

WHIMSEYSHIRE – A Comedic Drama

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An exegesis submitted to
Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Screenwriting

2015

School of Languages

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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ABSTRACT

Whimseyshire is a contemporary comedic drama about family, the roles family members play, the masks they wear and the secrets that are held long after they should have been shared. Through the use of humour in the face of difficulty, it explores the concepts of how long held secrets have shaped the lives of three generations of women in the same family and their responses when the truth is revealed. Ultimately, the two younger women do come to understand the love they share and the love others have for them does not change when the nature of their relationship changes and this becomes the healing salve to their fresh and very tender wounds. Juxtaposed against this is the inability of other characters who are too entrenched in the lies and the keeping up of appearances to be able to accept that the truth has the ability to create personal freedom.

Whimseyshire Synopsis

Typical adult sisters, Anna and Lucy enjoy a largely amicable connection, slightly skewed by the not inconsiderable age difference of 15 years between them. Normality, however, is abruptly ruptured when Lucy orders a birth certificate and discovers she is not in fact Anna's sister, but her daughter. It's a secret Anna, hating conflict and desiring perfection in everything, would probably have taken to her grave had Lucy not stumbled on it. It also means that Beatrice, the woman Lucy has been led to believe is her mother, is actually her grandmother. Beatrice holds the belief that what you don't know can't hurt you and has, through her fearsome manipulation of her daughter, Anna, created a lie so deeply entrenched that she almost believes it herself. Anna, for her part, has bought into the secrecy

and responded to it by ensuring that everything else in her life is as perfect as she can make it, hoping that this will somehow cover over the truth and provide an environment where she too can justify not revealing the truth. And then there's Lucy – a creative, self-centred, irreverent live wire who tackles life head on and without pretensions of any sort and who is never at a loss for another way to stir things up. Although the story is told from Anna's perspective, with the increase in size of Lucy's role, it has developed into a dual protagonist film.

The story charts the challenges and events that seek to undermine the relationship Anna and Lucy have always shared when Lucy believed them to be sisters. Lucy feels immensely deceived and angry. She is no longer sure of her place in the world and is devastated to learn that it was not just Anna who knew but the very people who love her most who have kept the truth from her for all of her 25 years. Anna, pregnant with a second surprise baby and planning a wedding to fiancé Ben, is desperate to reconnect with Lucy but on such shaky ground they struggle to recapture the lightness and humour of the way they used to be. She eventually realises that masking the truth and avoiding taking responsibility are no longer going to work for her. Ben too is shaken in his belief that he wants to marry Anna on the basis that he too was shut out of this truth. For Ben, truth, trust and integrity are the pillars of his being.

After several failed attempts to reconnect with her daughter and with a wedding and a baby looming, Anna makes a last ditch effort by hosting a baby shower to which she invites all the family who have gathered for the wedding. Here Anna hopes to reunite the family around the impending birth of her baby and for

forgiveness and healing to abound. However, Lucy decides to take this opportunity to share a secret of her own and announces that Anna is adopted. Beatrice, fearing her control over the family is slipping, launches a very public attack on Anna, further rupturing their relationship but allowing Lucy to reach some understanding of the circumstances around her birth and what few choices Anna has been given since having her, 25 years ago. Struggling to deal with this revelation on top of everything else, Anna too acquires some insight into what Lucy has been going through.

Ultimately Lucy and Anna re-establish their relationship, not as mother and daughter, but as people with a new found sense of self and desire to connect with and appreciate those who love them, to understand why they did what they did and to try to preserve the love they know exists between them. Anna experiences an ability to forgive herself for her imperfections and to let go of some of the pretensions and facades she has held onto while Lucy finds a new freedom to love and to ultimately leave both her mothers and explore the world on her own terms. Love, in the end, conquers all. Love for self, love for others and love for the wider group of those around us – those crazy, imperfect, self-oriented, martyring, faithful, deceptive, wildly inappropriate, loving people we call family.

RESEARCH AIMS

My research aims are two-fold. Firstly, I want to explore the genre of comedic drama as it relates to three contemporary films and to the journeys of my central characters, Anna and Lucy, as they grapple with the challenges of discovering the

truth about their biological mothers and the effect this has on each of them. Secondly, I want to explore what it means for people who find themselves in this position, how it affects the relationships around them, what typical responses to finding this out are and how this changes them and the way they feel about who they are and their place in this world and to reflect that in Lucy and Anna's own responses.

