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THE RISE OF HETERO-FLEXIBLE

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THE COURAGE TO BE SEEN

RANDA REINVENTED
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FROM THE EDITOR

Stories of Belonging at the Heart of This Issue

There's something powerful about stories that ask us to look both outward and inward — at the world around us, and at what we tell ourselves about who we are. This month, that spirit runs right through the magazine.

On our cover, Tāme Iti speaks with honesty, depth and courage about takatāpui belonging, decolonisation, and what it means to truly be seen. His voice anchors an issue that also celebrates queer reinvention, community, glamour and self-expression — from Mainard Larkin's reflections on starting again, to our wildest photo pages from Sydney Mardi Gras, Auckland's Woof Dog Show, Wellington Pride Parade and Christchurch's hottest parties.

Elsewhere, we explore beauty, travel, television, fashion and the ever-evolving language of identity, including Jessie Lewthwaite's thoughtful and funny piece on the rise of "heteroflexible".

As always, thank you for reading and for being part of this community with us. We'll be back next month with our May 'NZ Music Month'-themed issue.

Olly & Matt xx



COVER | TĀME ITI BY TE RANGIMOAHO ITI

YOUR eX

UNAPOLOGETICALLY QUEER

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YOUR EX's TALENTS



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works in rainbow inclusion and awareness and likes to joke that she is gay for pay. She splits her spare time between co-chairing the Rainbow NZ Charitable Trust, being an exec for Rainbow Auckland and playing video games.



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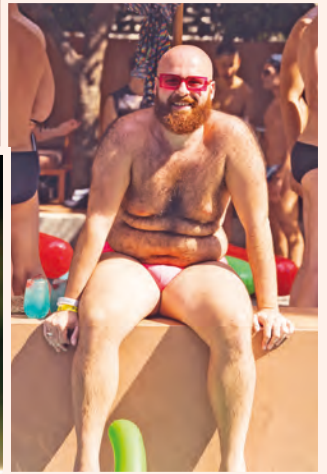
OUT & ABOUT

SYDNEY MARDI GRAS ECSTATICA IN FULL COLOUR

Sydney Mardi Gras 2026 delivered queer joy at full volume, from the 48th annual Parade's glittering Oxford Street spectacle to Paradiso Pool Party's sun-soaked revelry above the city. Under this year's Ecstatica banner, more than 12,000 marchers and 200-plus floats turned pride into protest, celebration, and connection, while Paradiso kept the energy high with its long-running rooftop dance floor, DJs, cocktails, and poolside chaos.



OUT & ABOUT



Sydney Mardi Gras

PHOTOS | ANN-MARIE CALILHANNA,
ZOE HYLAND & ASH PENIN



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TĀME ITI

ON TAKATĀPUI BELONGING, DECOLONISATION & THE COURAGE TO BE SEEN

Activist, artist and author Tāme Iti speaks to Oliver Hall about the shared struggles for Māori and Rainbow rights, and why young people give him hope for the future

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

A LOT OF QUEER PEOPLE GROW UP NAVIGATING SHAME BEFORE THEY FIND THEIR PRIDE. DOES THAT RESONATE WITH YOUR OWN JOURNEY?

In some ways, yes, though when I was younger, I didn't have much understanding of queer identity. In our community there were people who, looking back now, were clearly queer, but at the time I didn't have the language for that. Later, after leaving home and going out into the world, it started to make sense.

What I came to see was that queer people had always been there. They were part of the community. They weren't outside it. Once I understood that, and once I met more queer people through activism and protest, it all became much clearer to me.

ACTIVIST

SO YOU SEE PARALLELS BETWEEN THE STRUGGLES OF MĀORI AND THE STRUGGLE OF RAINBOW COMMUNITIES?

Yes, the same religious mentality that undermined our culture, our art and our language also made judgments about takatāpui, gay people and lesbians. Those systems of judgment come from the same place.

HAVE TAKATĀPUI COMMUNITIES BEEN PART OF YOUR WORLD OVER THE YEARS, AND, IF SO, WHAT HAVE THOSE RELATIONSHIPS TAUGHT YOU?

You meet all kinds of people in activist spaces — gay men, gay women, all sorts of people — and at first, because of my upbringing, it was unfamiliar to me. I hadn't had those experiences before, so I had to work through that as a young man.

