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FILM

Director milks his culture's humor

By LOUIS B. PARKS
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Director Harry Sinclair is the first to admit his romantic New Zealand fairy tale, *The Price of Milk*, is not for everybody.

"I've made this movie that some people love and others just don't get," Sinclair says, looking rather pleased with himself.

The Price of Milk, which opens Friday, is a comedy about two young sweethearts, Lucinda (Danielle Cormack) and Rob (Karl Urban). They live together on a lushly beautiful dairy farm. They're engaged.

Everything seems to be going great — until Lucinda tries to improve on perfection.

"I was interested in the idea that if everything seemed to be perfect, then maybe through anxiety or worry you'd start to ruin things," says Sinclair, who also wrote the screenplay. "Because I have a tendency to do that myself.

"I thought it would be interesting to tell a fairy story, but start with the happily-ever-after. So it's about how Lucinda tests her and Rob's love and, as a result, destroys the relationship and spends the rest of the film winning him back."

What's unusual about *The Price of Milk* is not the story but that it doesn't conform to the usual logic of life or the movies. Even Sinclair has trouble explaining just what type of movie it is.

"Uhhhh," he says, and after a long pause, "Hmmm.

"Well, it's this sort of magical and dreamy kind of film that defies normal, logical explanations for why things happen — which I feel represents a side of life that really exists for me. Things aren't always that cut-and-dried, and you often feel a sense of mystery you don't get at the movies. I was trying to capture that magical quality."

Once you accept that not everything in the movie is going to make perfect sense, then everything begins to, well, make sense.

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This is Sinclair's second film as a director, but it is the first to be released in the United States. Like other New Zealanders he was raised mainly on British and American television. But much of the humor of *The Price of Milk*, he believes, comes from his own culture.

"The New Zealand sense of humor is understated," Sinclair says. "Like (the scene where) the two cars turn upside-down and the guy gets out and says, 'It's a tricky corner, that one.' That feels like New Zealand to me.

"I think the movie has more a European sensibility than American, but so far it's the States that have been most enthusiastic." (The movie has also been sold for distribution in Japan, Germany and Switzerland, but the United States is the first foreign market to open it.)

To his surprise, however, Sinclair has found that American audiences from New Jersey to Texas have responded to the film pretty much like folks back home.

"I don't feel that, culturally, New Zealand is that far from Texas, you know?" he says. "It feels like we're on the same wavelength."

One of the whimsical touches in *The Price of Milk* involves a "gang" of Maoris – the indigenous people of New Zealand – which turns out to be a golf club known as the Jacksons. Both the gang and its name represent Sinclair's sense of humor.

"We have the stereotype in New Zealand of the scary Maori gang. I liked the idea that there was this gang but they were a friendly bunch of golf players. That actually is the local Maori golf club (playing the part) in the film ... with their own clubs. ...

"I called them the Jacksons because of my friend Peter Jackson (currently directing *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in New Zealand). In his film *The Frighteners* (a 1996 horror comedy starring Michael J. Fox), he had a character called Harry Sinclair – a dead guy – so I thought I'd return the favor."

Sinclair says six or seven films are made each year in New Zealand. Production is aided by the government, which, he says, hopes the movies will help establish New Zealand culture as different from the rest of the world.

That doesn't seem like a lot filmmaking activity until you consider that there are also several New Zealand TV series, and the population is only about 3.8 million. Viewed that way, New Zealand has a lively industry that keeps actors busy.

In fact, if the cast of *The Price of Milk* looks vaguely familiar it's probably because most of the actors have guest-starred several times each on the New Zealand-produced *Xena: Warrior Princess* or *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*.

If *The Price of Milk* leaves a few viewers scratching their heads, Sinclair doesn't mind. He figures too many movies look just like the last one.

"Everybody's trying to please everybody," the New Zealander says. "I like the idea of taking a risk and hoping to really entertain some people who like this kind of film, understanding that some people would miss out. I'm happy about that because that's an exciting way to make movies.

"What is really pleasing is that enough people like it to make it worthwhile."

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