better era of cinema. One advertisement read: ‘The New Era in Entertainment. Sir Benjamin and Mr John Fuller open the Treasure Chest of Amazing Entertainment, Coloured Photography, touched with the magic of the rainbow.’¹⁸⁷ According to their marketing, they had struck gold.

Certain theatres were focused more on being technologically advanced. The proprietors behind the Embassy Theatre claimed that it was the most up-to-date theatre in Aotearoa when it was initially built in 1935.¹⁸⁸ At the time, perhaps it was. The Embassy Theatre was specifically built to ‘cater for long season films.’¹⁸⁹ Seating up to a thousand patrons, it was a later addition to the central city theatre circuit. The premiere film was *Rose of the Rancho* (1936), a Western musical adapted from the stage.¹⁹⁰ Musicals were the centre of the opening programme, the *Auckland Star* considering that a ‘happy choice’ and declaring

¹⁸² *ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁸³ *New Zealand Herald*, December 14th, 1929, p.15.

¹⁸⁴ Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.20.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p.28.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, pp.101-102.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.101.

¹⁸⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, October 5th, 1935, p.1.

¹⁸⁹ Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.45.

¹⁹⁰ Grefstad, Volume 2, p.93.

that ‘musical pictures are the greatest achievement of the audible screen.’¹⁹¹ The Embassy recognised a cultural trend and acted upon it, even late into the ‘golden’ era. *West Side Story* (1961) ran for 114, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) for 81. In a failed attempt to beat the 459 days of *The Sound of Music* (1965) screenings at the Plaza theatre, *My Fair Lady* (1964) ran for 215 days. Long-running pictures were a feature of the Embassy. *Spartacus* (1960) – definitely not a musical - ran for 82 days. But long runs were not just a late era phenomenon. The St James was inundated when *Gone with the Wind* (1939) premiered in 1941. The historical epic had won ten Academy Awards and was full of British and American stars, including Vivien Leigh, Clark Gable, Olivia de Havilland, Hattie McDaniel and Leslie Howard. With a season that ran from May 2nd, 1941, through June 5th, advance bookings for *Gone with the Wind* were ‘at a peak figure completely unprecedented in the theatre’s history.’¹⁹² *Gone with the Wind* appeared to be loved so much by their audience that the St James could screen it three times a week. After the St James, the film moved on to the neighbouring Embassy.¹⁹³ While His Majesty’s and the Civic focused on exhibiting art beautifully, cinemas such as the Embassy and the St James encouraged a culture of long seasons and loyalty. They also brought forward technology they thought their audience might enjoy. In 1953, the Embassy was home to the early 3D films. In a twenty-five-minute exhibit, families were treated to a showing of a new technological feat that would continue to crop up in the decades to come.¹⁹⁴

That is not to say that there were no cons to the grandeur of the golden age. In fact, the new technology presented many new dangers. The St James opened in 1928, as an over-£70,000 replacement to the Fullers’ Opera House, that burned down in 1926.¹⁹⁵ The Opera House, located on Wellesley Street, was notably where the first-ever films were screened.¹⁹⁶ The devastating fire occurred on December 3rd 1926, after ‘an electrical fault in a switch board behind the stage and ignited the curtain, from which the flames quickly spread through the upper part of the three-level cinema.’¹⁹⁷ Fire was not entirely uncommon in the grand old days of cinema, particularly as new technology blended with old-fashioned ways. Particularly

¹⁹¹ *ibid.*

¹⁹² Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.103.

¹⁹³ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p.96.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.101.

¹⁹⁶ Hayward and Hayward, p.2.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.20.

in the 1910s, it was a regulation that ‘chemical fire extinguishers had to be procured and panic bolts fitted to exit doors.’¹⁹⁸ Another example was found at the Queen’s Theatre, which ultimately led to the prosecution of a projectionist in 1926.¹⁹⁹ Until the middle of the twentieth-century, film reels were made from nitrate - an extremely flammable material. Nitrate would burn fast and was to be looked after with care. Chemical fire extinguishers could only do so much as the decades progressed and people were alerted to new dangers. Because of this, the incident of 1926 was treated as a lesson. Francis X Bouzaid had been charged with leaning over film with a lit cigarette, as he was caught by the deputy chief Inspector of explosives (later of films), Roy Girling-Butcher.²⁰⁰ First and foremost, Girling-Butcher wanted to warn owners and operators to the ongoing risks that could be found in any part of the theatre. Essentially, he wanted to argue that ‘the practice of smoking in the projection room was dangerous and in case of fire a panic among the audience might easily be caused with disastrous results.’²⁰¹ Bouzaid, luckily, had escaped charges with a small fine.²⁰² Fire was perhaps the biggest physical risk that theatres faced in the golden age.

Contextually, the Great Depression threatened the very existence of cinema barely after it began. The Great Depression saw the number of movie goers drop by forty-five percent and debts rise exponentially.²⁰³ O’Brien lost five cinemas to Amalgamated, one of the largest theatre chains in Tāmaki Makaurau, and then found himself bankrupt and dropping out of the cinema industry in 1932.²⁰⁴ Thankfully, the transfer to Amalgamated rescued the Civic from financial strife. As reported in the *New Zealand Herald*, the Civic was the most lavishly designed theatre in the country, and the largest of Amalgamated’s repertoire.²⁰⁵ Through this purchase, the Civic was able to continue expanding and establishing itself as this theatrical landmark of Tāmaki Makaurau. As argued by Nerida Elliot, there was no need for Tāmaki Makaurau to plead with its audience members to return

¹⁹⁸ Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.4.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*

²⁰¹ *ibid.*

²⁰² *ibid.*

²⁰³ *ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, March 31st 1934, p.12.

to the cinema once the Depression had eased. She argued that ‘New Zealanders did not desert the big screen until they could place a smaller one in their homes.’²⁰⁶

The Second World War also introduced further disruption. However, some venues used the change to their advantage. The Wintergarden, tucked away in the basement of the Civic, was all about the world of entertainment beyond the motion picture. It was to be open every single day from 10:30am through until midnight.²⁰⁷ Design-wise, it was ‘to be artificially illuminated and it will really be tantamount to the stalls in an ordinary theatre.’²⁰⁸ It was designed with visual access into the main theatre, so patrons could enjoy a refreshment while they watched a film. A tearoom operated during the day, appropriate for luncheon, with a stage for entertainment at no extra charge.²⁰⁹ Then, a dance floor was to be laid down. The article suggested that it was so ‘patrons may trip the light fantastic while jazz numbers are being played.’²¹⁰ It was the hub of dance and extravagant partying, all within the same atmosphere that the main theatre endeavoured to encapsulate. As per the Auckland Live website, they described the Wintergarden’s past as such: ‘The venue was used as a cabaret, night club, and tearoom. People could dance until the early hours of the morning, and though they weren’t supposed to have any alcohol, this didn’t stop people smuggling it in! During World War II, The Civic was a popular place for people to relax and have a good time- especially after 1942 with the arrival of American servicemen - though The Wintergarden was usually reserved for officers and their friends.’²¹¹ It was the more glamorous side of late-night fun, and these foreign guests help to prove that. To expand on the presence of American soldiers, Anna Soutar discussed the war bonds scheme that the Civic was home to, and the demand to keep these Americans happy.²¹² Then, the fun would start. Women were recruited to play music, dance, organise costumes and choreograph routines. It was a day to night role, as ‘local dancers and musicians spent the days on dreary “War Effort” jobs, but their nights

²⁰⁶ Elliot, p.141.

²⁰⁷ Grefstad, Volume 11C. p.10.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.7.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.* p.10.

²¹⁰ *ibid.*

²¹¹ Auckland Live, *Wintergarden, The Civic*, <https://www.aucklandlive.co.nz/the-wintergarden> (accessed 16/01/2023).

²¹² Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.31.

were for moonlighting in the Civic.²¹³ Art helped to keep any slivers of sanity intact during such a dark period.

There is one further aspect of cinema's golden age to consider. Its romanticised culture created the notion that cinema began and concluded within one set timeframe. However, the city was not entirely abandoned. While the second half of the century tested the limits and altered the façade, there were still some cinemas remaining. While large-scale audiences began to leave the city, they also evolved into different spaces. There was a general neglect for preservation, but a continuation of consumption.

THE SUBURBS IN THE GOLDEN AGE

Jan Grefstad's research reminded readers of the existence of a suburban golden age. The glamour of the city was a staple of early twentieth-century culture, but the suburbs developed a unique subculture of their own. Tāmaki Makaurau's geography meant that suburbs could develop far from one another, creating tight-knit communities. The city was a travel destination, but the suburbs were providing local entertainment. That meant that most cinemas existed as a multipurpose venue, hosting everything from committee meetings to dances. Suburban cinema in the golden age is not explored often in historiography, as the city created more allure. One purpose of my thesis is to emphasise the crucial role that suburban cinemas had in the fabric of cultural consumption. Tāmaki Makaurau had pockets of entertainment in nearly every suburb. I would also argue that suburban cinema had more room for evolution than the city theatres. Because they were often multipurpose venues at the heart of the suburban community, they were viewed as more than a cinema.

Most of the opulence lay within the city centre, but that did not mean that suburban cinemas avoided a focus on style. As a matter of fact, some proprietors constructed theatres of wondrous glamour. They were outliers but reflected their community. The inner-city suburb of Remuera is perhaps one of the more affluent locations in Tāmaki Makaurau. Despite only being four kilometres from the central city, it still housed a local cinema. From 1928 through to 1973, the Tudor was exactly that. It had 1066 seats, perhaps a deliberate (yet inaccurate by a few centuries) historical joke. Unsurprisingly luxurious, it was another

²¹³ *ibid.*

themed theatre, taking inspiration from the royal aesthetic of the namesake medieval period. It can be argued that this was a romanticisation of the metropole and their elaborate histories. The Tudor's 'lounge was reminiscent of the sitting room of a gracious home, with dark panelling, comfortable armchairs, and a fireplace. Tudor Rose emblems and a coat of arms adorned the wall above the mantelpiece. An unusual feature of the lounge was a circular opening with a wooden surround and upholstered seating. From here you could look down to the foyer below.'²¹⁴ It stayed on theme on occasion, as Tudor period dances were arranged and put on.²¹⁵ Luxury appeared to be the main aim of the cinema, and it delivered. The Tudor 'was not a "suburban picture show" but an ideal structure, carefully thought out by those who have had lifelong experience in dealing with this colossal business.'²¹⁶

Glad rags were the expectation of the Tudor, despite it being a suburban theatre. This catered specifically to the demographic of the affluent suburb. On a Saturday night during the peak years of the theatre, 'women generally wore a good dress and the men a suit or sports jacket, trousers and tie.'²¹⁷ A full venue of 1066 could be mistaken for His Majesty's on any given weekend. The Tudor was an intellectual business in an intellectual area, or so it was assumed to be.²¹⁸ The Haywards, who were behind the theatre, seemed to possess the 'innocent belief that because Remuera was then the place where the people with money lived, that meant, ipso facto, that there you would find the intellectuals.'²¹⁹ They were not wrong in assuming that this suburb was where the wealth was, but it was perhaps a misguided assumption as to what these patrons would want to consume in the long run of the theatre. It was above all, a family affair. Standard practice was that families would reserve seats for weekly screenings, to the point where the Tudor had up to three hundred permanent reservations at one time.²²⁰ Loyalty was the secret ingredient to these theatres operating for so many years. Dancing was common, as it so often is in these suburban venues. It all happened on a Saturday night at the Tudor. The night would begin at eight pm, with a prime selection

²¹⁴ Remuera Heritage, *Seen at the Tudor: A History of the Tudor Theatre*, <https://remueraheritage.org.nz/story/seen-at-the-tudor-a-history-of-the-tudor-theatre-remuera/> (accessed 17/01/2023)

²¹⁵ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.147.

²¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.146.

²¹⁷ Grefstad, Volume 13C, p.92.

²¹⁸ Ingham, p.41.

²¹⁹ *ibid.*

²²⁰ Remuera Heritage.

of films.²²¹ Then, by ten pm, the theatre will have transformed into a ballroom. Patrons were able to ‘do the Light Fantastic with a specially selected Jazz orchestra,’ and dance the night away while only minutes from comfort of their own homes.²²² The Haywards believed they could market this into their theatre, as ‘they even tried calling it the Moulin Rouge.’²²³ It was implied that patrons could spend their night with one venue, instead of travelling into the city. By calling it the Moulin Rouge, they could allow for further focus on dance and more intense and wild performances. However, the ties to the Tudor were too strong, and the name reverted in 1930.²²⁴

Across the harbour sat a seaside village rich with history. An early colonial settlement and a key location for the establishment of Tāmaki Makaurau’s ferry system, Devonport has constantly provided insights into the historical workings of the city. It is the home to Aotearoa’s naval base and has established itself as a more affluent suburb. Naturally, it boasted a cinema with significance. The presence of a cinema in Devonport began after an American immigrant, John L. Benwell, saw a profit in the film industry.²²⁵ When settling into the seaside village in 1911, he established the North Shore’s first cinema, naming it Benwell’s Picture Palace.²²⁶ There were very few suburban cinemas in the early-1910s, so what Benwell had accomplished was the first taste of a permanent location for this new entertainment. By this point, films had only been in Aotearoa for fifteen years. Benwell’s Picture Palace was ill-fated, burning down on Christmas Eve 1911.²²⁷ This technology was so new that it had yet to be made fireproof. Benwell then constructed a brand-new cinema, one that would eventually be named the Victoria Theatre and appropriately located at the top of Victoria Street (which was the base of Mount Victoria). Its 1912 opening was a grand affair, and Benwell was thrust into the art of entertaining his community. As I will discuss with further suburban cinemas, so many served multiple purposes for the sake of the suburb’s residents. In the case of Benwell’s cinema, he hosted ‘baby contests, rhyme contests and benefit concerts for the police and firemen of Devonport.’²²⁸ Slightly more eccentric than the

²²¹ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.148.

²²² *ibid.*

²²³ Ingham, p.41.

²²⁴ Grefstad, Volume 13C, p.148.

²²⁵ Grefstad, Volume 13A, p.35.

²²⁶ *ibid.*

²²⁷ *ibid.*

²²⁸ *ibid.*

usually seen committee meetings or dances, Benwell ensured that his time at the theatre was memorable. Grefstad noted that monkeys were kept in cages around the hall. Arguably live exotic animals were more extravagant than themed usherette uniforms in the Civic.

The Victoria Theatre is suggested to be the oldest purpose-built cinema still standing in Aotearoa.²²⁹ Benwell's Picture Palace sat in an old hall, which drew complaint. The Vic's build was purposely kept simple, as actioned by architect Daniel B. Patterson. It was designed with, 'An attractive entrance [which] opens to the stalls and slightly below the dress circle doors is a tastefully furnished lounge. The colour scheme is based on a soft cream and the walls are panelled with fabric. Modernistic lights, in the form of uptumed umbrellas hang from the ceilings. The same type of seat has been fitted throughout the house.' This architectural outlook is entirely different from that of Charles Bohringer, and instead favoured the more timeless and practical style. Bohringer wanted to explore the possibilities of a building dedicated to housing art and wonder, which is what made the Civic different from its central city neighbours. That is not to say that the Vic existed without an aesthetic that pertained to a specific period. The cinema, even in 2023, has become an example of the art-deco style. This may be due to further renovations under the Haywards or later Bruce Palmer. While not overly extravagant like the counterparts in the city, the Vic's sleek and geometric detail brought the patron forth into a classic and short-lived style. People were able to experience luxury in Remuera and Devonport, two affluent suburbs. Where there was money, there was the opportunity for glamour that could rival His Majesty's. It could never truly replicate it, but it served as an important reminder. Cinema culture, from usherettes to lavish architecture, was frequently enjoyed by the public. This did not mean that it had to stay confined to the city.

When something is culturally popular, there is room for more. Competition arose between 1927 and 1934, when the State Theatre was built across the road from the Vic. There are contesting dates regarding the opening of the State Theatre, as Grefstad noted that it opened on November 23rd, 1934, and the 2006 Victoria Theatre Conservation Plan said it was built in 1927. It was operated by Amalgamated Theatres, and emerged at a time where the popularity of Devonport was increasing. It was quietly becoming a place where

²²⁹ Salmond Reed Architects, p.1.

‘community life centred on clubs, schools, church and service organizations, and many people had permanently booked seats for Saturday nights.’²³⁰

Even if a cinema was not focused on the glamour, that did not mean they were averse to a lavish opening. In the suburb of Howick, on the eastern side of Tāmaki Makaurau, the Monterey Cinema operated. The the Monterey’s owner, Harry Griffiths, was ‘known as the last of the Barnums, a real showman who could exploit any movie to maximise the business at the box office. To him must be credited every type of exploitation from giants and Frankenstein’s plodding city footpaths to frightening scenes in shop windows advertising movies showing at his cinema.’²³¹ As I will discuss frequently, all suburban owners appeared to be characters. I would argue that one had to be extremely passionate to own and operate a cinema, particularly in the interwar period and just prior to the Great Depression. Originally known as the La Scala, it opened with a grand gala on December 14th, 1929.²³² Its opening film was *The Wild Party* (1929), and was accompanied by a vaudeville act on stage.²³³ *The Wild Party* was a monumental film in Hollywood, marking the first ‘talkie’ of silent film IT girl Clara Bow. It was a prime example of a film made before the implication of the Hays Code, a set of rules that reduced Hollywood to a more conservative, clean-cut industry. In *The Wild Party*, Bow played a college student that falls in love with her professor. Interestingly, the film had only premiered in the United States in April of that year. *The Wild Party* was first screened at the Regent Theatre on Queen Street on September 14th 1929, as per a large print advertisement in the *Sun* newspaper.²³⁴ The advertisement included an image of Bow herself, flirtatiously winking at the reader, with the words ‘Big doing! Don’t miss the fun! Clara talks - and HOW! - the “it” girls’ first talking picture.’²³⁵ It made it sway to the La Scala a few months later.

When the name changed to the Monterey, a grand re-opening took place just over a year later on December 6th 1930.²³⁶ This time, the film was *Journey’s End* (1930), a war film

²³⁰ Salmond Reed Architects, p.13.

²³¹ Grefstad, Volume 13A, p.61.

²³² *ibid.*, p.61.

²³³ *ibid*

²³⁴ *Sun*, September 13th 1929, p.14.

²³⁵ *ibid.*

²³⁶ Grefstad, Volume 13A, p.61.

that dove headfirst into themes of grief, trauma, and the horrors of war.²³⁷ Starkly different to a Clara Bow film, *Journey's End* was also released in the April of that same year. However grand this new Monterey was, its owner could not fight against the crippling effects of the Great Depression. Shortly after the reopening, Griffiths found himself broke and bankrupt.²³⁸ The Monterey then went through multiple owners but found itself becoming the 'best known building in Howick.'²³⁹

On the same end of Tāmaki Makaurau, the suburb of Mission Bay opened their theatre, Berkeley by the Sea, on Wednesday December 22nd 1937.²⁴⁰ It was officially opened by Lady Marion Davis (née Mitchell), opera singer and the wife of the then-Mayor of Auckland City Ernest Davis.²⁴¹ The Berkeley's very first film was *It Isn't Done* (1937), an Australian comedy about a farmer that inherits a grand English estate.²⁴² I found this interesting, as this is the first cinema I have come across that debuted a non-English or American film. Berkeley appeared to create a more homely atmosphere with this choice. It was advertised to initially have two evening sessions at 5:30pm and 8:30pm.²⁴³ From this, the rough demographic can be established. The Berkeley was not a housewife or children-centred theatre, but an evening excursion. Screenings were after the traditional workday, and on either side of dinner time. By the 1980s, there was an additional 11am screening added.²⁴⁴

Despite all these cinemas and their grand offerings, the suburbs were also able to get away with less-refined, rowdier venues. There was no expectation to be glamorous, rather a choice of the owner at that time. Naturally, there were those theatres that represented the 'black sheep' of the city. The 555 Picture Theatre in Browns Bay, on the North Shore of Tāmaki Makaurau, was a cinema, cabaret, dance hall and church.²⁴⁵ Again, it was a multipurpose venue, but this time with a scandalous twist. The name 555 derived from a

²³⁷ *ibid.*

²³⁸ *ibid.*

²³⁹ *ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.84.

²⁴¹ *ibid.*

²⁴² *ibid.*

²⁴³ *ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Auckland Star*, 16th Dec 1987, p.B17

²⁴⁵ Grefstad, Volume 13A, p.34.

luxury English brand of cigarettes and was apparently a private family joke.²⁴⁶ It was built in 1925 in a barn-like manner.²⁴⁷ Formal seating was replaced with deck chairs that were often repaired with titree sticks.²⁴⁸ When deck chairs were unavailable, as noted in a Grefstad anecdote, there were boxes on offer. He recounted the story of a family of English tourists being under the impression that these boxes were the traditional theatre box, often reserved for royalty or VIPs.²⁴⁹ To their surprise, ‘on buying the tickets they were given empty orange boxes to sit on!’²⁵⁰ There were a lot of pranks that accommodated this unconventional furniture set-up. In Grefstad’s work, ‘A.S. Oldham tells of the prank to slit the long canvas deck chair seats with a sharp knife so that the occupants would fall to the floor. This fits well with the comment that the deck chairs had a habit of collapsing.’²⁵¹ When examining all the different varieties of theatre, it made sense that one like the 555 would emerge.

The 555 was right next to the beach, so naturally the sailors found the location simultaneously convenient and appealing. The stereotypical sailor culture of alcohol and sex fit right into the activities hosted by the cinema. This behaviour became infamous, as ‘the Saturday night dances were popular with more than just the locals - yachts would sail in from Auckland, laden with beer. The lack of local police allowed rowdy behaviour to go unchecked, thus Brown’s Bay was nicknamed ‘Naughty Bay.’²⁵² Ingham mentioned that Browns Bay in the 1930s was a rugged seaside hideout, further implying that the 555 (or Three Fives, as he referred to) was no grand affair.²⁵³ There were no red carpets or tea rooms to be found amongst the empty orange boxes. In this way, *Rocky Horror* had an example of what a rugged cinema could like, something that was deliberately out of the glamorous ordinary. Film consumption could be chaotic, wild and most importantly, fun.

Community was the core reason for the success of the suburban golden age. People were drawn to their local cinemas, for their abundance of activities. There was no need to travel from suburb-to-suburb for entertainment, and a location like Devonport, on the end of a

²⁴⁶ Ingham, p.44.

²⁴⁷ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.118.

²⁴⁸ Ingham, p.44.

²⁴⁹ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.118.

²⁵⁰ *ibid.*

²⁵¹ Grefstad, Volume 13A, p.34.

