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**This Is Not A Chick Flick: The discourse of the romantic comedy  
genre created by Hollywood**

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**Certificate of Authorship**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

### **1. Abstract**

### **2. Exegesis: This is not a Chick Fick: The discourse of the romantic comedy genre created by Hollywood**

#### 2.1. Introduction

#### 2.2. Genre

##### 2.2.1. Genre and the development of *Priceless!*

#### 2.3. Research Project

#### 2.4. Research Methodology

#### 2.5. Critical Analysis and Findings

#### 2.6. Conclusions

##### 2.6.1. Further Drafts

### **3. References**

#### 3.1. Filmography

### **4. Screenplay**

**ABSTRACT:**

The feature length film script **Priceless!** is a romantic comedy set in 21<sup>st</sup> century New Zealand about family, relationships and corporate greed, seen from the perspective of the main protagonist 29 year old Philippa (Pippi) Shore.

Born in the fictitious Toi Toi Beach, Pippi has left small-town life far behind her for the opportunities and excitement of the big city, but things aren't quite turning out as she had hoped. Living on credit cards to keep up with her best friend Ruby, overlooked for promotion by her boss, still flatting and single, Pippi needs something in her life to change. When the opportunity to be promoted at work arises and she is finally considered, it comes at a cost. Pippi must return to Toi Toi Beach and convince the people she once cared about to get behind a development plan that could compromise the lifestyle they cherish dearly.

The following exegesis on **Priceless!** challenges the notion that the romantic comedy genre is only successful when produced by big budget Hollywood studios and relies exclusively on an existing star system.

By exploring aspects of the history of the genre and the expectations of a contemporary audience you will see how the success of the romantic comedy in an independent film market can be a signifier of maturity in our local industry and shouldn't be so easily written off.

### Exegesis:

#### **This is not a Chick Flick: The discourse of the romantic comedy genre created by Hollywood**

*Priceless!* is primarily a comedy drama about family, relationships and corporate greed. However, due to the significance of, not one, but two romantic relationship lines in the script it would be difficult not to include romance in its genre classification making it fall into the sub-genre known as the romantic comedy or rom com.

According to Linda Aronson in 'The 21st Century Screen Play: A comprehensive guide to writing tomorrow's films', genre is a promise to the audience that must be fulfilled in a real but unusual way. So what is the promise of the rom com sub-genre laid down by Hollywood and can an independent film live up to the audience expectations outside of a system that relies heavily on its star system to make it a box office success?

If we look at the history of the rom com we can understand more clearly what a contemporary audience has come to expect, then explore how this has created discourse for films produced outside of Hollywood and why many independent films with romantic relationship lines ignore the sub-genre altogether. The rom com, along with other genres targeted specifically at a female audience, are often referred to as 'chick flicks'. The term has pretty negative connotations to many.

*'Chick flicks' have often been put down as trite, sappy, emotional, soap-opera-ish, cliched, melodramatic, weepy, and trivial. Often considered an all-encompassing sub-genre, they mostly include dialogue-laden, formulated romantic comedies (with*

*mismatched lovers or female relationships), tearjerkers and gal-pal films, movies about family crises and emotional catharsis, some traditional 'weepies' and fantasy-action adventures, sometimes with foul-mouthed and empowered females, and female bonding situations involving families, mothers, daughters and children.<sup>1</sup>*

You can see why any writer would be reluctant to self-impose this sub-genré on their work when the audience expectation is so negative and polarising! But how can it be escaped?

The basic plot line (or pattern) of a rom com written in a three act structure would go something like this; two people meet and are attracted to each other, humorous circumstances prevent them being together so conflict ensues, leading to a love conquers all or happily ever after climax.

Applying Aronson's genre equation "*genre = pattern + relevant emotion + real + unusual*" to both a Hollywood rom com and an independent film, we can see if ***Priceless!*** would fulfil an audiences expectations of this troublesome classification.

The popularity of the rom com in Hollywood can be linked to the popularity of the sit com in television and recognition of a predominantly female audience. During the late 1980s and into the early 2000s, Hollywood produced a significantly large number of rom coms, many of which became big box office successes. But as time has passed by, something has changed.

*In 1997, there were two romantic comedies among the top 20 box office*

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<sup>1</sup> AMC Filmsite, Tim Dirks, <http://www.filmsite.org/chickflicks.html>

*performers. In 1998 and 1999, there were three. Each cracked \$100 million in sales. Even as recently as 2005, five romantic comedies topped \$100 million at the box office. Contrast that with 2013: There's not one romantic comedy in the top 50 films. Not even in the top 100.*<sup>2</sup>

I would argue, like Amy Nicholson has in her article written for LA Weekly, that Hollywood killed the romantic comedy. Nicholson points out the decline has very little to do with who is purchasing tickets at the box office, with statistics supporting females over 25 still represent a large percentage of the market, and everything to do with the conventions of the *genre*.