What I learned was that everybody has their own feelings and their own way of being in the world. Once you really listen and let go of fear, you realise so much of what you've been told isn't true. A lot of the fear people carry about queer people is learned fear. Fear that has often been seeded by colonialism and by Christianity. I was brought up Presbyterian and also in Ringatū, so I knew both those traditions. But at the end of the day, those belief systems still come from Christian foundations, and those foundations shaped the judgments people made.

AS A PUBLIC FIGURE YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN VERY OPEN ABOUT WHO YOU ARE. FOR SOME QUEER PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY IN THE TRANS COMMUNITY, THAT CAN FEEL DANGEROUS. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO ARE WORRIED ABOUT BEING AUTHENTICALLY THEMSELVES IN PUBLIC?

First and foremost, you have to build that security inside yourself. You have to feel okay in yourself, comfortable in who you are. Once you know who you are, that gives you strength.

It's really important for people to be visible, not hidden away in the corner. I don't agree with the idea that people should have to disappear to be safe. There is space for all of us. We are allowed to be who we are.

WHAT DO YOU THINK MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES CAN LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER?

We need conversations. We need debate. We need spaces where people can speak openly, whether or not everyone agrees. Back in the late '60s and early '70s, everything happened on the street. People argued, debated, challenged each other, listened to each other. There was a real openness to that exchange.

That taught me that everybody needs a voice. It doesn't matter whether you agree with them or not — people need space to speak and to be heard. That's how you learn. That's how you

stop making judgments too quickly. Everybody should have a place in that conversation.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU MISS ABOUT THOSE EARLIER YEARS OF ACTIVISM?

I miss the eye contact. I miss people actually being together, rather than relying on social media. I miss the vibration of people gathering — small groups, big groups, that feeling of bodies together in a shared purpose. In the '70s, that feeling was everywhere for us, and I loved it. It was energising. When you came across hundreds or thousands of people on the street, there was a real force in that.

WHEN YOU WROTE YOUR MEMOIR, MANA, WHAT DID YOU WANT READERS, ESPECIALLY YOUNG PEOPLE, TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE BOOK?

Originally, I thought of it as a kind of manual — not just a memoir, but something people could learn from. A book about protest, about strategy, about language, about how movements communicate and win people over. Back in the '70s, everything had to be typed, printed, distributed by hand. You had to think very carefully about what language you used and how you reached people.

I learned from a lot of different movements — the Black Panthers, people like Bobby Seale, and Che Guevara — because we were thinking seriously about power, about organising, and about how to win the hearts and minds of people. That has always been the real challenge.

WAS THERE ANY PART OF THE BOOK THAT WAS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT TO WRITE ABOUT?

I couldn't tell everything, and the book is really only a beginning. But one of the hardest parts was writing about the sexual abuse I experienced at the hands of my own family. That was very difficult to put on the page. But at the same time, it felt important. Sharing parts of that story was part of my healing. For a long time, people talked about these things but didn't confront them. I felt it mattered to speak about it openly.

A LOT OF YOUR PUBLIC LIFE HAS BEEN ABOUT STANDING FIRM IN WHO YOU ARE AND WHERE YOU COME FROM. HOW HARD WAS IT TO DO THAT IN TIMES WHEN MĀORI PEOPLE WERE BEING DEFINED THROUGH FEAR AND STEREOTYPES?

I wasn't alone in that. My whole generation was going through it. What helped me was meeting older activists and political organisers, people who had already been involved in anti-war movements, anti-apartheid organising, and socialist organising. They became teachers to me.

At one stage, I thought the enemy was a white person with blonde hair and blue eyes. But that's not true. The enemy is not colour. The

real struggle is understanding colonisation and then going through the process of decolonising yourself. That's the deeper work.

WE'RE IN AN ELECTION YEAR. WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THE GENERAL ELECTION?

Sometimes I think voting itself can be a scam! People making promises every three years without building anything lasting. What I believe in is building strong communities. We can have different opinions, but we still need to build something that lasts, something bigger than party politics. For me, that means building with our Treaty partners too, with those who genuinely want to be part of that work.