²⁵² *ibid.*

²⁵³ Ingham, p.44.

peninsula prior to the construction of the Harbour Bridge, meant that travel could be limited. The Vic ensured that there was enough to keep even their smallest residents entertained. Joyce Hitchen, presumably a Devonport resident, wrote in November 1989:

‘The children used to clap and stamp their feet as soon as the lights were dimmed and Miss Precey from the sweet shop across the road walked down the aisle towards the piano which she played real loud when the Indians were coming and then she would play softly. The children used to clap and shout – it was quite exciting. We had Keystone Cops, Laurel & Hardie, and Buster Keaton to name a few and of course the serials which always stopped at a most exciting time to be continued the next week.’²⁵⁴

What Joyce’s account suggested is that cinema events designed specifically for children were commonplace in the 1920s. Community through cinema started as early as one could toddle to the local theatre and spend an afternoon with their peers. In the case of Benwell’s ownership style, sometimes babies were the stars of these grand activities. The Kosy Theatre in Blockhouse Bay also specifically catered to children. They screened cartoons for children on Saturdays and put an emphasis on being able to control any rowdy behaviour.²⁵⁵ It was socially acceptable for parents to trust a business to take care of their children for a couple of hours, despite them not being formally trained in childcare. In the early 1960s, outings were also arranged for the children by the owner at the time, Jim Marquet.²⁵⁶ During the school holidays, they would have a day out at a biscuit factory, a swim at Waiwera and then a film in the afternoon.²⁵⁷ Jim Marquet would not only arrange the trip but attended it. Individually owned businesses, particularly in communities, saw the owner directly involved. No matter the profit, it was often the passion that brought them along for the journey.

Something that made the Kosy stand out from other theatres was that it also catered and advertised to the mother and the housewife. In 1959, ‘the Housewife’s sessions have started once again and taking the atrocious weather into consideration we have been having very good attendances especially as we show the films back to front, that is, we screen the main feature first then the short subjects so that mothers may leave early if need be to meet

²⁵⁴ Grefstad,, Volume 13A, p.13.

²⁵⁵ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.28.

²⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.32.

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*

children after school. These sessions never come out later than 2.30pm.²⁵⁸ This singular sentence helps to strengthen my argument of the importance of cinema culture in Aotearoa. With an example like this, an insight is made what the role of the suburban woman was in the twentieth century. The housewife was allocated a break within the day, at a convenient time for the children and the breadwinner.

Throughout this section, I have mentioned the different forms of cinema ownership. In the suburbs, you had the passionate owners. The Benwells, the Marquets, the Griffiths, the Grefstads. People ran cinemas because they loved community, and they loved film. The Kosy Theatre, who had multiple owners, became a well-loved location. The picture hall was bought by another land owner in 1935, and then by Mr Doug Fleming and his wife Sadie in 1944.²⁵⁹ During this nine-year period, the building had been nicknamed ‘the Bug House’, so the Flemings took it upon themselves to transform it and rename the theatre ‘the Beverley’.²⁶⁰ Sadie sold a small amount of confectionary, and there was no foyer.²⁶¹ Patrons were there to see the film, and nothing else. The Flemings were not even based in Blockhouse Bay, rather Three Kings, but always made the commute.²⁶² The newer iteration was still used by local groups, hired by ‘the Bowling Club, the Primary school for elections, and the Labour Party for funds and the Ladies Guild.’²⁶³ With films only being shown periodically, there was plenty of time available for community to come together.

Jan Grefstad had been a regular patron when he was younger, due to his upbringing in Green Bay.²⁶⁴ To him, this was one of the reasons he became an avid lover of film. During ‘the holidays he and his friends had been attending the Saturday night movies at the Beverly / Kosy cinema as often as they could afford it. They used to walk from Green Bay, a distance of over a mile to attend the movies at Blockhouse Bay.’²⁶⁵ He described the candy bar with intense detail, as though it were an incredibly familiar sight. He said: ‘On the left hand side of the stage area was the supper room, which also doubled as the candy bar where the patrons

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.28.

²⁵⁹ *ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *ibid.*

²⁶¹ *ibid.*

²⁶² *ibid.*, p.22.

²⁶³ *ibid.*, p.22.

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.25.

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*

could buy ice creams and bars of chocolates as well as Jaffas and Minties. Such was the hunger for sweet things that nearly half the takings from the cinema were also spent in the candy bar. I well remember the posters adorning the walls of the Candy Bar in the 50's. One was a giant pin-up of Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan. There was also a poster advertising a teenage Shirley Temple in a film called *Honeymoon*. Ice creams were 6d and popular brands of soft drinks 3d from Grey & Menzies, Y-Y, and Innes.²⁶⁶ The candy bar was the ultimate money earner in theatres, particularly in larger theatres.²⁶⁷ When intervals were either built into the film or determined by the cinema, people had a hankering for sweet snacks.

There appeared to be boundless potential for the future of cinemas. Why would there not be? Cinema was one of Tāmaki Makaurau's favourite pastimes, naturally there appeared to be no stopping its growth. Mr Eddie Greenfield, the owner of Berkeley by the Sea, had constructed the cinema with grand plans to be a multipurpose venue. The venue was built with a cinema and a catering lounge, 'which could be used as a restaurant, tea-rooms or dancing floor.'²⁶⁸ One observation that I have made in my research is that owners often sat between two different mindsets. Some owners wanted multipurpose venues, such as Berkeley's adaptable catering lounge, while others wanted a purpose-built cinema that could occasionally be used for non-furniture-altering activities. While Greenfield had achieved partial success with the former mindset, there was still more he wanted to accomplish. He had built dressing rooms, with the intention of hosting a number of plays during the summer months.²⁶⁹ According to Grefstad, 'sadly this idea did not eventuate as the clouds of war were on the horizon.'²⁷⁰ That did not stop the continued success of the theatre. The beauty of suburban cinemas is that people had a homely comfort, never too far from where they were. There was little need to travel.

THE CITY AFTER THE GOLDEN AGE

²⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.22.

²⁶⁷ Wayne Brittenden, *The Celluloid Circus: The Heyday of the New Zealand Picture Theatre*, Auckland, 2008, p.103.

²⁶⁸ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.84.

²⁶⁹ *ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

There is no denying that the city's landscape changed after the golden age of cinema. Tāmaki Makaurau appeared to reject earlier forms of entertainment as soon as more modern versions arrived, and that was reflected in the closure of many theatres. There were some triumphs, of sorts. The Embassy was selected to host a premiere, and with it promote the idea that cinema should never die. The film was *Porgy and Bess* (1959), starring legendary actors Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge. Appropriately for the Embassy, *Porgy and Bess* was a musical, based upon the work of George Gershwin. The subject matter was relatively dark, with themes such as poverty, drug use and murder. The film was reportedly so beautiful that 'every reel, every scene preserved completely the feel of opera and the spirit of Gershwin.'²⁷¹ An illusion was created to mimic a real opera, due to the operatic nature of Gershwin's compositions. A hefty line-up of 'civic leaders, businessmen, officers of the armed services, show businesspeople and scores of other prominent personalities arrived in gleaming limousines.' Hollywood had arrived at Lorne Street. The promotional build up that was based on this idea of cinema never dying was a direct hit against the rise of television. The message that Kerridge Odeon wished to establish was 'Television can't do this.'²⁷²

There was a desire to reinvigorate times-gone-by, and this was also reflected in the Civic. Amalgamated held onto the Civic throughout the tougher period of cinema consumption, maintaining the image of grandeur and luxury. However, there was no desire to go as far as to add some of the details of the previous ownership (such as elaborate costumes for employees and a Wurlitzer organ).²⁷³ The chain did contribute to restoration, giving the theatre a \$1.2 million facelift.²⁷⁴ During the 1970s, new carpets, seats, velvet drapes were installed and colours were re-brightened, reviving the Civic's spirit.²⁷⁵

Amid the other controversies and movements of the 1980s, there was one that physically transformed the cultural landscape of the city. The demolition of His Majesty's Theatre in 1988 was the nail in the coffin, bringing with it an end to Tāmaki Makaurau's era of the glamorous cinema. Of course, there were a few remaining, but by ending the 85-year run of His Majesty's, the city was proving its lack of respect for preserving its cultural

²⁷¹ Grefstad, Volume 2, p.93.

²⁷² *ibid.*

²⁷³ *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*

history.²⁷⁶ Even though cinema had ultimately lost its popularity, that did not mean that all buildings needed to be destroyed. Preservation had not been a priority. By the late 1980s, the fate of His Majesty's suddenly became uncertain. By this point in its history, 'younger generations of Aucklanders know His Majesty's as a quaint playhouse tucked away behind Queen Street at the end of an old-style shopping arcade.'²⁷⁷ The theatre had held touring productions of *Rocky Horror* in 1978 and 1986, so it appeared to have continued its success as a theatre venue. However, it did not hold the same reputation as the St James, because it was too dated and simply dismissed by the public. From Jools Topp to Maurice Shadbolt, numerous entertainment and creative figures emerged to try and protect a building that was not quite on the Heritage listing.²⁷⁸ It was rated as a category C, which meant it would merit preservation but cannot a notice that would protect it.²⁷⁹ Future legislation, most notably The Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014 would have issued further protection that might have saved the theatre. Under Section 13 of the Act, there are two areas of interest that outline the protection that His Majesty's should have had. It also helps to reinforce my argument of preservation. The Act reads:

'(c) to advocate the conservation and protection of historic places, historic areas, wāhi tūpuna, wāhi tapu, and wāhi tapu areas:

(d) to foster public interest and involvement in historic places and historic areas and in identifying, recording, investigating, assessing, protecting, and conserving them, maintaining the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero, and entering such places on that list'²⁸⁰

Before its demolition, His Majesty's was put up for sale, as shiny new office buildings were suggested. Art was being replaced by concrete blocks of corporate cash. An editorial opinion in the *Auckland Star* had this to say: 'Aucklanders who for years have done nothing by the city centre has become soulless glass and steel will probably shrug their shoulders at the inevitability of the news that His Majesty's Theatre will be sold by auction next February

²⁷⁶ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.1.

²⁷⁷ *ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Todd Niall, Wayne Brown recalls the 1988 demolition of His Majesty's Theatre, 2022, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/local-government/130802608/wayne-brown-recalls-the-1988-demolition-of-his-majestys-theatre> (accessed 13/01/2023)

²⁷⁹ *Auckland Star*, Editorial Opinions, December 16th 1987, p.A10.

²⁸⁰ Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014, New Zealand Legislation, <https://legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2014/0026/latest/DLM4005511.html> (accessed 15/01/2023)

and very likely will become yet another mirrored finance centre.’²⁸¹ This unnamed writer was frustrated at the lack of care from both the council and the sheer apathy of residents.

Interestingly, this is a similar attitude to what Jeff Hayward said about the collapse of the St James. Tāmaki Makaurau does not care about preservation to the extent that they should. The author of the opinion piece believed that ‘If the city is not to die, it must retain some of its attractions,’ and I deeply agree with that statement.²⁸² The day following, Thursday December 17th, there was an article about a petition being launched. An action group had been formed, hoping to persuade the council that any development should include part of the theatre, not replace it. It was another voice that tried to help people to understand the value of preserving culture. These groups believed that the area could lose its respect. The group’s spokesperson Hamish Keith said that ‘if it was demolished, that part of Queen Street would become a ‘happy hunting ground for hoons.’²⁸³ That same issue, Ian McDonald wrote a letter that was published in the opinion section. McDonald was frustrated by claims that ‘the theatre is an anachronism, that it is redundant, that it is to be replaced.’²⁸⁴ There was quite simply, no respect for art, be it the films that His Majesty’s screened, or the numerous theatrical productions. The death of the cinema is in the hands of those who sought profit from the business industry in the wake of the recession.

McDonald does admit that the treatment and cleaning applied to preserve the standing facade had not been adequate: ‘This is true the building has been neglected, the beautiful tiles in the arcade were covered in the fifties with asphalt to reduce your noise from stiletto heels, the Post Office has bequeathed five generations of wiring to its unwashed facade.’²⁸⁵ However, this does not excuse demolition. With the end of His Majesty’s, there were so few theatres left. McDonald then argued: ‘Even the survival of the St James’s theatre does not compensate for the loss of His Majesty’s. The theatre is fully booked for next year. In fact, it is reputed to be its busiest year yet!’²⁸⁶ The St James managed a reputation as a popular venue, but that was not enough to satisfy the needs of the remaining cinemagoers.