Unconventional is the new convention

In a society where, more and more, children are not raised by both of their biological parents but by grandparents, gay parents, solo parents, aunts, friends of the family, cousins and older siblings, this is a very relevant area to be exploring through film as a way of both reflecting and acknowledging the strength and validity of these arrangements. It is my hope that ultimately, *Whimseyshire* will encourage families in crisis that reconciliation is possible given a commitment to truth, time, understanding and a willingness to keep communicating.

I want to tell this story because one doesn't have to look far to see an "unconventional" family, and their voices need to be heard. I would argue that I'd have to look even further to find a conventional one – mum, dad, and their biological children. Certainly no one in my immediate circle of friends fits that description and my own family circumstances, both as a child and now as a parent myself, do not either. The types of families outside of that convention abound around me: I consider my step-mother to be my primary parent although my biological parents raised me for several years and are both still alive. My partner was raised by his grandmother who herself adopted his mother when she was

primary school aged. Three of my best friends raise their children with a man who fathered only some, or even none, of them. I myself live in a home where two families have blended with seven children between us, two of whom come and go week about. Perhaps the reality of our changing family structures is that unconventional is the new convention.

Exegesis Outline

Over the course of this exegesis, I will examine the comedy drama genre within which *Whimseyshire* sits, and compare my screenplay to three contemporary films sharing the same genre, in terms of the expectations film audiences have of a comedic drama, the influence those films have had on my own writing and a discussion on how *Whimseyshire* builds on and contributes to the existing body of work in this genre. To be able to do that effectively, I will also propose a new model of genre hybrids which will aid the discussion around the comedic drama, having found very little published material about this genre. I will outline the classic three-act structure employed for *Whimseyshire* and its key turning points and climaxes, relating these to contemporary theories of screen narrative as outlined by Linda Aronson (2010) and Dov S. S. Simens (2003). I will also discuss how this structure is relevant and appropriate to my film and how it has helped me to achieve my research aim. The journey from concept to actualisation has been a complex one and I will draw upon a well-kept blog of this process to describe the honing and paring and sometimes dramatic changes I had to make in order to find the best and most effective way of telling this story, from the perspective of the best person to tell it.

I will conclude by discussing the emotional truth of *Whimseyshire* – the love that conquers all, and how my story explores the themes of love and loss, grieving and displacement, interpersonal relationships – particularly those between mothers and daughters - and forgiveness. I will identify my target audience and examine the relationship that an audience may form with my characters and the journey upon which those characters may take that audience and how this is relevant to their expectations and to the film’s genre. Finally, I will discuss the possible markets and investors to which I will present my finished screenplay for funding and producing and how *Whimseyshire* might put its best foot forward to attract either or both.

COMEDIC DRAMA – A HYBRID GENRE

The comedic drama genre can be described as a sub-set of the drama genre or as a hybrid of the genres drama and comedy. Typically it is a dramatic work that is light and often humorous or satirical in tone and one that usually contains a happy resolution of the thematic conflict.

It could be said that the birth of the genre mix of comedy and drama was found in the tragi-comedies of the 16th Century. It was during this period that the “battle over the ultimate generic crossbreed: tragicomedy” (Altman, 1999, p. 4) ensued and the hybrid genre was accepted. In the same century, comedy and drama were performed hand in hand in Commedia dell’arte (Italy) where some characters were blatantly established to provide the audience with amusement and to relieve the tension of whatever deep emotive moral the play was exploring.

William Shakespeare employed the comedic drama genre in many of his plays and each of his comedies deals with significant dramatic emotional truths connecting the audience to wider thought about the world in which they live.

In terms of early comedic dramas in film, Charlie Chaplin's work provides us with excellent examples. The comedic pathos of the clown juxtaposed with the very real hardships of living provided audiences with their first experience of laughing through tears at the cinema. Chaplin's first film, *The Kid* (1921), tells the story of The Little Tramp (Chaplin) unwillingly taking in an abandoned baby and quickly softening up to the boy. After a few years, they make their living together as a team but one day, the child falls ill and social services try to take him away. Hardly the stuff of comedy, and yet Chaplin's unique character delivers belly laughs whilst dealing with very tragic events. (Roy Exports SAS, n.d.)