*Maybe romantic-comedy conventions just got tired. From the late '90s to the mid-2000s, Hollywood produced dozens of romantic comedies each year, but many were outright lousy.*<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary audiences are no longer satisfied with the concept that love conquers all; it no longer, and possibly for some time never has, ticked the "real" in Aronson's *genre* equation. I would also add that female protagonists within this *genre* are not relatable. The success of *Bridesmaids* (2011) defies the notion that the rom com is dead because of its *genre* and supports the fact that good writing and playing with the Hollywood convention can still make a box office success.

*Of course, Bridesmaids wasn't a classic romantic comedy — though it was called*

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<sup>2</sup> LA Weekly, Who Killed The Romantic Comedy by Amy Nicholson, 27 Feb 2014, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/who-killed-the-romantic-comedy-4464884>

<sup>3</sup> LA Weekly, Who Killed The Romantic Comedy by Amy Nicholson, 27 Feb 2014, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/who-killed-the-romantic-comedy-4464884>

*one by critics who knew no other term for a funny film starring women. After all, in Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo's script, the focus wasn't on Wiig's character finding a good man; it was about her reconfiguring her friendship with Maya Rudolph. The love story between Wiig and the Irish cop played by Chris O'Dowd was secondary, and even then Feig was iffy about including it.<sup>4</sup>*

***Priceless!***, much like *Bridesmaids*, plays with the conventions of the rom com to excite its potential audience. The two romance lines are secondary to the family relationship lines and the action line.

The protagonist, Pippi, being forced to return to her old hometown of Toi Toi Beach to advance her career, relies on the relationships she has with her family and friends to help her succeed. Her interest in Paul, who has marginalised himself from consumer society, living in a tepee, smoking weed and surfing, is sexual. Paul doesn't believe in ownership and challenges Pippi's values with his care-free ways.

As a nod to the conventions of the traditional rom com, the scripts two elderly citizens, Mrs Mac and Mr Chen's relationship is presented in classic Hollywood narrative style. They are from polar opposite worlds. Mrs Mac represents change and Mr Chen, tradition. They meet and are instantly in conflict over a garden once owned by Mrs Mac that Mr Chen has replanted in traditional Japanese style. The point of conflict also becomes their mutual attraction to one another. The reference to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is introduced to identify the roots of poetry in popular music and to signify

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<sup>4</sup> LA Weekly, Who Killed The Romantic Comedy by Amy Nicholson, 27 Feb 2014, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/who-killed-the-romantic-comedy-4464884>

the fatalistic inevitability of starting a relationship in your 80's.

Understanding the conventions of the rom com genre has forced this writer to develop characters and lines to hopefully exceed the expectations of a contemporary audience and provide some of the “real” elements Aronson suggests are essential to a genre's success.

The decline in popularity of the conventional Hollywood rom com with audiences has challenged writers to tap into the psyché of women for some time.

Independent films, those produced outside of the big Hollywood studios, have delivered rom coms like Australia's *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) and even here at home *Sione's Wedding* (2006), finding new ways to attract audiences.

Hollywood too seems to recognise the need for change producing films like *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck* (2015), both considered box office successes, which would seem to defy the notion that contemporary audiences don't want to watch rom coms. I would argue the rom com became too predictable during its hey day in the 90s because the studios stopped challenging the conventions of the genre. Put simply, Hollywood became lazy and greedy.

***Priceless!*** explores greed and questions who benefits when someone's idea of financial success is imposed on a community with a very different value system. The film's protagonist is caught between the two worlds, having grown up in the small community of Toi Toi Beach and been seduced away by the chance to make it in the big city. But making money, and spending even more, isn't fulfilling for Pippi so her

internal conflict is making peace with the boredom of small town life she was so desperate to escape as a teenager. Pippi's age (29) signifies a late coming of age; a time when many adults question the pursuit of making money and mass consumerism in their own lives.

The action line of Pippi convincing the residents of Toi Toi Beach that development is essential for their financial survival reflects her own internal conflict. Forced to consider finding alternatives to the proposed development plan, Pippi must also confront her own value system to find happiness. The conflict between an imposed value system and something more organic is a struggle hopefully the films target audience will also identify with. New Zealand as a country is often caught between the value systems of more dominant cultures and maintaining a sense of our unique cultural identity.