²⁸¹ *Auckland Star*, Editorial Opinions, December 16th 1987, p.A10

²⁸² *Auckland Star*, December 16th 1987, p.A10.

²⁸³ *Auckland Star*, December 17th 1987, p.A4.

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *ibid.*

The front page of the *Auckland Star* told a sad story on Monday January 4th, 1988. At the very top, there is an image of someone crying. On either side of them, grasping hold of both arms, are two members of the police. The headline reads: 'Protest tears as theatre crumbles.' Michael Barker reports, and the opening line is: 'The final curtain came down on His Majesty's Theatre today as workers began demolishing the 85-year-old building.'²⁸⁷ The article reported that there had been twenty-four hour vigils held in the previous few days, with picketers such as Maurice Shadbolt desperately trying to change the council's mind.²⁸⁸ All of these efforts were completely ignored, and picketers were arrested, just like the one in the leading image. There was nothing to be done. Photographs scattered through the newspaper detail the demolition, as well as the reaction of the passionate protestors. There was nothing to do; the artists had lost. What the demolition of His Majesty's represented was the uninterest of what Aucklanders had for cultural heritage. As the opinion mentioned previously, both local government and residents of Tāmaki Makaurau showed nothing other than they simply did not care. While the current petition and fight for restoration of the St James suggests that people are now paying attention, it came at the price of His Majesty's, the Embassy and countless other city theatres.

Despite the destruction of heritage, a new form of cinema was emerging. The public still wanted entertainment, but no longer prioritised the glamorous side of entertainment. However, there were still those that attempted to recapture the feeling of nostalgia. One was the Classic Cinema, situated at the top of Queen Street. The Classic Cinema was Jan Grefstad's headquarters for reviving a love for, as the name suggested, classic films. He had a belief that the golden age could return in its entirety. While his other endeavour the Hollywood, screened *Prophecy* (1979) and Frank Langella as *Dracula*, (1979), the Classic had *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *East of Eden* (1955).²⁸⁹ Whether he was trying to push an argument on the quality of film or was simply a film geek exhibiting his personal favourites, Grefstad endeavoured to create community and artistic fun within Tāmaki Makaurau. He opened his new cinema with *The Jazz Singer* (1927) on November 30th, 1974, the famed film that became one of the most influential in cinema history by being the first "talkie".²⁹⁰ The preservation of film history was everything to Grefstad - the Classic was dedicated to the re-

²⁸⁷ Auckland Star, January 4th 1988, p.A1.

²⁸⁸ *ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, January 2nd, 1980, p.11.

²⁹⁰ Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.107.

creation of nostalgia. Strangely enough, the city needed the presence. The Classic could remind audiences of a time gone by, while also being topical and keeping films timeless. An example is the Elvis Presley Festival, which screened throughout select dates in August 1978. As per an advertisement on August 18th, the Classic was screening back-to-back Elvis films, including *Love Me Tender* (1956) and *That's the Way It Is* (1970). Legendary performer Elvis Presley had passed away a year prior on August 16th, 1977, and the Classic was the perfect venue to commemorate this first anniversary. The larger cinemas did not play any Elvis films during this period, instead playing new releases such as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). The Astor Cinema on Dominion Road shared their own Elvis tribute, playing *Elvis on Tour* (1972), which they advertised on a quarter-page ad emblazoned with his face.²⁹¹

The Classic was also notoriously a cinema that showed adult films. Unlike those cinemas in the golden age, at the Classic Grefstad fought against complaints and backlash that inevitably brewed amongst the more conservative population. The Classic Cinema was a rare independent cinema on Queen Street, and the screenings evolved into adult films when Grefstad realised, not out of his own wishes, that there was a market for these films. Aotearoa had a complicated history with censorship and pornography and had only started to allow tasteful nudity and sexual content on cinema screens.²⁹² Communities could be rigid and conservative, especially when crossing religious boundaries. In 1986, a protest was held in the St James theatre, when ten Catholics filed in during a screening of *Hail Mary* (1985), an erotic French retelling of the virgin Mary by Jean-Luc Godard.²⁹³ While the protest was not successful in shutting the film down, it still served as an important example of popular opinions and beliefs.

In 1987, the Auckland Council aimed to shut these screenings down. Adult films were advertised, marketed, and proudly shown, for example, in the *Auckland Star* on Wednesday 16th December 1987, the Classic is advertised with everyone else in the classifieds. There are two films playing: *Commando Lovers* (1986) and *Tight and Tender* (1985).²⁹⁴ Both are

²⁹¹ *Auckland Star*, August 17th 1978, p.16.

²⁹² Paul Christoffel, *Censorship: A short history of censorship in New Zealand*, Department of Internal Affairs, 1989, p.31.

²⁹³ *Auckland Star*, 'Film protest flop', July 21st, 1987, p.A3.

²⁹⁴ *Auckland Star*, December 16th, 1987, p.B17

labelled as R18, as well as text following saying, ‘Explicit sexual content may offend.’²⁹⁵ There was no secrecy or code words. The Classic played these films three times a day seven days a week, at 2pm, 5pm and 8pm. There was an additional 11am screening Monday to Friday. From looking at the movie times from 1987, there was no hiding the adult content. Alongside the Classic’s advertisement, there are promotions for Strip-O-Grams and stripteases.²⁹⁶ The presence of pornography, when looking through the regular Tāmaki Makaurau newspaper, appeared to be relatively normalised. This seemed to be the case, despite what officials thought.

Exercising their power to end tenancies, the Council believed they had grounds to step in and halt the operations. Censorship had been an issue in Aotearoa legislation for decades, with stringent laws first coming into effect at the initial establishment of film. Even though 1987 was a relatively progressive year, with the Māori Language Act, a Labour-winning election and the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act passed, there was still an air of conservatism that the Council expressed. This would not be the first or last time Grefstad or the Classic was a news item. In 1986, the infamous pornography film *Deep Throat* was screened, fifteen years after its initial release, sparking controversy. There were also accusations of Grefstad shortening films. Despite this, the Classic Cinema operated until 1997, when it was converted into a comedy bar.

The Classic introduced a more suburban-esque cinema to the city audiences. However, it had to offer a unique product to bring people into the city for it. This idea was something that threatened the city cinemas post-golden age. Why would people travel if they could be entertained locally? Pre-golden age, there was more appeal. New releases, grand architecture and city glamour brought people in. There were few cinemas that replicated this in the suburbs, especially regarding new releases.

The grandeur of the St James may not live to see a full century. As of 2023, the theatre is now owned privately, after the crumbling of a failed merger between Kerridge Odeon and a smaller thoroughbred houses’ company.²⁹⁷ Due to the fact that the city council

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *Auckland Star*, December 17th, 1987, p.B13.

²⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.105.

does not have ownership and no restoration funds or efforts have been made, I would make the conclusion that most of the younger generation of Tāmaki Makaurau are completely unaware of the heritage that sits opposite the library. ‘Other countries preserve their artistic heritage. Other than the Civic, Auckland doesn't seem to care, and this is just unbelievably tragic.’²⁹⁸ These words were spoken by Jeff Hayward, a St James frequenter. While the latest owner, Steve Bielby bought the St James in 2014 with a passion to restore the theatre, further help is required. The area is now vulnerable to burglaries and lacks the budget to undergo a full restoration. Member of Parliament for Auckland Central, Chlöe Swarbrick is a strong voice in the fight for the restoration. As of 2022, she believed that ‘The St James, interestingly enough, is in better shape than the Civic was 20 years ago when the Civic was undertaken to be done up and to be fixed for all to enjoy. [...] the theatre stands to fill quite a big hole, particularly young local musicians looking to get a foot in the door and continue building their career, and those who can't quite get the radio play that's necessary to get into a 12,000 venue like Spark Arena.’²⁹⁹ Following the completion of this thesis, the status of the St James may change. By the end of 2023, the theatre may finally be funded and headed towards restoration and preservation.

Grefstad’s final words in his histories about the St James was hopeful. Once His Majesty’s had been demolished in 1988, there were only two main theatres in the city that remained – the Civic and the St James. Then finally, in 1994, the Auckland City Council took over.³⁰⁰ The theatre was in the hands of the city and its patrons. Heading into the twenty-first century, the Civic became known for staging theatre productions and screening the occasional film. In 2021, as a part of the Auckland Live Cabaret Season, the Civic held a midnight screening of *Rocky Horror*, emceed by drag queen Anita Wig’it.³⁰¹ The atmospheric theatre has become one of the few remaining cultural landmarks of the central city, and a reminder of lost time. The St James has become merely another victim, unbeknownst to Grefstad. When reading his work in 2023, they are significantly sadder: ‘Now the St James is set to be renovated in a major refit in 2000 so it can rightfully stand

²⁹⁸ Leonard Powell, Auckland's St James Theatre restoration now 'do or die', Swarbrick says, Radio New Zealand, 2022. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/479623/auckland-s-st-james-theatre-restoration-now-do-or-die-swarbrick-says> (accessed 31/01/2023)

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *ibid.*

³⁰¹ Auckland Live, Auckland Live presents *The Rocky Horror Picture Show: A Vintage Cabaret Cinema*, <https://www.aucklandlive.co.nz/show/the-rocky-horror-picture-show-cabaret21> (accessed 3/03/2023)

alongside the Civic, Aotea Centre and the Town Hall for entertainment engagements in the future.³⁰² With the theatre's centenary a mere five years away, the clock is ticking. Perhaps one day 'the Theatre Perfect' will return.³⁰³

THE SUBURBS AFTER THE GOLDEN AGE

The suburban cinema was not free from the 'demise' of the golden age, with many venues closing before the millennium. Theatres became shopping centres, carparks and malls. A public yearning for the newest technology meant that priorities shifted beyond local cinema consumption, and multiplexes emerged in their place. Out of the seven suburban cinemas I will discuss throughout this chapter and my third, only three continue to operate in 2023 -- The Vic in Devonport, Berkeley Cinemas in Mission Bay and the Hollywood in Avondale. These remaining cinemas, as well as a select few, continued to remind their audiences about the beauty of traditional cinema culture. They recognised the rapidly modernising world around them but knew that nostalgia could be utilised to its full potential. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the Hollywood is that exact example. While I will discuss that within my third chapter, it is important to note here.

Some cinemas closed at the end of the 1960s, the Kosy being one example. There was promise at the end, but ultimately it fell. The city council had forbidden cinemas playing on a Sunday, and the Kosy tried to oppose this. In 1963, they were granted to permission to do so.³⁰⁴ Only a few years later, the end of the suburban cinema had claimed the Kosy as its latest victim. The theatre's final film was screened on Saturday May 18, 1968.³⁰⁵ Their closing choice was *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), a science-fiction film. It starred Raquel Welch and Stephen Boyd of *Ben-Hur* (1959) and was a classic United States versus the Soviet Union-type adventure. The Kosy met its end officially in December 1972, when it was sold to Foodtown Supermarkets.³⁰⁶ It was demolished in its entirety a month later to make way for a parking area, and therefore taking with it another part of suburban culture. The Kosy became

³⁰² Grefstad, Volume 11C, p.105.

³⁰³ *ibid.*, p.101.

³⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.30.

³⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.34.

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.34.

just another victim of a changing world. The Hollywood became its legacy, a part of the narrative of Grefstad's journey through film.