It's tricky. I'm a strong supporter of Te Pāti Māori. But I also know our people have lived through generations of colonisation, and that affects how we organise and how we divide ourselves. Those internal conflicts don't come from nowhere.

DO YOU THINK TE PĀTI MĀORI'S INTERNAL TENSIONS WILL AFFECT THEIR SUCCESS THIS ELECTION?

I've seen those kinds of tensions many times before in political movements. It may take another two or three generations to fully overcome.

What gives me hope is the young people. I work with my moko and with younger generations, and they're amazing. That's why I love Indigenous events and spaces where young people can share their creativity, their stories and their strength. That movement from negativity into positivity — that's where hope is!

Tāme Iti will be appearing at the Auckland Writers Festival 12–17 May. For more information and tickets, visit www.writersfestival.co.nz

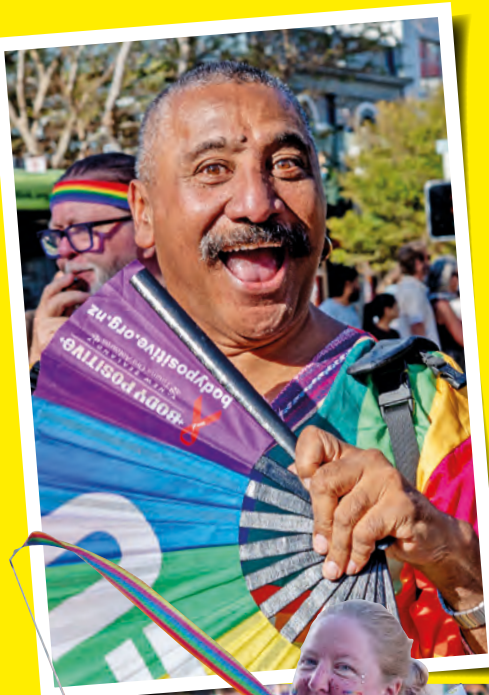


Mana by Tāme Iti
published by Allen & Unwin Aotearoa
New Zealand, is out now.

OUT & ABOUT

PŌNEKE PRIDE FILLS CITY STREETS

Thousands turned out in central Wellington as the Pride Parade brought colour, joy and visibility to the capital. Marchers moved from Courtenay Place to the Cuba Street Rainbow Crossing, celebrating community and resilience. Marking 40 years of Homosexual Law Reform, the parade honoured pioneers Des Smith and John Jolliff while reminding everyone that Pride remains both protest and celebration.



Wellington Pride Parade

PHOTOS | JEFF SMITH

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Dr Mataroria Lyndon answers your health-related questions.

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IN A NOISY WORLD, STEPHEN K AMOS IS STILL LISTENING

Comedian Stephen K Amos reflects on social media, race, representation, Princes Harry and Andrew, and the importance of context, in a world trying to balance progress with division.

Ahead of his return to New Zealand with *Now We're Talking*, Stephen K Amos sounds energised by the idea of reconnecting with audiences — but also deeply preoccupied by the state of the world he's stepping back into. The new tour is framed around what gives him “the ick” and what makes him “tick”, and when we speak, it quickly becomes clear that what most animates him in 2026 is not simply bad behaviour, but bad faith.

“The world at the moment, as we know it, is just a noisy place,” he says. With social media, and the endless churn of opinion and reaction, Amos sees a culture increasingly shaped by volume rather than understanding. “There’s a phrase going around the UK saying that we now live in a post-truth world, which I find absolutely terrifying.”

For Amos, the real issue is not that everyone is talking. It is that too few people are listening.

“We’re not asking enough questions,” he says. “There are a lot of big people with big mouths doing a lot of talking, but not listening. We need to make ourselves aware of context and nuance, and not necessarily believe everything you read.”

Asked whether this atmosphere has helped create conditions for the rise of figures like Nigel Farage, Amos does not hesitate. “It has led to extremism on both sides of the political

spectrum, undoubtedly,” he says. He misses the smaller, quieter world he grew up in.

“We had three TV channels, and at certain points of the day the TV went off,” he says. “People weren’t telling you that other people are to blame for your lack of success. There wasn’t that sense of division that there is now. Sadly, it sits on both sides.”