Categorising Genre

Thomas Schatz hypothesises that genres fall into two broad categories, revolving around "order" or "integration" (Schatz, 1981, p. 35). He describes "order" genres such as the western, detective and gangster films, as being male dominant, set in a contested space, the conflict involved being externalised and violent, resulting in a resolution involving death, leading to redemption and a restoration of the macho code with overriding themes of isolated self reliance and utopia-as-promise. Conversely, he describes "integration" genres such as the musical, comedy and family melodramas as being female dominant, set in a civilized space which is ideologically stable, for the conflict to be internalised and emotion based, the

resolution to be the embracing of love and the overriding themes being domestication, integration, maternal-familial codes, community cooperation and utopia-as-reality.

In his book, *Film/Genres* (1999), Rick Altman examines the mixing of genres, posing the question in relation to Ridley Scott's 1991 film, *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991), "Is it a chick-flick, a buddy film, a road movie, or something else?" (Altman, 1999, p. 94). He goes on to discuss how films might be described as X meets Y. For example, he describes the film, *The Player* (Altman, 1992), as being "Out of Africa (Pollack, 1985) meets *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990)" (Altman, 1999, p. 130).

Both Schatz (1981) and Altman's (1999) approaches illustrate the complexity of mixing genres and the shifting of audience perceptions. Surprisingly, not a great deal has been written specifically about the comedic drama genre, which begs the question, why? Is it that people are comfortable enough with the notion that a film is too funny to be described as a drama and too serious to be described as a comedy? I would suggest that each film identifying as being a hybrid of the comedy and drama genre sits somewhere on a continuum, which in its simplified form looks like this:



However, to truly be able to classify the signifiers of the comedic drama, we need to acknowledge the various types of comedy from farce to black and the various



The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) prefers to describe genres without using an adjective/noun composition but by using only nouns. It describes the genre of *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012) as “comedy | drama” and *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989) in exactly the same fashion. I will use the term “comedy | drama” as a catch-all for both comedic dramas and dramatic comedies but will also make the distinction to better compare *Whimseyshire* with other contemporary films falling along the same continuum and examine what has positioned them there.

Contemporary Comedy | Dramas

Comedy | dramas have always sought to examine tough issues with a light hand, delivering their punches with velvet gloves. There are three contemporary comedy | dramas I have used throughout this writing process to bring me back or direct me to the tone and style I want my screenplay to reflect or avoid. These are *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989), *Juno* (Reitman, 2007) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russel, 2012). Each of these films examine, with varying degrees of comedy and drama, issues also explored in *Whimseyshire* and can, therefore, be considered the standard to which I hold up my own story and the writing of it. It is also these films that I feel have been original and challenged the form itself.

In 1989, *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989) was released, and became perhaps the embodiment of this genre in the 1980s. The film deals with some fairly weighty

issues – child development problems, teenage angst, gambling and alcohol addictions, controlling parenting, professional disappointments, sexual issues, and emotional remoteness. Whilst it is unrealistic for one family to experience all of these issues over the course of just a few months as the family in *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989) does, it does beg the question of just how comedic can a drama be whilst maintaining its integrity as an issue filled and issue based film. Ultimately, the emotional truth that holds the film together comes from Grandma right before she gets into the wrong car to wait for her family to join her:

Grandma: *You know, when I was nineteen, Grandpa took me on a roller coaster.*

Gil: *Oh?*

Grandma: *Up, down, up, down. Oh, what a ride!*

Gil: *What a great story.*

Grandma: *I always wanted to go again. You know, it was just so interesting to me that a ride could make me so frightened, so scared, so sick, so excited, and so thrilled all together! Some didn't like it. They went on the merry-go-round. That just goes around. Nothing. I like the roller coaster. You get more out of it.*

Parenthood (Howard, 1989), I believe, embodies the balance of drama and comedy without losing one to the other. The casting of Steve Martin in the lead role of Gil was always going to provide the comic relief needed to break up what could otherwise be a depressing portrait of family life. This film does sit a good deal along the continuum away from drama and towards comedy. The comedy is light; sometimes ironic, sometimes slapstick. Sometimes it asks of the audience to forgive the folly in order to perceive the message. I recognise that *Whimseyshire* has the potential to sit in a similar place on my continuum to *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989), but I largely resist this type of humour in my writing as I find it distracts from fully engaging in a film's truth as it requires too much suspension of disbelief. *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989) is a film I will watch perhaps another

couple of times in my life – not because of the humour nor because of its exploration of a number of issues, but rather because it accurately reflects the chaos of families and succeeds in its message of “hang in there – this too will pass!” As each of the adult members of the family in *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989) battles either with their children’s issues or their own, one is never left in any doubt that they all love each other and that, given the time and the right counselling, their family can be made whole again. It’s that part of the message *Whimseyshire* connects to and embodies as well.