When I first confessed to liking a good chick flick or rom com to my class of fellow screen writers, the room fell silent. Every other student proudly listed 'Festival', 'Action' or 'Sci-Fi' as their preferred genre, while I quietly slunk down in my seat, embarrassed by my apparent lack of film culture. But then I started to ask myself why? Why has this genre become so trivialised and is there a way to overcome it, when love and happiness are both core emotions that resonate widely and uniquely in the human psyché.

As I have pointed out, there are films within the rom com genre that do manage to overcome the negative expectations of a contemporary audience. Could it signify that like myself, there are others out there that remain hopeful that someone will deliver a

more meaningful film that is both funny and romantic?

Hollywood was quick to capitalise on the growth of the female audience and popularity of the rom com but I would suggest the writers became stuck in a formula that worked once and failed to evolve with their audience.

As a female writer appealing to a female audience within a genre dominated by the sex seems logical. Identifying why and where the rom com lost popularity with its audience, has been significant in the development of *Priceless!*

Attempting to resolve some of the obvious failings in creating a female protagonist that isn't passive or too aggressive has been challenging. Even *Bridesmaids* didn't get this right in my opinion. Writer and actor, Kristen Wiig's main character Annie, although hilariously funny, is a victim of circumstance, rendering her passive for much of the movie evoking pity from the audience.

Part of the problem with writing a single female protagonist is rooted in literary gender stereotyping. The classic example being the Fairy Tale, which has been exploited repeatedly by Hollywood and other film makers.

In an earlier draft of what is now titled *Priceless!* I experimented with addressing the internal dilemma for girls, growing up with the fairy tale narrative of life's problems being solved by meeting Prince Charming and living happily ever after. As my story developed this theme became irrelevant and I believe Hollywood has recognised its problematic premise with several successful retellings of classic fairy tales like *Maleficent* (2014) and Disney's animated film *Tangled* (2010).

The disconnect from the rom com for a contemporary female audience is much the same. The delusional notion of love conquering all is out-dated and women no longer relate to the gender stereotypes created for them. This provides an opportunity for a writer and I find the challenge exciting.

Should *Priceless!* not escape the rom com classification, I would like to think it isn't pre-conceived as trivial nonsense and an understanding of the potential audience with a retelling of the genre exists.

While still conforming to some of the genre conventions, I have attempted to provide a sense of depth and realism with *Priceless!* to resolve some of the rom com's failings identified above.

The main character Pippi has evolved based on valuable feedback given in group readings of the script. As Aronson puts it "In film, a character *is* what it *does*". Initially I wrote Pippi avoiding conflict situations or drinking to deal with her emotional issues but this made her a weak character, particularly to the younger members of our group. I had fallen into a similar trap as with Annie in *Bridesmaids*; too weak equals unattractive and disengages an audience that is tired of the female 'victim' stereotype.

Once I had an action line for the main character to drive the narrative forward and dropped the unlikeable characteristics, it opened up new ways in which the script could develop.

*Muriel's Wedding* is a good example of a flawed but engaging female protagonist with

a very clear action line:

*Socially awkward Muriel Heslop (Toni Collette) wants nothing more than to get married. Unfortunately, due to her oppressive politician father (Bill Hunter), Muriel has never even been on a date. Ostracized by her more socially adept friends, Muriel runs into fellow outcast Rhonda Epinstalk (Rachel Griffiths), and the two move from their small Australian town to the big city of Sydney, where Muriel changes her name and begins the arduous task of redesigning her life to match her fantasies.*

Although the film loses its way a bit in my opinion when Rhonda is left a paraplegic in the middle of a threesome with a couple of navy boys and a slightly clichéd ending, it would be difficult not to want to know if Muriel gets her happy ending.

I have attempted to use this in ***Priceless!*** and, like Muriel, Pippi does get her happy ending but it isn't dependent on her relationship with Paul but her internal conflict with money and happiness.

Intentionally leaving room for the audience to interpret where Pippi and Paul's relationships future lies is also significant as subverting a genre's conventions is also delving into the unknown in terms of the fate of the script.

The problem of the rom com genre has influenced the development of ***Priceless!*** by forcing the writer to understand how to overcome, as opposed to ignoring, the issues surrounding it.

The process of developing a story idea through to second draft screenplay has been an

enlightening experience. It has taken me a year to understand the importance of ‘beats’ in planning and getting this tool figured out has taken my writing to a new level. Part science, part creativity, scriptwriting is demystified with an understanding of the importance of structure and how this informs the audience of genre conventions.