What disturbs him most is the collapse of real dialogue. “Debating seems to have gone out of the window.” In its place, he argues, is a flattening of language and thought: “Disagree with someone on the right and they are instantly branded a Nazi; disagree with someone on the left and they are dismissed as a snowflake. What happened to discourse and dialogue and agreeing to disagree? It’s frightening.”

That commitment to context also shapes how Amos reflects

on one of the moments for which he remains widely remembered: the time he publicly recounted Prince Harry saying he did not “sound like a black chap”. Nearly two decades later, and with Harry himself now outspoken about racism and media hostility, Amos is unwilling to reduce the story to a simplistic gotcha.



“I’m a huge fan of Harry and Meghan,” he says. The couple’s decision to leave the UK and raise their family elsewhere makes perfect sense. “The reaction to Meghan in the UK, anyway, by a lot of the right-wing press, was not very favourable. There was racism, and they’re only human.”

As for Harry’s comment? Amos insists that “context is key”. He explains that another comedian had been on before him and had been doing accent-based material, and that Harry was trying to join in the joke rather than make a malicious point. “So in all fairness, it was taken out of context. He was trying to be funny, and my comedy brain goes, yes, let’s go with that.”

He is similarly pragmatic when discussing the ongoing Prince Andrew (now Andrew Mountbatten) scandal and suggestions it could threaten the future of the monarchy. Amos doubts the institution itself is in real danger, at least in Britain.

If anything, he suspects the future lies in a stripped-back version of the monarchy, centred only on senior working royals. But he is far more interested in the question of accountability than constitutional drama. “What I find more extraordinary about this whole Andrew saga is: where are the other heads? Where are they going to roll? When are you going to start seeing people being held accountable?”

If the monarchy reveals Amos’s instinct for separating noise from substance, his reflections on race and representation show just how much has changed during his own career. When he first went to the Edinburgh Fringe, he says, he was one of only a tiny number of Black comedians on the scene, and one of very few openly LGBTQ+ performers. The landscape now is unmistakably broader.

“One of the good things about social media is that there are so many voices out there now that can put out their own content,” he says. “You don’t have to wait for gatekeepers anymore.”

He remembers getting complaints when his Radio 4 series *What Does the K Stand For?* debuted in 2013, featuring actors using Nigerian accents to play his parents. “We still had people emailing and writing in saying,



Stephen K. Amos.

“We don’t like these voices on our radios.” For Amos the lesson is straightforward: keep going. “My whole thing is comedy. I want to make people laugh. I don’t want to ostracise anybody. Everybody’s welcome to my shows.”

That generosity has had its own consequences. Over time, Amos found himself becoming something he had never consciously intended to be: a role model. When he first spoke openly about homosexuality in his Edinburgh show *All of Me*, the response was immediate and overwhelming. “I never thought I’d be a spokesperson or a representative of anybody,” he says. “But you find yourself in that position. Therefore, you really need to think about what you do, what you say, and how you present yourself.”

Still, he is adamant that progress must be acknowledged. “We should celebrate every victory,” he says. “Because they are there.”

Perhaps nowhere is Amos’s mix of candour, courage and curiosity clearer than in the extraordinary moment that unfolded during the BBC series *Pilgrimage* in 2019, when he told Pope Francis, “As a gay man, I don’t feel accepted.” Amos had joined the programme while grieving someone close to him, and despite not being religious, found himself

unexpectedly open to the experience. When told the group would meet the Pope, his first instinct was to refuse. But after talking with fellow participants from other faith backgrounds, he reconsidered.

Then came the opportunity to ask questions. Amos knew he could not let the moment pass. “I cannot be a gay black man in front of the head of the Catholic Church and not ask important questions,” he says. “If I just sat there smiling and got a blessing, I probably would have kicked myself and reflected on it till the day I died.”

He had braced himself for a rejection dressed up as kindness. Instead, the Pope replied: “Giving more importance to the adjective rather than the noun, this is not good. We are all human beings and have dignity. It does not matter who you are or how you live your life, you do not lose your dignity. There are people that prefer to

select or discard people because of

the adjective – these people don’t have a human heart.” The answer moved him not because it solved anything, but because it did not condemn him. And yet seven years on, Amos is not naïve about how limited that moment’s practical legacy may have been. Since then, he says, the Church has often seemed to retreat towards the status quo. The hope the exchange briefly created has not necessarily translated into broader institutional courage.

