

STARLIGHT HOTEL - SYNOPSIS

It is 1930. The Great Depression has spread far afield from its Wall Street beginnings to wreck havoc on rural New Zealand.

The land is rich but the money has gone. Farmers who can afford it are living off their savings but others have already been forced off the land and they, and their workers, have become itinerants - searching for work of any kind.

In the central South Island, against this bleak backdrop, Dave Marshall has been forced to leave his home and young daughter Kate (Greer Robson) to find work in one of the large North Island cities.

Kate's mother is dead and she must live with her aunt and uncle, attending a school she can't stand, until her father is ready to take care of her again.

As things become worse, Kate decides to take matters into her own hands. She runs away to join her father up north.

But despite Kate's strong will and self reliance, the road isn't the safest place for a young runaway. There are too many questions and too many people ready to rip you off.

So when Kate meets Patrick (Peter Phelps), who saves her from a potentially nasty fate after she is caught stealing fruit from an orchard, she becomes his wise-cracking, ever-present shadow. As far as she's concerned it's a partnership.

But Patrick sees it differently. He, too, is on the run but this time it's from the law and he doesn't need some smart Alec kid weighing him down.

Until, that is, someone mistakes them for brother and sister and Patrick realises that there maybe is an advantage in a team-up after all. He figures he can use Kate as a temporary cover, throw the police off his trail, and make good his escape.

But gradually a bond of friendship develops between the unlikely pair and they stay on the road together. With the help of sympathetic people along the way, a dramatic series of narrow escapes keeps them one step ahead of the law until, it would appear, their luck runs out ...

STARLIGHT HOTEL - CAST

Kate	Greer Robson
Patrick	Peter Phelps
Detective Wallace	Marshall Napier
Spooner	The Wizard
Aunt	Alice Fraser
Uncle	Patrick Smyth
Dave Marshall	Bruce Phillips
Principal	Elrich Hooper
Mr Curtis	John Watson
Skip	Mervyn Glue
Mrs Skip	Shirley Kelly
John Repo-man	Bill Walker
Jack Repo-man	John Waite
Helen	Donogh Rees
Maxwell	Timothy Lee
Des	Peter Dennet
Melissa	Teresa Bonney
Railway Clerk	Duncan Anderson
Railway Worker	Russell Gibson
Constable Bonnet	Ken Cook
Constable Murphy	Gary McCormick
Constable Willis	Lex Matheson
Farmer	Norm Forsey
Farmhand	Craig Stewart
Farmer's Son	Craig Halkett

Mr Jamieson	Geoffrey Wearing
Flora Peters	Sherril Cooper
Chairwoman	Louise Petherbridge
Guard	David Telford
Station Master	Patrick Pointer
Tea Lady	Glennis Woods

STARLIGHT HOTEL - PRODUCTION CREW

Producer	Larry Parr
Producer	Finola Dwyer
Director	Sam Pillsbury
Writer	Grant Hinden Miller
Director of Photography	Warrick Attewell
Editor	Mike Horton
1st Assistant Director	Chris Graves
Production Designer	Mike Becroft
Costume Designer	Barbara Darragh
Production Manager	Hammond Peek
Production Accountant	Keith McKenzie
Production Secretary	Margaret Meyer
Location Manager	Kate White
Unit Manager	Podge Preston
2nd Assistant Director	Victoria Hardy
Continuity	Sally Tagg
Focus Puller	James Cowley
Clapper Loader	Cameron McLean
Sound Recordist	Mike Westgate
Boom Operator	Stephen Buckland
Stills Photographer	Derek Henderson
Art Director	Roger Guise
Standby Props	Fiona Gunter
Construction Manager	Nigel Tweed
Make Up	Viv Mepham

Gaffer	Steve Latty
Best Boy	Ian Beale
Key Grip	Andy Reid
2nd Grip	Terry Williams
Editing Assistant	Chris Todd
Chaperone	Alison Routledge
Lighting Trainee	Alistair Broughton
Runner	Michael Hill
Art Dept Trainee	Wendy Preston

END

PRODUCTION STORY: "STARLIGHT HOTEL"

" 'Starlight Hotel' is one of those dream projects," says producer Larry Parr. "We've hardly had a hiccup the whole way through - it's just progressing smoothly from stage one to finished product."

From the moment writer Grant Hindin Miller handed over the screenplay of his best-selling novel, "The Dream Monger" to Mirage Films early last year, the result was never in much doubt.