Tucked away in the southern suburb of Ōtara, the Ōtara Luxury Cinema was the last place Tāmaki Makaurau expected to an opening ceremony of *The King and I* (1956). The big-budget Rodgers and Hammerstein musical graced the screens of Ōtara on September 16th, 1957, at a glitzy event, and was by far the most grand opening of any suburban cinema in the city. Allan Webb's so called 'jewel in the crown' was a staple to the Papatoetoe and Ōtara community, and a continuation of cinema culture as it was once known.³⁰⁷ There was a desire to reinstate the cinema culture of the golden age, but in a way that was adaptable to modern entertainment standards. The venue was built in ten months, crafted in a very modern, stadium-like aesthetic.³⁰⁸ The timing coincided with the development of Ōtara as a suburb and was a surprising build amongst a city of cinemas that had stood for decades. The cinema was built after the bulk of According to the local health organisation, 'the Otara community was formed in the early 1950's as part of the central government policy to provide low-cost housing and relocate inner city Maori and new immigrant Pacific workers into the area.'³⁰⁹ The cinema became a beating heart of a new community.

The cinema also later given the opportunity to host the world premiere of Rudall Hayward's final feature film *To Love a Maori* (1972). It was another grand affair, and catapulted the dramatic interracial documentary towards a successful roadshow led by Hayward himself.³¹⁰ There was also the country's first screening of *Nudist Paradise* (1959), which was advertised as a premiere and was so successful that it ran for two weeks with three full houses in its opening days.³¹¹ The cinema was similar to the Tudor, as 'everyone used to dress up coming to the Starlight... old ladies in their furs and all.'³¹² In the hey-day of cinema culture in Aotearoa, theatre-attire travelled beyond the opera or the play. The Tudor in Remuera was a core example of this.

³⁰⁷ Alan Webb, *Cinemas of South Auckland*, 1995, p.10.

³⁰⁸ Grefstad, Volume 13C, p.25.

³⁰⁹ Our History, <https://otarahealth.org.nz/our-history/> (accessed 31/01/2023)

³¹⁰ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.130.

³¹¹ *ibid.*, p.131.

³¹² Grefstad, Volume 13C, p.25.

One thing that made the Ōtara Luxury Cinema different from its suburban peers was how modern and accessible it was. The cinema cleverly adjusted their practices to represent modernity and tradition. There was a Crying Room for mothers with babies, where they could ‘watch the film isolated from the main auditorium complete with a speaker without disturbing the audience in the cinema.’³¹³ As with the Vic or the Kosy, some theatres deliberately designed features to appeal to members of the local community that spent their lives in and around the home. Mothers were able to enjoy a film in a separate, more private space, away from potential complaints of other patrons. Accommodating to your patrons was key when your audience consisted of your neighbours. Allan Webb also detailed the accessibility of their showtimes, and how they were unique for the time. The times spread across the week for various reasons, as ‘Fridays saw early evening as well as later shoppers’ sessions at 6.00 pm and 8.45 pm. Saturdays had the 1.30 special children’s sessions including the Birthday Club (which I was not a member of), plus the 4.45 pm and 8.00 pm shows. Midweek also saw two shopper’s sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 12.30.’³¹⁴ Children being included in cinema culture is a theme that pops up later in the chapter. I would argue that Ōtara Luxury Cinema understood the earliest concept of mall culture, when people wanted to do more than just view a film. While doing this, they also outwardly cared about their patrons. Through Grefstad’s work, former owner Lynne Bruce said: ‘In the suburbs you knew most of the patrons, If there was a wedding, they’d bring us some wedding cake and we would see all the pictures. I can’t imagine that happening at the picture theatres now.’³¹⁵ There was a relationship that made suburbia special.

In 1975, the name changed from the Ōtara Luxury Cinema to the Starlight.³¹⁶ The cinema would go on to run for twenty-seven years under the refreshed name, until it finally closed in 1992.³¹⁷ The Starlight surprisingly lasted beyond the harder period of the 1980s. Grefstad suggested that, ‘by 1988 the hey-day of cinema in the suburbs was gone,’ and the migration away from the traditional cinema experience had gone. There was no more desire to dress up and sit in your local theatre. People were dressing up for *Rocky Horror* instead, where they knew it was fancy-dress and nothing else. If you were not dressed up, clothes

³¹³ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.130.

³¹⁴ Webb, p.11.

³¹⁵ Grefstad, Volume 13C, p.27

³¹⁶ Webb, p.12.

³¹⁷ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.131.

were casual. The glamour of cinema left when the city lost its glamorous venues, and that ripple effect carried through to the suburbs that cared about keeping up appearances. The Tudor was one of these victims. ‘Now, alas, it's glorious have departed and shops and offices occupy the building.’³¹⁸ The closure occurred in 1973. It was an unlucky end for a theatre that glittered with nostalgia for an era that seemed more like myth.

The world was changing in a way that left cinema behind. In some locations, cinema chose to continue existing alongside major events. Mission Bay is also the location of Bastion Point, or Takaparawhau. As I mentioned in my introduction, one of the key events of the late twentieth-century was Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei’s peaceful 507-day occupation. From 1977 through to May 25, 1978, the protest the unlawful actions of the Crown sat just minutes away from this famed strip of restaurants, bars, and the Berkeley. When studying Grefstad’s research, I did not come across any mention of disruption or inclusion from the protests into the everyday life of the cinema goer. This could lead to many theories, especially when there is such a gap in the research. The answer could be as simple as blissful ignorance by patrons, who wanted to continue with their lives and not acknowledge the history being made above them. Because it was a peaceful protest, it may not have been noticed by the everyday Pākehā popping into the Berkeley. The eviction of the protest on May 25th was front page news but told a very different story. The headline was: ‘Hakas, hymns, songs of protest - the bastion falls peacefully’, and the standfirst: ‘The biggest police action of its type in New Zealand history cleared Bastion Point today - without violence.’³¹⁹ As I discussed in my introduction, this peaceful eviction was a story that changed over the decades. The depiction of the police and the protest here suggested that this may imply indifference from Mission Bay residents. In that same paper, Berkeley advertised their nightly screening of *Annie Hall* (1977).

Gordon Ingham mentioned that Berkeley was crafting a ‘reputation with many good films going straight there from Queen Street,’ but come 1973 was ‘slipping a bit; perhaps because the good films stay in Queen Street for so long now that they have to fill in with what they can get.’³²⁰ The most notable difference between city and suburban cinemas, is that new releases were nearly always had a prioritised first run in the city. This made a lot of

³¹⁸ Ingham, p.41.

³¹⁹ *Auckland Star*, May 25th 1978, p.A1

³²⁰ Ingham, p.41.

sense, especially when analysing the extravagance of these city venues. To bring people into town, they had to have a reason that they could not get down the road at their local cinema. However, as with the Berkeley and the Tudor, some suburban theatres had earlier access to the second run of new films.

Berkeley saw two chain owners in the latter half of the twentieth century. The first was Kerridge Odeon, who operated from July 21st, 1964, until February 1998, when Everard Films took over and developed the Berkeley cinema chain.³²¹ In 2023, the Berkeley still stands, operating under the cinema chain Hoyts. Flanked by an American-style diner on one side and a café on the other, Berkeley by the Sea is a rare reminder of suburban culture nearest to the central city. They were not the only cinema bought by a chain company, but they had more luck than some. The complete closure of the Monterey in Howick came about in 1993, when the Hoyts cinema chain decided to shut the theatre down.³²² According to the manager at the time, Rick Thacker, ‘We have had dismal attendances lately,’ she said. ‘I think it's a shame there will be no movie outlet for Howick and Pakuranga people. But I feel they didn't support us with attendances. Our regulars are very sad over the closure - but there's not a lot of them now.’³²³ Alongside the rise of television and things to do outside of going to the movies, perhaps changing corporate presence also had an effect. There had been theatre chains for decades, but companies like Kerridge Odeon and Amalgamated seemed slightly more personable. Hoyts is an Australian-based company, which removed another relatability factor.

On Friday April 3rd, 1998, five years after the Monterey had shut its doors for good, fire ripped through the local landmark.³²⁴ In a flash, just under seventy-years of memories had gone. Some years later, the Monterey chain was refurbished and suddenly Howick had a cinema again. Owned by Kelly Rogers and David Ross, the Monterey was finally bought by the independent movie company that Thacker had hoped it would go to.³²⁵ It sits at 4/2 Fencible Drive, still in the heart of Howick village. It is a six-minute walk or a one minute drive from the original Monterey, whose facade still stands in 2023. In recent years, it has

³²¹ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.85.

³²² *ibid.*, p.62.

³²³ *ibid.*

³²⁴ *ibid.*

³²⁵ *ibid.*

become a residential and retail space. No longer is it a gem of the small suburb. It is a memory to the generations that got to experience its magic, as all these wonderful venues end up being.

By the final decades of the century, Devonport's cinema industry was in dire straits. The Vic was put up for sale in 1986, where uproar and donations from regular patrons led to the formation of the Victoria Theatre Trust.³²⁶ The State Theatre, its competition, had met an untimely end at the very beginning of the 1970s. Grefstad claimed that the final films were *Prehistoric Woman* (1967) and *The Vengeance of She* (1968), screened on April 12th 1970, with the cinema closing immediately after.³²⁷ Both the Conservation Plan and Grefstad noted that the theatre was sold to a religious group to hold services. The Victoria Theatre Trust would not allow for the Vic to meet the same fate. Their sole purpose was to reinforce the importance of the Vic as both a community space and an important landmark in the history of Devonport.³²⁸ For people like Joyce Hitchens, the Vic had become more than just a building. This seemed to be the case across many suburban cinemas. While there was appropriate uproar for the demolishing of His Majesty's, the anger was sometimes stronger in the suburbs. The city cinemas were beautiful landmarks, ornate and glamorous reminders of a nostalgic time. Bruce Palmer purchased the theatre shortly after, renovating the space and developing further onto its art deco style. In 2023, the Vic still glimmers on the top of Victoria Street, enjoyed by tourists and residents alike. Its quaintness slotted in perfectly with the atmosphere of the preserved seaside village and was protected by its residents at the appropriate time. The Vic was saved from the destruction of suburban cinemas because the suburb cared. It is often the venue for *Rocky Horror* screenings, accompanied by shadow casts and a full house.³²⁹

DRAWING THE CURTAIN

To conclude, the city and the suburbs approached their cinemas very differently. The city world was glamorous. People spent an evening in town, travelling far and wide to enjoy a

³²⁶ Salmond Reed Architects, p.13.

³²⁷ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.37.

³²⁸ *ibid.*

³²⁹ The Vic, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, <https://thevic.co.nz/movie/the-rocky-horror-picture-show> (accessed 31/01/2023)

new release and a luxurious environment. Suburban cinemas had a tighter focus on being a hub of community. They were dance halls, meeting spaces. Events were tailored towards children, housewives, young people and old. It was designed to keep people socialising within their suburb as much as possible, and pumping profit into their local businesses. As previously mentioned, regarding the Kosy Theatre, the owners of the theatre were often directly involved with the day-to-day operations. As well as the Kosy, another key example is Jan Grefstad and the Hollywood. Before the cinema chains reached the suburbs, the owner had to have been extremely passionate about the world of film. Grefstad is the best example of this. Wives and sisters also played a large part, often playing the piano alongside silent films. Helga Guttormsen, the sister of the first owner and builder of the Kosy, played alongside the first films screened.³³⁰ Sadie Fleming from ‘the Beverley’ era had spent her teenage years playing piano for films in halls further north.³³¹ While city cinemas had their fair share of personal stories, the whole point of suburban theatres was to connect people. Their regulars were neighbours, and their children grew up in the same spaces. Some owners travelled to operate their cinema, while some, like Grefstad, had been a local for decades.