Still, the moment matters. Not because it fixed the Catholic Church, and not because it made global headlines, but because Amos asked the question in the first place.

That, in a way, is the thread tying all of Amos’s ethos together: the insistence on asking, listening, probing, refusing easy narratives. Amos may be coming to New Zealand to make us laugh, but *Now We’re Talking* also arrives as a reminder that comedy can still make room for thought, complexity and truth.

And in a world full of noise, that feels worth hearing.

Stephen K Amos: Now We’re Talking plays Wellington’s Hannah Playhouse on Friday 8 May and Auckland’s Q Theatre on 9 and 10 May. Tickets from ticket.co.nz

AUCKLAND'S FABULOUS PUPS TAKE CENTRE STAGE

Hundreds gathered at Western Park for Woof! The Auckland Rainbow Dog Show, where adorable pups and their proud humans brought colour, camp and community spirit to Ponsonby. From Best Dressed to Dog and Owner Lookalike, the runway was full of laughs, sequins and wagging tails. With celebrity judges and plenty of four-legged charm, Woof! once again proved a standout on Auckland's rainbow calendar.



Woof Dog Show
PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH

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CHRISTCHURCH PRIDE ENDS IN LOVE & LIGHT

CHCH Pride closed in dazzling style at the sold-out Love and Light Closing Party, where the dance floor glowed with joy, connection and unapologetic celebration. The night brought together multiple DJs, roving performers and a crowd ready to sparkle. It was one final chance to gather, let go and finish Pride Fest wrapped in love and light together.



The Core Bar & Grill
Saint Asaph Street, Chch
PHOTOS | TUX HIKA



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OUT & ABOUT

URGE IGNITES CHRISTCHURCH PRIDE

URGE turned up the heat in Christchurch, packing Exchange (XCHC) with pounding beats, bold looks and queer connection. Now the party heads north for URGE Black at Wellington's Valhalla on Saturday 11 April, promising another night celebrating all men's shapes, sizes and identities.



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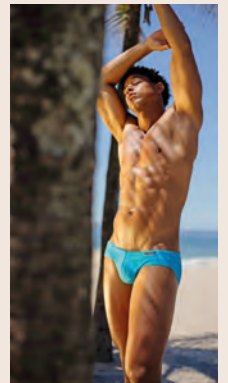
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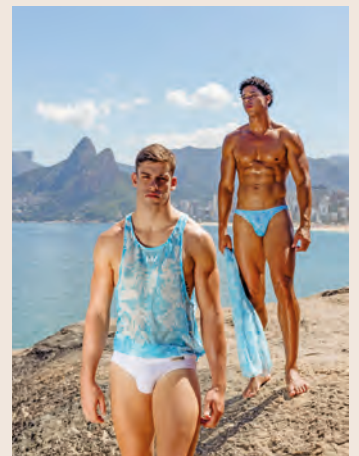
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INSIDE SYDNEY MARDI GRAS: WHERE QUEER CULTURE MEETS COASTAL GLAMOUR



Oliver Hall visits Sydney during Mardi Gras to experience the joy of being surrounded by queer communities, powerful history, and world-class culture in this stunning harbour city.

Sydney, the Southern Hemisphere's epicentre of gay culture, knows how to dial queer joy all the way up. There is something genuinely thrilling about being surrounded by other gay men at every turn; staying on Oxford Street, I watched same-sex couples holding hands, bodies dressed for spectacle, flashes of kink, and people embracing the full theatre of being themselves, all of it perfectly in step with this year's Mardi Gras theme: Ecstatica.

But Sydney's magic is bigger than one glittering weekend. This is a city that offers sensual excess and natural beauty in equal measure: multicultural neighbourhoods, golden beaches, inventive dining, restless creativity,

and a calendar that barely seems to pause for breath, with world-class events from Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras to May's Vivid Sydney drawing people from all over the world to this international getaway.