In 2007, a film called *Juno* (Reitman, 2007) by little known writer, Diablo Cody was released into cinemas and created an immediate stir with its challenging premise which seemed to polarise its viewers. The casting of Ellen Page was an interesting choice and meant that the audience was treated to something they rarely get to see – an intelligent portrayal of a teenager coming of age through finding herself pregnant and independently realising she is unable to provide for the baby, rejecting abortion as an option, and finding a suitable family to adopt her unborn child into. When her baby’s potential adopting parents break up, Juno must again call on her best instincts and 16 year old wisdom and she decides to let go of the fantasy of the perfect home for her baby and adopt it to the mother, regardless. There are similar themes here to *Whimseyshire* – the notion that a baby’s future must be protected, that there are people able to love a child to which they have no blood relation as their own and that sometimes sacrifices need to be made. Anna was 15 when she reluctantly gave up her role as mother to Lucy and handed her over to Beatrice. Beatrice convinced her that was her only choice. In reality, however, Anna could have stayed in school, stayed in the country, put her

own dreams and aspirations on hold and raised Lucy herself. Like Juno, Anna had to make the difficult decision to allow someone else to play that role. Whilst Juno came to this conclusion on her own, Anna had the decision thrust upon her, which then set in motion the secrecy and damage this was to later cause when the truth is revealed to Lucy.

In 2012, *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012) was released. Whilst still dealing with the weighty issues of contemporary life, *Silver Linings Playbook* is my standout example of the three of a successful blend of comedy and drama.

Warshow (1962) writes:

For a type to be successful its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the vehicle of a particular set of attitudes and a particular aesthetic effect. One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations, and originality is to be welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it. (Warshow, 1962, p. 129-30)

I believe this film did indeed provide us with an original extension or expansion of the comedic drama genre and became the embodiment of what this genre can look like in contemporary film culture. The flawed characters – Pat suffering from bi-polar disorder, Tiffany with a past steeped in inappropriate sexual encounters, both using expletives liberally – are real and accessible and even likable. It demonstrates a willingness on the part of today’s audience to engage with the flaws of their heroes and root for them to overcome whatever it is that’s standing in the way of their success and to allow humour to play a significant role in that engagement. Pat refuses the medication he’s been prescribed until he realises the extent of the hurt he is inflicting on others by choosing to do this. Tiffany is baffled by Pat’s belief that she’s more “screwed up” than him, but

doggedly pursues her dream of dancing in a competition way out of her league and takes Pat along with her. The audience wants them to succeed. Many of that same audience would probably move away from these characters on a bus or in a restaurant, but on the big screen a different set of social rules play out.

In relation to *Whimseyshire*, I'm looking to *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012) and to *Juno* (Reitman, 2007) as my key influences. In terms of audience, *Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012) is more reflective of where I feel my film lies, as *Juno* (Reitman, 2007) certainly appeals to a teenage market and *Whimseyshire* does not. *Juno* (Reitman, 2007) does, however, embody the balance of comedy and drama I hope to achieve and the features of the style in which it is written are also very appealing to me – short, sharp sentences which employ irony, sarcasm and wit.

In relation to characters, I am wary of creating pastel shaded people who are “nice” as my experience of these characters is that they are also boring and predictable. The audience doesn't care about them enough. Pat and Tiffany, and even Juno herself, cannot be described as “nice” people. The comedy comes about through their flaws and their struggles, and the flaws and struggles of their supporting characters. There is a lot to like about a pregnant teenager giving birth screaming “Ow fuckity ow!” or an adult bi-polar son waking his elderly parents in the middle of the night to energetically and emphatically expound upon the unfairness of the demise of a character in a novel!