Ultimately, what started as ‘cinema culture’ disappeared from mainstream consumption culture by the twenty-first century. Most of Grefstad’s work concluded with short sentences about the demise of each theatre. However, that did not mean that culture completely ceased to exist. There will still those who kept the torch alight for nostalgia or enrichment purposes. The golden age, as it was defined, had begun to reach an end in the latter half of the twentieth century, there was no denying that. Buildings caught fire or were demolished, in favour of apartment buildings or carparks. The atmosphere that existed throughout this period suggested that art had to be more accessible than just in picture houses. Television was firmly in the home by the 1980s, and by the 1990s many surviving suburban cinemas either had multiple screens or were owned by chains. Films could still be viewed, but the slow disappearance of the independent local cinema meant that the charm of the communal experience became hard to find. That is what made the Hollywood so appealing for me to study - no matter what challenges or owners they faced; their long history of passionate cinema persisted. While public favour seemed to turn against the humble independent cinema, there were those who knew they would be missed.

³³⁰ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.20.

³³¹ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.21.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Give yourself over to absolute pleasure.’ Rocky Horror in Aotearoa

Within Grefstad’s histories, there is an article detailing what life would have been like for locals in 1954. It is a time-travel piece, uncredited but suggested to have been written around 1994. The author spoke to the reader about the changing times, suggesting that, ‘you see, my friend, here in 1954 Auckland there isn’t a hell of a lot else to do. There’s maybe the odd dance, there’s certainly no clubs, or licensed restaurants and all the pubs closed at 6.’³³² This was the reality of Tāmaki Makaurau social life. The six o’clock swill, in force until 1967, meant that by the early hours of the evening, people had nothing to do except to visit the picture theatre. Human beings always crave entertainment, and human beings in Aotearoa loved the movies. The piece finished with the emptying of the city streets. It implied that the night would conclude at once: ‘When the show finishes and we come out into the crisp night air of Queen St, we watched the audience crowd on to trams with some of the other 20,000 people at the pictures that night. By eleven o’clock Queen St is left to the street cleaners or folks heading for the last Devonport Ferry.’³³³ Grefstad suggested that people travelled into the inner city, as opposed to living in it. Public transport, such as the trams or the ferries, were the lifeline that operated to bring people in. According to Love Chile and Xavier Black, Tāmaki Makaurau only saw a growth in inner-city living from the mid-1970s onwards, spiking in the 1990s when retail spaces and commercial offices lay empty following economic instability in 1987.³³⁴ Commuting from fringe suburbs, particularly ones that had been gentrified (including Ponsonby and Grey Lynn), was far more common.³³⁵ Trams connected many of these suburbs, as highlighted in the figure above. There were also the ferries, notably the steam ship *Kestrel*, connecting residents on the North Shore prior to the opening of Harbour Bridge in 1959. Accessing the city was relatively easy and frequently done.

³³² Grefstad, Volume 18, p.5.

³³³ Grefstad, Volume 18, p.8.

³³⁴ Love Chile, and Xavier Black., ‘Auckland inner-city residents’ experiences and expressions of community connectedness’, *Whanake: The Pacific Journal of Community Development*, 1, 2, 2015, p.35.

³³⁵ *ibid.*

By the 1970s and 1980s, when the golden age has all but passed, a new yearning for entertainment emerged. There was more to do once the six o'clock swill had been lifted. Clubbing was one of those activities. According to Audio Culture and the New Zealand Fashion Museum, Tāmaki Makaurau became a partying city. The abundance of late-night venues seemed to replace the abundance of cinemas, as people found new ways to have fun. This is not unusual for a society, who simply move fluidly through trends and preferences. People would also attend live music performances, with venues such as the Gluepot in Ponsonby becoming a hotspot for local acts and endless partying.³³⁶ Evolutions of rock, reggae and pop emerged through the underground music scene. In nightclubs, dance music had become a form of self-expression. Music had become the ultimate gateway to individual style and removing the gender binary that fashion had previously created. The clubbing scene, for its long, sweat-filled nights, was incredibly glamorous. Doris de Pont described the clubbing attire as:

‘Men and women of all genders dressed up to party in clinging lycra, tulle tutus, svelte frocks and pants in panne velvet, puffball skirts, bright silk bow-ties and pirate shirts, gold lurex bodysuits, lamé tailored jackets and large smatterings of skin fitted leather and stretch vinyl while denim, if it wasn’t coloured, barely got a look in. Everyone wore makeup; eyeliner and coloured shadows and poppy lips, no holds barred. Earrings too were a universal accessory; long and dangling or big bold bright and matching, well they were certain to match something you were wearing.’³³⁷

However, this phenomenon of nightclubs and partying all night was only limited to the older demographic. The drinking age was twenty until the very end of the century, when it was lowered to eighteen. Eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, in theory, had very few activities after midnight. *Rocky Horror* was a perfect solution. Advertisements in the paper labelled *Rocky Horror* as an R-18 film, almost implying that the screenings were designed for them. After an early-evening live performance, or before a night on-the-town, *Rocky Horror* was that snippet of entertainment. There were no reports of drinking copious amounts of alcohol, rather throwing rice.

Rocky Horror graced the stages of Aotearoa twice within six years. A national touring production brought *Rocky Horror* to the country in 1978, then again in 1986. Both shows were heavily advertised in newspapers such as the *New Zealand Herald* and *Auckland Star*.

³³⁶ John Dix, ‘The Gluepot’, Audio Culture, <https://audioculture.co.nz/articles/the-gluepot> (accessed 26/04/2023)

³³⁷ Doris de Pont, ‘Nightclubbing in 80s Auckland’, NZ Fashion Museum, <https://www.nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/nightclubbing-in-80s-auckland/> (accessed 17/04/2023)

Theatre productions were more expensive events than films, and understandably so. The theatre company had to cover the expenses of costumes, set design and wages of at least a few dozen cast and crew members. Shows were also temporary, lasting anywhere from a couple nights to a couple months. Marketing and advertising were the only way to guarantee their short-term success. Theatre required resources, whereas film only needed the reel, a projector, speakers and a screen at minimum. Film had always been the more accessible medium.

By 1978, most of the world had already seen *Rocky Horror*. There had been productions in Melbourne, Paris, Sydney, Barcelona and Mexico City, just to name a few. The film had been released and revived as a midnight movie by the time that Tāmaki Makaurau had been able to enjoy the stage show for the first time. Indeed, Tāmaki Makaurau was exposed to *Rocky Horror* all at once. Not only would 1978 be the first time *Rocky Horror* was performed on Aotearoa’s stages, but it was also the beginning of the Hollywood’s mammoth midnight season.

The production was directed by Raynor Bourton, the original stage Rocky who notoriously cut his role short after a nasty glitter-related accident.³³⁸ Bourton was given a monumental task – to cast Frank. Stewart MacPherson, long-time theatre producer and founder of the Stetson Group, was adamant to see if Bourton could recruit Tim Curry to reprise his role of Frank. Curry was undoubtedly the star of *Rocky Horror*; the very epitome of what Frank should be. His charisma was electric and captured audiences. According to Bourton, he saw ‘Tim Curry turn men and women on, like couples, people who were together.’³³⁹ There was a universal adoration and lust for him. But Curry had already played Frank on screen, as well as the productions in London, Los Angeles, and Broadway. There was no way that he would offer his performance again, five years after the first production. Instead, MacPherson suggested Gary Glitter. Bourton agreed that ‘he would make a great Frank.’³⁴⁰ Glitter was an English glam rock singer, embodying his stage name by regularly performing in extravagant, glittery outfits.³⁴¹ He was the perfect choice. His fellow cast

³³⁸ Michaels and Evans, p.159.

³³⁹ *ibid.*, p.158.

³⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.160.

³⁴¹ As of March 2023, Gary Glitter has been granted early release from his sixteen-year prison sentence. Glitter was accused of paedophilia in various countries, before eventually being tried and imprisoned in the United Kingdom.

members adored him, too. Glitter's name and face was also used heavily in the marketing of the show, in a way that could now be called stunt-casting. A celebrity appearance would always spark intrigue and could sell tickets on name alone.

One thing to note about this touring production of *Rocky Horror* is that there was an accompanying cast recording. This has not lasted as a trend, and touring productions rarely get their own recording. Cast recordings are commonplace for major productions, particularly those on Broadway or the West End. Their sole purpose is to immortalise a show and that specific cast. Aotearoa's few cast recordings were released via MacPherson's Stetson Group, and include *Rocky Horror*, *Evita* (1982), *The Pirates of Penzance* (1986) and *Blood Brothers* (1994). There was also a recording of *Jesus Christ Superstar* released in 1993. However, these were not issued in the same volume as international cast recordings. Australia has had a significant number of cast recordings released over the decades, including their own *Rocky Horror* album in 1974. Sydney audiences were amongst some of the first witnesses to the original production, before the show had even reached Broadway. While a world away from the London stage, there was a personal connection between Australia and *Rocky Horror*. Australian Jim Sharman was one of the core people behind *Rocky Horror*. He directed the show, the film, and numerous iterations of international productions. Sharman brought *Rocky Horror* to Australia, and with it an adoring fanbase. Australians adored *Rocky Horror*.

Rocky Horror at the Hollywood began on the same day as a midnight showing of the stage show in 1978. Perhaps it was fate, or merely luck, that *Rocky Horror* would lock its grip onto Tāmaki Makaurau all at once. As advertised throughout the week of newspapers, there was to be a midnight performance on Friday 25th August.³⁴² Aotearoa was finally catching up on a years-old trend. While I could not find anything that directly linked the two, there is no denying the coincidence. The timing worked perfectly, as midnight screenings had already been established globally. Presenting an international phenomenon to a new audience meant that it could be easier to sell the madness of *Rocky Horror*. Tāmaki Makaurau loved it. Suddenly, people were enjoying the cinema in a whole new way. They were travelling from different points in the city in order to dance with everyone else. Grefstad recalled:

'One of the highlights has been the showing of 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' for over ten years. The film started its mammoth season on August 25 1978. A record for one film in a cinema in NZ.

³⁴² *Auckland Star*, 18th August 1978, p.17.

Every Friday and Saturday Night at 11:30pm young people from all over Auckland would gather at Avondale and watch week after week the film. The audiences used to know the entire dialogue of the film and would then shout their replies to the dialogue which could change in any week. They would often dress up as the characters of the film and bring their own rice and newspapers to add any fun to the movie. You couldn't move at some screenings for all the people gathered there. During the performances members of the audience would enact the actions of the screen down below in front of the stage.³⁴³

Less than a decade later, *Rocky Horror* was once again on the stage. This time, the show was a familiar work. The Hollywood had been screening the film for eight years non-stop. *Rocky Horror* was more than a trend, it had become something to do on a Friday or Saturday night.

The Narrator, or the Criminologist as called in the film, is the perfect role for famous cameos. There is little to no dancing involved, and the commanding of the audience can depend on their own public persona. Ultimately, it can be a role that required minimal acting. In the film, the Criminologist was played by Charles Gray, who had famously played villain Blofeld in *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971) against Sean Connery as James Bond. His Criminologist is stalwart and sceptical until he led the Time Warp. On stage, versions of the Narrator have been played by Stephen Fry, Emma Bunton of the Spice Girls, comedian Mel Giedroyc, and Richard O'Brien himself.³⁴⁴ By stunt-casting the role of the Narrator, as opposed to major roles such as Frank, there is more room for audience participation. The Narrator can be played as a cameo, or as a more serious role. This is exactly why in Aotearoa in 1986, former Prime Minister Robert Muldoon stepped into the role. Audiences were thrilled. When writing one of Muldoon's biographies, Barry Gustafson detailed the experience of Muldoon's brief theatrical career. He said that:

'Most surprising to many people was Muldoon agreeing to do ten performances in July 1986 as the narrator in the raunchy Rocky Horror Show, dancing the 'Time Warp' with seductively underdressed girls and transvestites. The 13,000 people who saw Muldoon perform at His Majesty's Theatre in Auckland found him a little unsure of his lines and movements at first, but by the last night he had gained in confidence, was enjoying the humour of the occasion, and was getting thunderous ovations for his attempt at a pelvic thrust.'³⁴⁵

³⁴³ Grefstad, Volume 1, p.109.