"It's a delightful story," Parr continues. "It's beautifully written and it has definite commercial potential. On the strength of the script and our team's track record, we were able to raise the entire budget within New Zealand at what was a very difficult time for film investment here."

The combination of road movie and relationship drama is too good to miss, says Parr and fellow producer Finola Dwyer, especially when set in 1930's period New Zealand.

The story will have a nostalgic and familiar ring to American audiences, but retains an essential New Zealand quality that will intrigue audiences the world over. "And," says Dwyer, "the adventure and suspense are universal elements in any story."

Dwyer began working on the package early last year and quickly rounded up Film Commission support for the project. While the script was going through a series of fine-tuned drafts, the search for locations began in earnest.

The film is set in the southern half of New Zealand's South Island. But, with the production company firmly based in the north of the North Island, it was initially decided to shoot all the interiors and much of the outside action near Mirage's Auckland base - leaving the vistas for a second unit team down south.

However, as more of the production team began looking at the southern locations, the clearer it became that the whole film needed to be shot in the South Island.

Says Dwyer: "Once we got down here, the choice was simple. While it was more expensive to crew the film so far away from everything, the result shows in shots that you couldn't duplicate anywhere else in the world."

"Any extra money we've spent will show directly on-screen. But, because we've been filming in places not used to movie crews, we've actually saved money. Prices haven't inflated like they have in other parts of New Zealand."

When director Sam Pillsbury was offered the job, he did a justifiable double-take. Hindin Miller had approached him privately the previous year, asking if he liked the script and would be interested in taking charge of the film.]

"I was sorely tempted," says Pillsbury. "The idea appealed, but I had so much else on at the time that I just couldn't see myself being able to fit it in."

The second time, though, he didn't hesitate and Hindin Miller's project had come full circle.

"I had everybody I could have wanted working on it," he says. "It was a great first-time experience for me to be surrounded by people who were each top professionals in their field."

Despite all the care and attention on production detail, the most crucial element in the film according to Pillsbury, was always going to be the cast - particularly the two main actors.

"We needed to find two terrific people," he says. "Filming is always about creating the perfect environment for your shoot - but casting is one thing that you can't create."

"Everything else was coming together well. We knew that if we could get the two leads cast in good time, we'd have the chance to make a great movie."

But the casting wasn't all plain sailing. Greer Robson, probably the best-known young actress in Australasia, virtually cast herself - although Pillsbury dutifully auditioned a barrage of other teenage hopefuls "just in case."

"But there wasn't much point," he admits. "They don't come any better than Greer."

However, finding an actor to play Patrick was a different story. The role was originally written for a man in his late-30's, and the relationship between the vagabond pair was to have been like father and daughter.

"But, we tried just about every New Zealand actor between 25 and 45," says Dwyer, "and we still couldn't come up with the right combination. It's a difficult role - these two actors have to carry the film and hold people's attention for 90 minutes. They have to spark off each other and they have to have that inner spark that comes across on screen."

"Greer has it but, for a long time, we couldn't find someone with that quality to play opposite her."

The search finally took them to Australia and a similar response. That was, until 27-year-old Peter Phelps walked into audition.

"And there it was," says Pillsbury. "You wait for it and wait for it and finally it hits you. Both Finola and I knew he was younger than our character, but we both knew he was perfect the minute we saw him walk in."

Phelps had just finished the lead role in the new Australian epic, "The Lighthorsemen" (now nearing completion) and is being talked about as a major new Australian star.

"And he and Greer are just marvellous together," says Pillsbury. "As a director, you usually spend a lot of time with actors trying to make them not look so bad. But these two just look so good - they both have a strong natural sense of technique and they know their characters. What's more, the camera loves them."

Competing for attention with the actors will be the breathtaking South Island scenery, seldom seen on camera - parts of it rarely seen by any human at all.

Production designer Mike Beacroft spent months driving around searching out locations, and he reckons they'll tell a story all of their own.

"This part of New Zealand is a gift for period filmmaking. Most of it hasn't changed in over 50 years, and the original cars, farm equipment, and houses are still on-hand. Even the massive mountain backdrops haven't been spoiled for filming by any man-made objects."

At this time of year, too, the harsh summer sun has given the farmland a parched, unforgiving look in keeping with the feel of the Great Depression period.

"But once you get into small-town Oamaru," says Beacroft, "you'll see a stark contrast to the uniformly poor countryside."

"You'll see the gap between rich and poor and how the money's locked up in the buildings. You'll see that people are angry, but the locations will show you why they're angry."