It is the examination of these three protagonists – Pat, Tiffany and Juno – in the context of the comedic drama genre, which have influenced me to make my own characters more extreme. I have stretched out the character of Beatrice to be more unpleasant, less understanding, more dominating and unlikeable, providing a plausible argument for Anna to have relinquished her parenting rights to her dominating mother, Beatrice. In addition, Anna, whilst dealing with an onslaught of pressures and dilemmas, and as part of her character arc, goes from being completely caught up in the importance of keeping everything looking perfect on the outside to having to come to terms with the fact that no amount of cleaning and cover up can hide the fact that life is messy and challenging and full of trials. This is also reflected in her chosen vocation of plastic surgeon as well as her obsession with living in a false sense of security – hence the title, *Whimseyshire*. Lucy’s character too has undergone a significant shift from being quirky and likeable to being more childish, more self-obsessed, and a little irritating in her insistence on making everything about her. This needed to happen in order for her to be able to have her own arc in which she does some growing up and stretches her to look at her world and the people in it with a new appreciation.

THE THREE ACT STRUCTURE

Although the classical three act structure is by no means the only one that works for the big screen, for the purposes of this process and because it is, according to Linda Aronson (2010) in her book, “*The 21st Century Screenplay*”, “the most *prevalent* model, the most *streamlined* model, the most *basic* model and, crucially, the *safest* model” (Aronson, 2010, p. 47) it is the one I have employed

for *Whimseyshire*. I believe one needs to know how the prevalent and accepted works in order to then go confidently breaking with tradition. Aronson (2010) also states that the kind of film which responds best to the classic three act structure is “chronological, has a long central development section and involves only one protagonist and one point of view. It covers a brief time span, gets off to a very quick start and always builds directly and suspensefully (*sic*) to a final climax.” (Aronson, 2010, p. 68). Whilst the intensity of the relationship between Anna and Lucy steers the film dangerously towards a dual protagonist story, I’m confident that Anna should and does remain the central figure and it is largely her perspective the audience is privy to.

Act One (set up):

In which normality for the protagonist and antagonist is established. This is soon followed by what Aronson terms a “disturbance”, more commonly known as the “inciting incident”. Aronson (2010) describes this as “something unusual happening in the normality” (Aronson, 2010, p. 68). She also describes normality as “your protagonist on the cusp of change” and states “the story cannot start until the disturbance happens” (Aronson, 2010, p. 69). The third and final part of Act One is the first – act turning point. Aronson (2010) describes this as “the surprise that turns into the obstacle” and states that “It’s very useful if the first-act turning point is as big a shock as possible...because the bigger the shock the more energy you are injecting into the film, hence the more fuel you have to drive the story for its one hundred minutes” (Aronson, 2010, p. 99). Dov S-S Simens (2003)

describes the first act in “*From Reel to Deal*” as the turning point somewhat less eloquently as one of the “Oh-Shit” moments (Simens, 2003, p. 75).

In *Whimseyshire*, normality is established largely through the extended opening scenes of Anna and Ben’s home during their engagement party as the tone of the relationship between Anna, the protagonist, and Lucy, the antagonist, is established firmly, providing the contrast needed once the first-act turning point happens. The inciting incident, then, is Aunty Maxine’s drunken reference to there being a family secret involving mothers and daughters, which immediately piques Lucy’s interest and sets her on a path to discover what this secret might be, despite Anna’s pleading she not do this. It is the first-act turning point at which Lucy reveals she has discovered the true nature of the relationship between herself and Anna – the biggest shock possible for them both and Simen’s “Oh-Shit” moment– which “sets up what the story is ‘about’” (Aronsen, 2010, p. 105)

Act Two (development):

The second act is about development, described by Aronson (2010) as being “all about complications and things getting worse” (Aronson, 2010, p. 104). Typically the second act runs for around an hour, so it’s vitally important that the protagonist’s story is kept powerfully interesting, leading up to the second act mid point and then from the mid point to the crucial second act turning point which Aronson (2010) describes as “the protagonist’s closest moment to death and/or despair, followed by a decision to act” (Aronson, 2010, p. 54).

Throughout the second act of *Whimseyshire*, Anna strives to deal with obstructions thrown in her way that are “real but unusual” (Aronson, 2010, p. 107). Largely these are to reconcile with her daughter, whilst also dealing with the increasing pressures of a break down in her relationship with her fiancé, a late in life and unexpected pregnancy, bringing her wedding forward so it happens before the birth of her baby, and the reactions and actions her wider family have to the 25 year deception. Throughout the second act, Anna also has to deal with the increasing likelihood that Lucy will not attend her wedding. At the second act turning point – the “baby shower” it appears that the chasm between Anna and Lucy is irreparable, despite their best efforts, and all hope of reconciliation seems lost. In this scene we see Anna hit rock bottom in which both the action line – her desire to show Lucy the truth of how the events 25 years ago transpired - and the relationship line – her desire to reconnect with her daughter - of the story come crashing down together. The second act turning point typically results in the protagonist’s decision to fight back.