*Priceless!* was not intended to be a rom com, largely due to the stigma surrounding the genre. I wanted to write a film about the growing disillusionment with a world driven by consumerist greed. Pippi was initially a school teacher, largely rejecting her wealthy family’s money-centric lifestyle. They had moved from the beach to the city and Pippi dreamed of going back to rekindle old friendships and the idyllic life she remembered as a child. Once I had my characters, I played with moving them around from the city to the beach to provide the motivation for progressing the opposing locations.

The main characters have remained throughout the scripts development but their personalities and relationships have changed dramatically, evolving as other lines were added or removed. New characters have been added as recently as the second draft and my initial reluctance to some feedback has improved the story line beyond my own expectations.

One of the most significant changes has been the character of Paul. I resisted the suggestion that he be a pot smoking loser, for reasons that are now forgotten, but exploring this opened up so many new opportunities that he is now one of my favourite characters to write.

Another important development happened between the beat sheet and first draft in

*Priceless!*; the importance of a clear action line for the protagonist. Once I shifted my focus away from theme and characters onto action, the dramatic possibilities began to emerge. This also allowed my protagonist to drive the story forward and have a purpose in every scene.

The conventions of the genre also influenced the structure of *Priceless!* so once I had overcome my fear of acknowledging I was writing a rom com, my relationship lines strengthened and my character arch's fell into place.

*Priceless!* has several significant relationship lines and these have changed dramatically from first to second draft. Writing so many characters in a first attempt at a feature film was, in retrospect, ambitious.

A rom com has to have a romantic relationship line and earlier attempts not to give this to the protagonist had failed, so *Priceless!* now has two. Mrs Mac's romantic line with an elderly gentleman neighbour was too popular to discard at the expense of developing the line for Pippi, so it remained and evolved.

Possibly the most difficult thing for me to resolve during the development of *Priceless!* was how to avoid a clichéd ending in a genre that's audience is already cynical about happily ever after.

Amy Schumer wrote *Trainwreck* (2015) and managed to succeed on many levels to subvert the gender stereotype of the female protagonist, making her a boozing, philandering, journalist who falls for a straight-laced surgeon but she just couldn't avoid falling into the clichéd-ending trap, which disappointed audiences and critics

alike.

*Actually, the longer Trainwreck extends, I found myself hoping that they wouldn't get together, because he comes across like a nice guy, and she's a monster. Alas, this is Hollywood, and even a movie that reverses gender stereotypes and attempts to push the envelope can't avoid the most basic rom-com clichés in the end.*<sup>5</sup>

***Priceless!*** attempts to provide the audience with a more satisfying ending by giving it to Pippi on her own, discarding the pair of shoes she purchased at the beginning of the film to signify her personal growth. Shoes have also been significant in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and the fairy tale *Cinderella*, later adapted to film in many different versions.

Based on the fact that an audience will still turn up to see a rom com in the hope it will deliver to contemporary expectations of the genre, as proven by the box office success of *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck*, we can conclude the following. The rom com isn't dead, it just needs to adapt to be more representative of the female audience it sets out to attract.

***Priceless!*** is written to address what I see as some of the failings of more recent attempts to subvert the genre conventions of the rom com. Female protagonists that aren't one-dimensional representations, story lines that feel real for women and the unique challenges they face in society around work, relationships and gender identity, and endings that don't proclaim the love of a man is the answer to all life's problems.

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<sup>5</sup> CinemaBlend review by Sean O'Connell,  
<http://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/Trainwreck-66629.html>

I'm sure men don't want this pressure either so perhaps this will open up the genre to a broader audience eventually – I'm allowed to hope!

Currently there is still the issue of the stigma attached to the 'chick flick' and I see films classified as comedies or drama/comedy that clearly have romantic sub-plots. *Muriel's Wedding* is classified as a comedy despite its title and main action line suggesting it's romantic intentions.

Genre is important to understand when writing a screenplay, as it will immediately inform the audience of what they are buying into at the box office. It is unfortunate for the romantic comedy that it has been given such a reputation during the height of its popularity and production in Hollywood during the 90s.

*Priceless!* could also be classified as the safer drama/comedy genre to have more chance of attracting funding but that isn't the purpose of this exercise in arguing for a rethinking of the rom com as opposed to supporting it's demise.

Given the opportunity to develop *Priceless!* further, I imagine some of the newer characters and lines could reach their full potential to advance the rom com genre and be a true representation of Aronson's equation to excite and delight a New Zealand audience.

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