For Pillsbury, the luxury of filming down south is the freedom to shoot wherever he likes, depending on the conditions of the day.

"Normally, shooting period films, the camera angles are very tight - one centimetre either way and some modern contraption gets in your way."

"Here, if the light's not right, I can just turn the camera around and shoot in the opposite direction. It makes for some really powerfully-lit, dramatic scenes."

But, despite the temptation to fill each frame with a strong South Island scene, Pillsbury is definite about one thing.

"The scenery can never, never overpower the characters. It's the characters that the film is all about. That's who we're here for. We're telling a story."

"We've got a very fine story, and we're going to tell it with an equally fine picture."

ENDS

SAM PILLSBURY: DIRECTOR

When Mirage Films approached Sam Pillsbury to direct "Starlight Hotel," he didn't have to be asked twice.

He already had been.

"When (writer) Grant Hindin Miller first did the screenplay from his novel," says Pillsbury, "he sent the draft to me and asked me to direct it. The idea appealed, but I had so much else on at the time that I just couldn't see myself being able to fit it in."

Hindin Miller took the project to Mirage, where he and producers Larry Parr and Finola Dwyer developed it up to the stage that a director was needed.

And Pillsbury was again approached. This time, work on his Canadian-New Zealand co-production film, "The Rainbow Warrior" had been delayed and he was delighted to reverse his earlier decision.

"I consider Grant one of the best story-tellers in New Zealand," says Pillsbury, "And we worked on the script until we came up with what I think is one of the best film stories ever to come out of this country."

Which isn't surprising, considering Pillsbury is regarded as one of the finest directors in New Zealand today.

American-born but New Zealand-raised, Pillsbury went to the National Film Unit direct from University in 1970 and stayed there for five years, working as director on seven short films.

It was a time when a new generation of filmmakers emerged in New Zealand, eager to tackle controversial subjects and experiment with new styles. In 1977, Pillsbury made his mark with his first independent effort, "Birth with R.D. Laing."

Presenting birth vividly from the baby's point of view and taking a critical look at the medical system from the mother's point of view, "Birth with R.D. Laing" created intense interest and controversy when it screened in New Zealand, Britain and the United States. It won a Feltex Award (NZ) for the best television documentary of the year.

Other documentaries, then half-hour dramas, followed before his feature film debut with "The Scarecrow" in 1982 (starring John Carradine). The film was selected for the 1982 Cannes Directors Fortnight.

Two years later, Pillsbury co-wrote and produced "The Quiet Earth" (directed by Geoff Murphy), New Zealand's highest-grossing film to date, and the seventh highest grossing foreign film in the USA in 1986. In 1985, he directed British-New Zealand co-produced mini-series, "Heart of the High Country", which outrated "The Eastenders" in Britain and "Hill Street Blues" when it ran in New Zealand.

Pillsbury sees "Starlight Hotel" as having the same charm and significance for New Zealand as "Huckleberry Finn" does for Americans.

"And, like 'Huckleberry Finn'," he says, "the themes are universal, so it will have a wide appeal. It's about freedom and responsibility. And it's also about outcasts from society.

"But there's an underlying humour and basic entertainment to it because, after all, we're telling a story. If you can't carry people away and make them forget they're sitting in a cinema for a while, then you're not doing your job."

ENDS

PETER PHELPS PLAYS PATRICK

Peter Phelps was discovered on a Sydney beach where he was working as a lifeguard - one of those classic acting breaks everyone thought went out with the old Hollywood studio system.

One of the people Phelps was trying to keep between the flags turned out to be a casting agent looking for someone to serve in a TV soap opera.

Talent was not a prerequisite.

With his sunbleached hair and blue eyes, Phelps was one of about 10,000 Australians who could have been right for the part. But he impressed the producers took his part in the daytime drama "Restless Years" and has continued to impress both the public and his industry colleagues ever since.

It was, perhaps, an inauspicious start for an actor who is rapidly joining the ranks of top box office drawcards in Australia, but Phelps learned fast and the results are really starting to show.

Late last year he took the lead in a major new Australian film, "The Lighthorsemen", which seems destined to become an epic in the tradition of such Australian classics as "Breaker Morant" and "Gallipoli".

Immediately after, he crossed the Tasman and is currently starring in "Starlight Hotel" for Mirage Films.

Now with his head firmly in the clouds, Phelps may well prefer to forget some of his early roles. But, he says, early training in daytime and primetime soaps got him where he is today, and he's not about to dismiss it.