Act Three (resolution):

“The third act is triggered by the...second act turning point” (Aronson, 2010, p. 113) and the first part of this act is the climax. Aronson (2010) describes this as being “the story’s major dilemma resolved in one make-or-break moment... always seen on screen as one physical moment, one crucial, win-or-lose scene... providing ‘the point’ of the film” (Aronson, 2010, p. 113). The climax should also “answer the question raised by the first act turning point” (Aronson, 2010, p. 114). Following on from the climax is the resolution and the ending in which we

“need to demonstrate the new normality... as economically as possible” (Aronson, 2010, p. 114), fulfilling the question the inciting incident posed whilst also bringing the protagonist’s journey to a satisfactory end.

In the third act of *Whimseyshire*, the climax is achieved by the realisation on the parts of both Anna and Lucy of the full extent of the control and manipulation Beatrice has exercised over them for the entirety of both their lives, coupled with a new appreciation for each other’s fears, decisions and actions. It is this newfound empathy on both their parts that ultimately moves them into resolution as we see that their united perspective does indeed lead them to a restoration of their relationship. Lucy attends both the Anna’s and Ben’s wedding and the birth of their baby and, in her first act as Lucy’s mother, Anna facilitates Lucy leaving home to pursue her dreams overseas.

ACHIEVING MY RESEARCH AIMS

As part of my research I discovered the term Late Discovery Adoptees (LDA) and an overview of the typical responses an LDA will have to their discovery:

The term ‘late discovery adoptees’ refers to those who learn they are adopted once they are adults. The impact of the discovery later in life depends on individual circumstances, but research has suggested that it is common to experience some degree of initial shock. Long-term impacts can vary and may include feelings of anger and betrayal directed at adoptive parents, depression, and issues with trust in other close relationships. This section provides information to help late-discovery adopted people begin to understand and process their experiences and find sources of potential support. (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.)

This was immensely helpful as it provided me with a clear relationship line for Lucy, which was both believable and real. Although Lucy was never formally adopted, I have tried to have her character arc follow roughly the same process of grief - initial shock, followed by anger, betrayal, depression and trust issues within the family. It's quite a journey for her to undertake and one that requires a great deal of support and love, ironically from the very people who have just hurt her.

The Internet is bursting with Facebook pages, blogs, forums and websites like this one: <http://secretsonsanddaughters.org/2014/02/02/like-late-discovery-adoptee/> where people discuss their experiences of finding out about their adoption or that the person they thought was their sister was actually their mother. By and large, their experiences follow a similar grieving process as described above. Although not strictly adopted at birth, Lucy was raised in the deception that her grandmother was her mother. The outworkings of such a discovery are, I imagine, similar, in terms of the stages of grief late discovery adopted people go through.

I also discovered, and it is referenced in *Whimseyshire*, that both Jack Nicholson and Eric Clapton were raised believing their sisters were actually their mothers. Nicholson's and Clapton's responses are in stark contrast to one another which may be due to the fact that Nicholson discovered this when he was an adult and after both his mother and his sister had died, whilst Clapton discovered it at age 9:

Nicholson discovered that his "parents" were actually his grandparents and his "sister" was his mother only in 1974, after a journalist for *TIME* magazine who was doing a feature on Nicholson informed him of the fact.^[7] By this time, both his mother and grandmother had died (in 1963 and 1970, respectively)... (Wikipedia, 2015)

I'd say it was a pretty dramatic event, but it wasn't what I'd call traumatizing," Nicholson said about discovering his family's secret. "After all, by the time I found out who my mother was, I was pretty well psychologically formed. As a matter of fact, it made quite a few things clearer to me. If anything, I felt grateful. (Bio, 2015)

Nicholson is also on record as saying:

Show me any women today who could keep a secret, confidence, or an intimacy to that degree, you got my kind of gal. (Hiskey, n.d.)