ORIENTATING OURSELVES ON OXFORD STREET

Our first stop was a walking tour with local drag queen Wonder Mama, who proved there is no better way to get to understand a gaybourhood than through its queer history. She led us along Oxford Street through the stories of its bars, businesses, protests, and past lives, delivering hard truths with comic timing. At one point, she explained that when drag was illegal, police



Wonder Mama.

would stop queens and check their underwear: men's briefs meant "dressing up", women's lingerie meant arrest. "And that's why I'm wearing men's underwear today," she quipped.

From memorials to the persecution of queer people through history to the legacy of Les Girls, Carlotta, and Sydney's trans trailblazers, the tour gave the strip real emotional depth. There was also time for practical pleasures: a stop at The Oxford, gelato at Messina, and a

TRAVEL

in, and the reception desk is dressed like a retro video store, complete with actual VHS tapes you can borrow. Even the corridors lean into the fantasy, with colourful digital room numbers and a distinctly 1980s energy.

Rooms strike that sweet spot between playful and polished. Green tiles framed the bathroom and entryway before giving way to warm wooden floors, a statement mural above the bed, and a blissfully private balcony that all but begged for a little nude sunbathing. Best of all, this is a hotel that understands its audience: standard check-out is midday. (25hours-hotels.com)

The food and drink offerings only deepen 25Hours' appeal. Breakfast from Jacob the Angel — heavenly matcha clouds and buttery Luna pastries — was ideal for a lazy breakfast in bed. Upstairs, **Monica**, the rooftop bar, serves punchy cocktails with an unexpectedly cinematic view stretching across leafy suburbs towards Bondi that feels more São Paulo than Sydney. (monica-rooftop.com)

Then there's **The Palomar**, the hotel's signature restaurant and the Australian sibling to the celebrated London original. Under Culinary Director Mitch Orr and Head Chef Luke Davenport, the menu folds Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Levant into one vivid, flavour-heavy experience. Favourites included cucumbers with green tahini and crispy chilli oil, grilled southern calamari with preserved lemon, and a pistachio ice cream baklava sandwich I am still thinking about. It was the perfect meal to complement a weekend built on spectacle. (thepalomar.com.au)

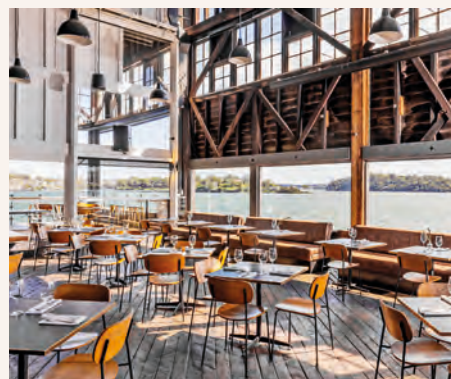
GETTING HIGH

A **BridgeClimb Sydney** experience is what the tourism world calls a star product, and for once the phrase feels entirely justified. Clad in those famously unflattering but reassuringly safety-conscious jumpsuits, we scaled the summit of the world's largest steel arch bridge for staggering 360-degree views across the harbour and beyond. It is a near-perfect formula: just enough physical effort to feel virtuous, adrenaline, and the kind of city views that make everyone fall silent.

I'd done the climb before and loved it, but this one felt especially memorable because my husband joined me. He has previously been wary of heights, yet the whole experience is



BridgeClimb Sydney.



The Wharf Restaurant and Bar.

so secure, so meticulously managed, that any nerves quickly gave way to delight. At 440 feet above Sydney Harbour, he was having the time of his life. Better still, our Mardi Gras departure group was almost entirely gay couples — until one straight Aussie couple arrived, whom we generously agreed to tolerate. (bridgeclimb.com)

WORLD-LEADING THEATRE

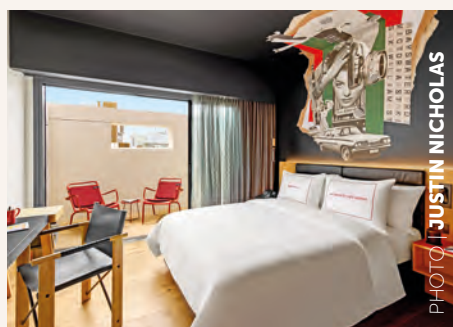
When it comes to Sydney theatre, the obvious move is to book something at the Opera House. But the more thrilling choice might be Sydney Theatre Company's home at The Wharf in Walsh Bay, a theatre complex so striking it's almost as impressive as what is happening on stage. A long foyer runs the length of the wharf, with harbour views shimmering on one side and the entrances to its two theatres lining the other. At the very end sits **The Wharf Restaurant and Bar**, an airy, high-ceilinged room with sweeping water views that makes pre-show dining feel like an event in itself.