³⁴⁴ Ben Beaumont-Thomas,

Stephen Fry, Mel Giedroyc and Emma Bunton to appear in Rocky Horror Show, *The Guardian*, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/13/stephen-fry-mel-giedroyc-emma-bunton-rocky-horror-show>

³⁴⁵ Barry Gustafson, *His Way: A Biography of Rob Muldoon*, Auckland, 2000, p.426.

The audiences did, in fact, love Muldoon. As reported by the *Auckland Star*, he was greeted by laughter before even opening his mouth.³⁴⁶ By the end of the show, he was applauded for not his politics, but rather his sportsmanship. He ‘looked totally at home among the weirdos in their shiny bras, suspender belts and fishnet stockings with their outlandish, sometimes utterly childish behaviour.’³⁴⁷ The production also starred Russ Le Roq, otherwise known as Russell Crowe. The future Academy Award winner played Eddie and Dr Scott and received his own taste of *Rocky Horror* publicity. During a promotional stunt, he was being pushed in his prop wheelchair by Brad, played by Andrew Binns. The *Auckland Star* snippet headlined ‘Rolling horrors’ reads: ‘An old man in a wheelchair, clad in fishnet stockings raises eyebrows in Queen Street today.’³⁴⁸ The public adored the gag, and had taken the chaos of *Rocky Horror* in their stride. From further articles in the *Auckland Star* during the show’s run, it was clear that 1986 was the peak year for *Rocky Horror* in Tāmaki Makaurau. Both cinema and theatre had an opportunity to be revitalised. Perry Benson, who played Riff Raff, had to leave the show early for health reasons. Despite his disappointment in leaving, he expressed his thoughts on the Aotearoa crowds. He said that ‘the people in New Zealand are crazy. You would never get people in London dancing in the aisle or throwing rice on the stage like we have had here. It has been hard work at times containing the audience, but it has been great.’³⁴⁹ This animalistic audience behaviour would have been a direct product of *Rocky Horror* midnight screenings, where rice was thrown, and dancing was mandatory. People were applying cinema behaviours to theatre etiquette.

By 1986, during the second touring production, *Rocky Horror* at the Hollywood was often advertised in print. That same page would usually advertise the stage show as well. The Hollywood’s advertisers knew that noting the concurrent events was worth mentioning. On the 18th of August 1986, the Hollywood ran an advertisement in their usual classified slot. However, there is a small picture of Frank and the words above him read: ‘Everyone can afford a ticket to the original show at the Hollywood!’³⁵⁰ They knew that there were status and price ranges separating the film from the show. As seen through the interview with Perry

³⁴⁶ Tony Potter, ‘Rob quickly wins Rocky Horror mob’, *Auckland Star*, July 21st 1986, p.A2.

³⁴⁷ *ibid.*

³⁴⁸ *Auckland Star*, 2nd July 1986, p.1.

³⁴⁹ Paul Ellis, ‘Actor quits Rocky’, *Auckland Star*, 20th July 1987, p.C13.

³⁵⁰ *ibid.*

Benson, even the price of tickets could not keep audiences from revelling in the learnings of the Hollywood.

One of the most exciting pieces of primary evidence was presented during the fourth season of *The Unauthorised History of New Zealand* (2005-2008). The series was an unconventional, comedic take on Aotearoa's history, exploring the more explicit and rowdy side to a nation that enjoyed crafting an incredibly laidback identity. Jeremy Wells, a long-time media personality, presented the show as a parody of classic historical documentaries, walking towards the camera and talking as though he was in conversation with the viewer. The fifth episode of the fourth season, simply titled "Entertainment", covered the world of fun beneath the surface. One of the snippets of fun is from the Hollywood, during a *Rocky Horror* screening. In watching it, I am viewing my entire thesis. When looking at the footage of the Hollywood, there are very few people in costume. In fact, the vast majority are in regular clothing. The audience looks young, suggesting that the transfer of generational entertainment had already begun. *Rocky Horror* had begun the process of timelessness. The clip opened with a group of dressed-up attendees, shouting to the camera 'Welcome to the Rocky Horror Picture Show!'³⁵¹ Quite a few people are in the crowd, around thirty. There are various iterations of Magenta and Columbia, and several Transylvanians. But when the scene cuts to the actual screening, most patrons are wearing normal clothes – jumpers and jeans. But they are having fun. That is the biggest takeaway from the clip. They are shaking their heads, dancing, and throwing rice. They are doing everything that *Rocky Horror* intended to do, which was bring people into a space where they can have unapologetic fun. Grefstad must have enjoyed reports that His Majesty's was sweeping rice from the floor, too.

³⁵¹ 'Entertainment', *The Unauthorised History of New Zealand*, TVNZ, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztGY68VRO8&list=PLUGrlBk4UqYgU003XO4vr_raxbMNON_yD&index=26

CONCLUSION

‘Lost in time, lost in space and meaning.’

For the conclusion of this thesis, there is perhaps no theme more appropriate than legacy. When researching and writing, a universal pleasure for the existence of cinema constantly emerged. Whether it was Scott Michaels and David Evans, gleefully engaging with every person involved with the creation of *Rocky Horror*, or the countless records that Jan Grefstad has collated, there was a mutual adoration for the cinematic art. Even Ron Rosenbaum, who heavily critiqued the cult phenomenon, appeared to respect the art form. What I hope to achieve in this conclusion is to recognise the legacies of Rocky Horror, as well as Grefstad’s volumes of cinema history and what they mean for the preservation of Tāmaki Makaurau’s cinema history.

LEGACY OF ROCKY HORROR

In *Rose Tint My World*, one of the final songs, Tim Curry emerges from behind a draped white curtain. His corset is red, his eyelids blue. Hands on hips, one in a gold sleeve, the other a fishnet glove, the words ‘An RKO Radio Picture’ are written above him. RKO Radio Pictures was one of the biggest film studios during the Golden Age of Hollywood, producing and distributing between 1928 and 1959. Tim Curry sings; ‘Whatever happened to Fay Wray?/That delicate satin-draped frame,’ the actress who played Ann Darrow in one of RKO’s most famous films, *King Kong* (1933). The song is an ode to the science-fiction and the monsters of early cinema, evoking the nostalgia that is embedded throughout. It is nostalgic, until it is meaningful.

‘Give yourself over to absolute pleasure
Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh
Erotic nightmares beyond any measure
And sensual daydreams to treasure forever
Can’t you just see it...

*Don't dream it, be it.*³⁵²

The line 'don't dream, be it,' has been featured many times throughout this thesis. It is perhaps the one lyric from *Rocky Horror* that continues to hold the most weight and significance. The line holds a double meaning: on the one hand, it is a rare thematic moment that expresses something deeper than the chaos. The song embraces individuality, freedom, and pleasure. It has also become a symbol of hope and confidence for different groups of people, particularly the queer community.

Rocky Horror's legacy is aided by its universal nature. As stated by Weinstock, 'Rocky Horror has wormed its way into America's collective unconscious. It's a movie virtually everyone has heard of and from which many can quote or sing songs, even if they haven't seen it.'³⁵³ Wedding parties break out into the Time Warp on the dance floor, television shows like *Glee* perform songs in character, and countless films feature the midnight screenings. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012) features a crucial scene in which a character has been transformed by a screening and the community around it. The former's main protagonist, Charlie, is the title 'wallflower'. He is a nervous fifteen-year-old, wracked with grief and depression. In his freshman year of high school, he winds up making friends in their senior year. He tags along with his newfound companions to a shadow cast, still shy but starting to feel at home with everyone. As an audience member, Charlie is more engaged. He watches his friend Patrick as Frank, cheering and clapping at the grandeur. His eyes are mainly on Sam, his crush. He starts to understand the freedom of *Rocky Horror*.

Due to sudden unforeseen circumstances, he is cast as Rocky. For an introverted teenager, this is a complete jolt to the system. But he does it without a protest. He performs as Rocky alongside Sam playing Janet. Their shadow cast performance of *Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a Me* is a representation of Charlie's steady growth in confidence. Everyone cheers for him. Charlie has realised one crucial detail about the midnight screenings - there is no such thing as judgement. By the end of the scene, he is dancing and singing to *Wild and Untamed Thing* with everyone else, eyes still fixed on Sam. They push him to the front, and he is applauded by the audience. By the end of the scene, he wants to 'join the cast maybe as

³⁵² O'Brien, 1975.

³⁵³ Weinstock, p.2.

an alternate or something.’³⁵⁴ In an article by Matt Melis for Consequence Film, he argued, ‘All sexiness aside, Charlie is but one of millions of confused young people who have found a safe space at a Rocky screening. Embracing newcomers from all walks of life might be the film’s greatest legacy.’³⁵⁵ This is true - while wildly popular and known even a little bit by most, *Rocky Horror* is a beacon of hope for the weird kid.

Not only is *Rocky Horror* for the weird kid, but it is also for the artistic ones. *Fame* (1980) is a film about teenagers navigating a prestigious performing arts school. In their junior year, the characters Ralph and Doris attend a midnight screening. By 1980, midnight screenings would have been all the rage. In comparison, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was set in the 1990s, when *Rocky Horror* had stopped being screened at the Hollywood and the general buzz had dropped. However, the scene is a reminder of the tradition carrying down to a new generation. Charlie, Sam and Patrick would have all been a part of the first generation post-release and grow up with midnight screenings being ‘normal’ as opposed to ‘new’. In the case of *Fame*, these characters had been alive when the film first came out. They would have been young but were at least aware of the phenomenon from the beginning. Ralph and Doris are attending a midnight screening, sharing a marijuana joint and getting high in a packed cinema. Some people are dressed up, some are not, Ralph and Doris being in the latter. There are celebrations for birthdays and screening anniversaries, as though each cinema had their own cluster of regular celebrities. A real-life screening celebrity makes a cameo - Sal Piro. He played the MC of the performance, donning a simple, red-lipped tee shirt. The film begins with classic cues, such as slapping your knee when Brad slaps the car wheel or holding a newspaper over your head when Brad and Janet do. Everything in the scene is formulaic, perfected in the few years that the screenings had occurred. Chaos is unleashed when the *Time Warp* begins. Suddenly, people are singing, shouting, and filling the stage. Interestingly, very few people are standing up to dance in the stalls. Doris is overcome with joy and throws her shirt off. Left in her jeans and a camisole, she runs onto the stage. She easily slots into the line of characters, despite resembling Janet more than a Transylvanian. Once again, there is no judgement. Simply happiness.