Eric Clapton's (n.d.) response was quite different, and much more typical of the responses I have come across:

It was extraordinarily difficult for an unmarried 16-year-old to raise a child on her own in the mid-1940s. Pat's parents, Rose and Jack Clapp, stepped in as surrogate parents and raised Eric as their own. Thus, he grew up believing his mother was his sister. His grandparents never legally adopted him, but remained his legal guardians until 1963...At the age of nine, he learned the truth about his parentage...This singular event affected him deeply and was a defining moment in his life. He became moody and distant and stopped applying himself at school. Emotionally scarred by this event, Eric failed the all-important 11 Plus Exams. (Clapton, n.d.)

WRITING IS REWRITING

Initially, the story I wanted to write at the start of the year was about a 25 year old woman, Lucy, who meets and falls in love with a man in Venice, only to discover that he is the son of her own mother's first husband. Whilst no blood relationship to each other, the divorce between their parents was a very messy one and there isn't a family member on either side who would condone their relationship. Lucy and Vincenzo were then to come back to New Zealand to announce their engagement and discover that Lucy's sister, Anna, is actually her mother, making Vincenzo her half uncle and marriage to him illegal. That film was a romantic comedy and I began to study the signifiers of what makes a good film of this genre as well as discovering that marriage between a half uncle and niece, while

illegal in New Zealand, was actually permissible in Australia. I discovered that the rules of the romantic comedy are fairly rigid and require the loving couple to be on screen for around eighty per cent of the film and for a wedding to take place at its conclusion. The more I fleshed out my story, the more the relationship between Lucy and Anna began to be more interesting than and overshadow the relationship between Lucy and her fiancée/uncle, ultimately resulting in Vincenzo's removal into the background of the story.

With Vincenzo mostly dispensed with, the story became about a mother and a daughter who each discover an earth-shattering truth about their parenthood, including the fact that the woman they both believed to be their biological mother was in fact not this to either of them. This film was no longer a romantic comedy, but a comedic drama. My research into genre shifted as a result of this. However, with Anna discovering at 40 that she was adopted as a baby and now falling pregnant with her fiancé's child with a wedding looming and a daughter who has just discovered she's a daughter and not a sister, the focus of the story shifted away from Lucy to Anna. This was a major rewrite of the synopsis and as more and more challenges were heaped onto Anna, she firmly established herself as the protagonist of the story, by virtue of the fact that she had the most to lose and that the audience sympathy was with her more than it was with Lucy. The genre at this point began to verge on farce and take on aspects of British stage plays such as "Noises Off" and "The Importance of Being Earnest". It wasn't a direction I was happy to take my screenplay in, but by this stage it appeared to have a life of its own as its plot twists became more and more unlikely and required more and more suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience.

It was at this point that I moved my story from its twenty page, highly detailed treatment form to first draft screenplay and subsequently its reading out loud with the rest of the class. I was very pleased with the result. The dialogue flowed and there was lots of laughter. Everyone had very positive things to say and I began to feel that the work I had done would mean it only needed a quick polish and it would be ready to take to a couple of producers I know. It was, however, also at this point that it was suggested to me that the ‘gold’, the true essence of the story, was the very part of the story that was missing - that it fell into a gigantic crevice I had created between Lucy discovering that she was Anna’s daughter at the end of Act Three and the following passing of time and jump to the wedding. The story that was of most interest was not even there.

Through the group processes of the “Pods”, I reluctantly let go of Anna’s own adoption as the story which was attracting the most interest was centred only around the relationship between Anna and Lucy and how they were going to reconstruct their relationship in the face of such conflict and seemingly irreconcilable events. I shifted Lucy’s discovery of her actual relationship to Anna to being the first act turning point and the whole of act two to being Anna’s and Lucy’s futile attempts to connect in a new way but with at least some of the ease and love they had felt when Lucy thought they were sisters. It felt like I had come full circle and was now writing a romantic comedy again, substituting the unlucky Vincenzo with Anna.

Moving into second draft was a painful experience. After presenting two new “beat sheets” outlining the new structure and key scenes, I launched into ejecting

most of my first draft to make way for Lucy and Anna's struggles. During this process the key skill is to be able to identify which subplots exist solely for their own sake and which build in to the central ideas. Some reassurance that my writing style is intrinsically humorous, allowed me to jettison some of the now redundant scenes that were originally included as some light relief after some heavy emotional scenes.

Moving into third draft saw the return of Lucy's discovery of Anna's adoption as it felt like this would bind the mother and daughter with a common experience and serve to be the catalyst for their relationship to grow.