After 12 months with "Restless Years", Phelps moved straight into another soap, but this time hit it big with a prime-time winner in "Sons and Daughters".

His role as young rebel John Palmer made him a national television figure and Phelps could have been excused for sitting back and taking it easy.

But those who have worked with him say the thing that sets Phelps apart is his determined approach and an ability to set himself high standards - and then surpass them.

For "The Lighthorsemen" he had to learn how to ride a horse convincingly enough to lead a 400-horse cavalry charge in the film's climactic scene. And for a part in a TV mini-series about Australia's historic win of the

America's Cup, he became a 12-metre yacht port grinder - the powerhouse crew member of the vessel.

About his role in "Starlight Hotel", Phelps says:
"Patrick is an outsider - even something of an outcast, and he's angry about a lot of things.

"But there's a sensitive side to him that just needs to be brought out. I've always liked that kind of role and watching those sort of movies. One of my all-time favourites is Paul Newman's "Cool Hand Luke", which is a similar sort of character."

Afer the inside reaction from his latest films, Phelps appeared well on the way to adding his name to the growing list of Australian Stars who are making a hit in the international arena.

ENDS

GREER ROBSON PLAYS KATE

Even before she could talk, Greer Robson's face was a filmmaker's dream. While other kids her age were timidly peering out of the family snapshots, Robson was hot commercial property - her face selling all manner of products both on television and in magazines.

By the time she turned nine, Robson proved what many around her had already guessed - that behind her smiling face lay a strong dramatic talent.

Against stiff competition, she landed the part of Georgie Shaw, a young girl torn between divorcing parents, in Roger Donaldson's "Smash Palace".

In a film that garnered wide acclaim overseas, Robson's performance was singled out as an indication of a "major new discovery", and the talk was less about how far she would go than how quickly she would get there.

But, through trips to Hollywood and other acting parts (in Sam Pillsbury's "Scarecrow" and the TVNZ show "Kids' World" Robson has kept her head and steered her own determined course.

Acting, she says, is not going to be her main career.

"For a start, it's impossible to work full-time as a film actor in New Zealand. And, although I enjoy it, I don't intend doing it forever."

At present, she has her sights firmly set on becoming a doctor - with acting more and more a side interest as her career in medicine takes over.

But, with her lead role in Mirage Film's "Starlight Hotel" as yet another success in Robson's "part-time career", there will be no shortage of filmmakers trying to change her mind before it's too late.

ENDS

THE WIZARD PLAYS SPOONER

Every country has its eccentrics. But few can be as successful at their trade as Ian Brackenbury Channell.

Next to the Prime Minister, Channell is probably the most familiar face in New Zealand. But ask them to give his real name and most New Zealanders would be stumped.

Because Ian Brackenbury Channell is "The Wizard" - a self-proclaimed living work of art, keeper of the national conscience, weaver of weird and wonderful spells and a living nightmare for the Kiwi bureaucrat.

And his reputation is beginning to spread. In January, "Entertainment This Week's" Leeza Gibbons interviewed him for a segment from Down Under and, later this year, he makes an auspicious movie debut as a philosophical hobo in Mirage Film's latest project, "Starlight Hotel" (directed by Sam Pillsbury).

Like many genuine eccentrics, The Wizard has a strong academic background - before he discovered his mystical calling, he was a sociology lecturer at the University of Western Australia.

But ancient forces proved too strong and Channell became The Wizard, moving to New Zealand where he dumbfounded the good citizens with his fiery soapbox rhetoric and outrageous claims of supernatural powers.

Although his popularity has finally made him politically acceptable - he is now recognised by the Government as New Zealand's Official Wizard - he has given the civil service a giant headache over the years by refusing to fill in the five-yearly national census forms as he is legally required to do.

Since coming to New Zealand in the early 1970's, he has refused to lay finger on any of the three national census's, and has been taken to court each time. The first case he won on a minor point of law after his claim that "living works of art are exempt" was rejected by the judge.

Five years later, he sailed outside the then three-mile national limit and, last year, he claimed to have "vanished into a higher reality" at midnight on census night when the forms had to be filled in.

The battle with bureaucracy isn't over, but The Wizard is delighted with the filmmaking diversion - "it's a little less demanding than magic," he says, "and the pay is better".

And, as director Sam Pillsbury says, "You couldn't have a more valuable member of the cast. He's an acting natural - and when the weather's wrong, he can fix that too".

ENDS