³⁵⁴ Stephen Chbosky, *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 2012

³⁵⁵ Matt Melis, 10 Times The Rocky Horror Picture Show Crashed Pop Culture, *Consequence Film*, 2020 <https://consequence.net/2020/08/10-times-the-rocky-horror-picture-show-crashed-pop-culture/3/> (accessed 3/01/2023)

The television show *Glee* ran from 2009 through to 2015. Throughout its tenure, episodes were dedicated to musicians, albums or shows. Britney Spears, Billy Joel, *Grease*, the Beatles, and Stevie Wonder were just a few of the many the show explored. In 2010, *Glee* aired 'The Rocky Horror Glee Show', the fifth episode in the second season. As the name suggested, the characters in the musical show were singing exclusively *Rocky Horror*. The core plot of the episode was relatively predictable; the high school show choir wanted to stage *Rocky Horror* but were getting denied due to the risqué nature of the show. Ultimately, the show's director, Will Schuester, was wanting to gain the attention of the guidance counsellor, Emma Pillsbury, by performing a musical that she loved. The episode also touched on the idea of masculinity, through the character of Finn Hudson learning to be comfortable in his body by parading around as Brad, clad only in underwear. *Rocky Horror* was perfect material for a show that emphasised the wider theme of *don't dream it, be it*, but that did not mean it was universally received. As Steve Beverburg Reale suggested, a significant amount of critique for the episode emerged around its censorship. He said, 'that the musical is too risqué for prime-time and needlessly sanitising a television programme that already deals with high-school sexuality (queer and straight alike) on a regular basis.'³⁵⁶ He is referring to the numerous lyric changes throughout the seven songs selected for the episode. Instead of singing 'it only leads to trouble and seat wetting,' in *Touch-a Touch-a Touch-a Me*, sung by Emma, she sang 'it only leads to trouble and *bad fretting*.'³⁵⁷ The most controversial lyric change would be in *Sweet Transvestite*. In the original *Rocky Horror*, Frank would sing 'I'm just a sweet transvestite / from transsexual Transylvania,' while *Glee*'s lyrics are 'I'm just a sweet transvestite / from sensational Transylvania.' The complicated nature of the word 'transsexual' would further affect future adaptations. Frank is also played by the character Mercedes, a Black female student who takes costume and aesthetic inspiration from 1960s and 1970s gospel and soul musicians.³⁵⁸ While the censored lyrics remove some of the effect that the original had, the essence of *Rocky Horror* remained. *Glee* was Camp, with a following too mainstream to be considered cult.

Glee would not be the only widespread adaptation that drew criticism. A made-for-television adaptation premiered in 2016, as a unique addition to the trend of live musicals on

³⁵⁶ Steven Beverburg Reale, 'A Sheep in a Wolf's Corset: Timbral and Vocal Signifiers of Masculinity in *The Rocky Horror Picture/Glee Show*', *MSMI*, 6, 2, 2011, p.154.

³⁵⁷ Adam Shankman, 'The Rocky Horror Glee Show', *Glee*, 2010.

³⁵⁸ Reale, p.156.

mainstream television network. It would be titled *Rocky Horror Picture Show: Let's Do the Time Warp Again*. At this point in time, the problematic nature of *Rocky Horror* was beginning to be questioned. Most art will inevitably age once new social norms are established. This is not an unusual practice but was significantly heightened in the twenty-first century. Education and awareness of language has become a crucial bridge in the wider social understanding of harm through words. Definitions have altered over time, and origins are often brought into question. In the case of *Rocky Horror*, issues have been raised in the subsequent years following the initial 1973 stage show. Cameron Crookston argued that there were multiple problematic factors, 'such as the racist coding and simultaneous racial erasure of Gothic and horror conventions as well as rapidly changing and often conflicted trans identity politics of the mid-twentieth century.'³⁵⁹ Laverne Cox was cast as Frank, which drew controversy and conversation. Cox, a transgender woman, was a trailblazer in twenty-first century representation, considered an icon of queer history and culture by Crookston.³⁶⁰ In playing a transvestite reminiscent of 1970s glam rock and androgyny, Cox therefore canonised the fluidity of Frank's unwavering genderless desires. The film was not well-received, but Cox brought forth a transformative interpretation of an iconic character.

Rocky Horror could not have been successful in 2023, let alone 2016. The deeper understanding of gender fluidity, sexuality and diverse identity has allowed for the removal of caricatures and the enrichment of fairly represented characters. *Rocky Horror* has not ceased to exist in the entertainment realm. As Cameron Crookston suggested, *Rocky Horror* is a 'cultural artifact' and has become a work that 'so explicitly and freely plays with time and cultural memory.'³⁶¹ The show is bigger than itself, and its impact will never cease to be culturally significant. *Rocky Horror* has not remained the weekly midnight movie, or something that every generation knows en masse. But as this thesis gets completed in the fiftieth year of its existence, it is obvious that there are still devotees across the world.

LEGACY OF GREFSTAD'S WORK

³⁵⁹ Cameron Crookston, Can I Be Frank with You? Laverne Cox and the Historiographic Dramaturgy of The Rocky Horror Picture Show, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 27, 2, 2021, p.234.

³⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.244.

³⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 234.

Something that made Grefstad's work so memorable was the care put into personal anecdotes. While there were obvious favourites, such as the Kosy and his many years as a patron and employee, no cinema is covered without detail. There is a level of importance to every aspect that I could not find in any other work. Surprisingly, there has been little, if any, work referencing his volumes of information. I would argue that the entirety of Taamaki Makaurau's cinema history can only be recognised and preserved through looking at these volumes. There is no other historian that has detailed every building to this extent. If there were to be any future preservation work within the city, Grefstad would be the ultimate source for information. What Grefstad was so skilled in doing, was capturing a slice of history with the passion of someone who wanted future generations to love the city as much as he did.

In the 2022 film *Babylon*, directed by Damien Chazelle, one of the lead characters is a silent film actor whose career has seemingly ended by 1932. In the opening act, set in 1926, he enters a party and is swarmed by adoring fans. The score that accompanies his entrance is entitled *King of the Circus*, composed by Justin Hurwitz. The music is loud, thumping as though it was greeting a member of ancient royalty. The bacchanal party is reminiscent of the reading by Amittai F. Aviram I have quoted throughout this thesis. *Babylon*, even with its biblical name, evokes a sense of mystique about an exciting and new period in entertainment history. Jack Conrad was one of the biggest names in Hollywood, but once he had grown older and talkies were fully integrated into the fabric of the cinema industry, there was simply no more use for him. Nearing the end of the three-hour epic, Jack sits down with Elinor St. John, a gossip columnist that has worked in the industry since that opening party scene. She has just written a damning article about him, declaring that his career is over. Jack cannot quite understand why he is suddenly discarded — he was part of the first wave of film stars, and people suddenly grew bored of them. New technology has meant that people will crave a totally innovative experience. It was seen with the introduction of talkies, and then the introduction of television. When modernity becomes accessible to the masses, the masses respond. However, everything is cyclical. Nostalgia, a theme I have mentioned sporadically throughout this thesis, is a part of the human condition. *Rocky Horror* is a nostalgic ode to science fiction. In a monologue by Elinor at the tail-end of the scene in *Babylon*, she muses on the timeless nature of film. The dialogue is worth quoting in full, as it encapsulated the legacy that Grefstad has created.

‘I know it hurts. No one asks to be left behind... But in a hundred years, when you and I are long gone, anytime someone threads a frame of yours through a sprocket, you will be alive again. You see what that means...? One day every person in every film shot this year will be dead. And one day those films will be pulled out of vaults and all their ghosts will dine together, adventure together, go to the jungle or to war together.

A child born in fifty years will stumble upon your image flickering on a screen and feel he knows you like a friend, though you breathed your last before he breathed his first. You’ve been given a gift. Be grateful. Your time today is through, but you’ll spend eternity with angels and ghosts.’³⁶²

The preservation of film has become one of the strongest arguments within this thesis. What Grefstad had done through running his two cinemas, as well as through these volumes of history, is bring these ghosts back to life. The Classic’s original purpose as an independent cinema dedicated to reviving old films was exactly what Elinor was hinting at. While films have been lost to fire or mishandling, there are still those that live on in the present day. There are stars that have only been memorialised due to those passionate enough to keep screening their films. Grefstad played a small role in the preservation of the Golden Age, at least for the attendees of the Classic. Throughout his work, there is an innate passion to preserve every detail, particularly the films that played. As I wrote my second chapter on each specific cinema, there was a glaring thread that appeared throughout every case study. Grefstad noted nearly every film that each cinema opened or closed with. To him, the smallest shed in Blockhouse Bay was worthy of being remembered. Within my thesis, I have hoped to contribute a small amount of enthusiasm towards the preservation of a dying culture within Tāmaki Makaurau.

Another scene in *Babylon* emphasised the accessibility of cinema. Through studying the number of suburban cinemas at its height, I reached a general conclusion that every hall or purpose-built cinema provided entertainment to those who did not (or could not) venture into the central city every weekend. The scene takes place just before the conversation between Elinor and Jack. One of Jack’s numerous wives, Estelle, is a Broadway actress. The conversation between high and lowbrow art appears in conversation often, enough to finally break Jack’s tolerance. In a moment of grief, he says, ‘What I do means something to millions of people. My parents didn’t have the money or the education to go to the theater so they went to the vaudeville houses and then they went to the nickelodeon, and you know what? There’s beauty there. What happens on the screen means something -- maybe not for

³⁶² Damien Chazelle, *Babylon*, 2022.

you up in your ivory tower, but down on the ground where real people live, it means something.³⁶³ This statement helps to strengthen the argument of the importance of cinema. The filmic art was designed to reach mass audiences, particularly those who could not afford to attend the theatre. When cinemas reached the suburbs of Tāmaki Makaurau, there was an option for everyone. *Rocky Horror* at the Hollywood was a unique opportunity to capitalise on the joy of the accessible option. There was no fanfare, as seen through the lack of advertising in the early years. Word-of-mouth was the key to an entirely different cinematic experience. What *Babylon* represents is a love for the experience of cinema – the communal value in sharing art. It emphasises the importance of preservation. Grefstad’s volumes have been the film reel, wound through a sprocket.

Grefstad’s work also opened the inspiration for further work that could not be included in this thesis. Initially this thesis was going to collect the oral histories of Aotearoa’s *Rocky Horror* fanbase, and draw a conclusion based upon individual experience and cultural history. Unfortunately, these interviews were unable to take place, and the discovery of Grefstad’s enormous body of work changed the direction of this thesis towards the history of preservation and suburban cinema. The opportunity arose in which I was able to utilise histories that had not been referenced or overly read. Instead of numerous individuals, this thesis has been able to honour one of the more overlooked and important figures in the history of Tāmaki Makaurau. Without Grefstad seizing the opportunity to screen *Rocky Horror*, suburban cinema in Tāmaki Makaurau would have ceased to exist. The rise of multiplexes and corporation-owned cinema chains would have continued, but the individual cinemas would have struggled. Grefstad kept the enthusiasm for old films and communal cinema alive in Tāmaki Makaurau. Without him and *Rocky Horror*, there would be minimal zest for independent film.

ROCKY HORROR TODAY

Rocky Horror is no longer screened every week at the Hollywood. Instead, it makes an appearance every few months. The cinema of choice often varies between the Vic in Devonport and the Hollywood, making the joyful outreach of *Rocky Horror* spread between suburbs. Oftentimes, a shadow cast will perform during the film. The company that has

³⁶³ Chazelle.

performed on numerous occasions was Hot and Flustered Shadowcast, who returned to the Hollywood in late 2022 for the first time since 1989; thirty-four years prior.³⁶⁴ The date is interesting to note, as it was a year following the end of the weekly screenings. The end only meant the beginning for a new form of enjoyment. Fans of Rocky Horror had to keep reinventing the style of the midnight screening so that they could keep generations coming. I firmly believe that people will still be dancing to the *Time Warp* in fifty years' time. Its importance has prevailed through the decades, albeit at a lesser level than the heyday of the midnight screening. However, the shadow casts and the popular culture references help to maintain the legacy of a film that both revived and introduced a form of entertainment consumption. Film-watching could be fun, chaotic and open to anyone from any walk of life. Frank N' Furter, in the pool while his admirers swim around him, sung words that resonated through every aspect of this thesis. There are no truer words spoken, and there are no lyrics more meaningful. *Don't dream it, be it.*

³⁶⁴ Hot and Flustered Shadowcast, 29 November 2022
<https://www.facebook.com/hotandflustered/photos/a.665618953506618/5659195350815595/> (accessed 1/02/2023)

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