THE EMOTIONAL TRUTH OF WHIMSEYSHIRE

I chose the title Whimseyshire because it speaks to me of a fantastical place where rainbows and unicorns abound. A place where reality can be shut out and one can indulge in the notion, as Anna does, that everything is just fine. It is also the name of an exclusive and elusive gaming level in the popular online game "Diablo 3" where fanciful creatures have replaced all the usual demons, albeit with the same strength and penchant for death and destruction as their evil counterparts. In Whimseyshire, everything is as you wish it to be, despite what it actually is. Anna has created a bubble in which she lives and works hard to maintain the illusion that her life is perfect.

Anna is defined by her perfectionism. Not strictly OCD, but certainly demonstrating some tendencies, her whole adult life has revolved around perfection and cover up. Immaculately made up and dressed, with a Home and Garden house to match, she's also a plastic surgeon by day. Not the kind who performs reconstructive surgery, but the kind who tweaks the crows feet on a mid thirties housewife, lifts the worry lines on overweight businessmen's foreheads, bolsters up the collagen in the lips of vain actresses. It's all about keeping up appearances. So is her home life. She has worked hard to disguise the fact that she gave birth at 15 and she is supported in this by the adults around her, Beatrice and Aunty Maxine. Everyone has bought into the sham, hiding the truth from Lucy over the many years. To her friends she is the shining example of success. The handsome, adoring husband to be (following the picture perfect wedding) is the icing on the cake. While she may be unattainable, Anna's façade, when it breaks, does so spectacularly. The audience will see her reinvent herself as a morning-sick woman too tired to fold the washing, too wrung out to keep the dishes done and too barraged by the truth to be able to cope gracefully. Something has to give, and as she embraces her pregnancy and future as a mother, she undergoes her own kind of surgery, becoming someone more likeable, more relaxed and more human. Her inside world aligns itself with how she projects to the outside world in a way that supports integrity and truth.

SELLING AND MARKETS

And so to this film's audience. I believe *Whimseyshire* will resonate with a wide demographic ranging in age from 25 to 80, with a skew towards a female

audience. Certainly it will speak to the modern family and its many variations and I think its emotional truth around love conquering all is something we all want and maybe need to hear and see to remind us that on our deathbeds we, largely, don't wish we'd spent more time at work, but in the presence of those we loved and who loved us. *Whimseyshire* throws a light into that room and does so through its use of humour in trying circumstances, significant character arcs and relatable ideas around what is family and the roles we play within this closest of relationship structures.

In terms of marketing, my first step will be to approach two producers I know who have expressed interest in my work before through the NZ Writers Guild, of which I am a member. To qualify for NZ Film Commission funding, an NZFC approved producer needs to be attached to a film already, so once I have secured the interest of either of these producers, the next step will be to put together a proposal to Dave Gibson, head of the NZFC for the funding of further drafts and refining of the screenplay and then for pre-production funding.

I will also be exploring the co-production agreement New Zealand has with Italy and look at possibly adding some scenes set in Italy to cement co-production funding. In terms of the NZFC, the funding I would be applying for would be the Advanced Development Fund: <http://www.nzfilm.co.nz/funding/feature-films/advanced-development>, which provides for screenplays near completion being funded to completion and market readiness. The recent appointment of Dave Gibson to the top job at the NZ Film Commission has brought with it some significant changes in terms of funding and several of these changes will directly

affect screenplays such as *Whimseyshire*. The first is that minimal funding will not be allocated to screenplays that demonstrate more potential than there are funds to give it. Measures will be taken to secure additional funding before these films are made. The second is that when a great screenplay becomes available, many of the rules around funding rounds and qualification of films will be set aside so that an outstanding project might be seen through to completion. Thirdly, feature film funding applications will now need to be accompanied by a trailer for the film, a short film version of the film or a shot scene from the film itself.

Whimseyshire is not an indie film. I hope that, if made, it would be submitted to several mainstream film festivals as well as having a theatrical release in New Zealand. Taika Waititi and Jermaine Clement with their film “*What We Do in the Shadows*” (Clement & Waititi, 2014) took the approach that anything which has enjoyed success outside of New Zealand first, is far more likely to be successful here. With that in mind, they secured overseas money to make their film and released it in the US long before it was released here. As at July 2014, it currently sits in the number one slot in the NZ charts. Sad that New Zealanders need to have the affirmation of an international film community to give them the confidence in a local film, but hopefully with David Gibson now at the helm of the New Zealand Film Commission, some of these attitudes will change.

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