There is a particular kind of electricity in the air before curtain-up: a sharply dressed after-work crowd ordering oysters, sipping champagne, and lingering over dessert as the sun drops over the harbour. It feels urbane, romantic, and unmistakably Sydney. For me, the standout dishes were the desserts, like the Chocolate Nemesis and Torta di Limone, both decadently intense yet featherlight. (thewharfrestaurantandbar.com.au)

And the work more than justified the stunning setting. On this trip we saw *The Normal Heart* and *Purpose*, two of the most exciting pieces of theatre I have seen anywhere in the world.



Bondi Coastal walk.



25Hours Hotels Sydney.

final photo on the rainbow crossing at Taylor Square. (fabulouswondermama.com.au)

STAYING IN SYDNEY'S GAY HEART

Checking into **25Hours Hotel The Olympia** felt like stepping into a particularly stylish fever dream. The building, once home to an arthouse cinema, still carries its old showbiz spirit, but now with a cheeky, design-forward twist. A warm cinnamon scent hits as soon as you walk



Palomar Pistachio Baklava Ice Cream Sandwich.



SailGP

... CONTINUED

Sydney's stage scene has transformed dramatically since I lived there in the early 2000s, and **Sydney Theatre Company (STC)** has played a huge role in that shift, particularly under former Artistic Director Kip Williams and now Artistic Director Mitchell Butel, who is curating STC's 2026 season. *The Normal Heart* remains a searing tribute to early AIDS activism, layered with urgent contemporary lessons, while *Purpose*, the recent Tony-winning African American family drama with an asexual protagonist, arrived with all its sharp bite intact. We left assured that any time we visit Sydney in the future we will be booking tickets to an STC production — no matter what it is. The standard is that good. (sydneytheatre.com.au)

PARADE DAY

On the day of the Mardi Gras Parade, Sydney feels like it wakes up already dressed for the occasion. Every café within cooe of Oxford Street seems to be offering a drag brunch, but we'd been told that **Chin Chin** in Surry Hills was the one. They were right. Tucked a few blocks back from the parade route, it delivered the holy trinity of a proper Mardi Gras warm-up: tasty cocktails, excellent food, and queens with enough charisma to send a room feral. Drag Race Down Under alum Ivory Glaze whipped the crowd into a frenzy with filthy humour and gloriously bawdy performances, while Asian-fusion bites and party-starting drinks kept arriving with dangerous efficiency. We left feeling very merry indeed. (chinchin.sydney)

Walking back to the hotel to glitter our beards up, my husband was shocked to discover people already setting up their parade spots — six full



Sydney Theatre Comopany's *The Normal Heart*.

hours before kick-off. Sydney does not play around when it comes to Mardi Gras viewing strategy. Thankfully, we had tickets to Magda's Glitter Club, the premium viewing zone at Taylor Square, complete with its own bar, a welcome abundance of porta-loos, and prime positioning right at the heart of the action.

Then came that unmistakable opening blast: the roar of the Dykes on Bikes, sending fruit bats soaring across the sky before pyrotechnics exploded over Taylor Square and Kylie bangers boomed through the speakers. It was camp, thrilling, and so perfectly Sydney it almost defied parody. One of my favourite things about Glitter Club was that the pop anthems never stopped. Even when the parade itself was briefly obscured, the party never dipped.



Chin Chin.



Mardi Gras parade 2026.

And yes, at first our view was not ideal. We had arrived a little too late, and the sold-out enclosure was packed. But Mardi Gras rewards patience. Pick your moment, and people drift off for drinks, toilet breaks, bar visits, or emotional reunions, and before too long we found ourselves with a front-row view of the

TRAVEL



Mel C's DJ set at Poof Doof.

parade in full glorious motion. And what a parade it is. I've been to Pride parades in New York and London, and I honestly think Sydney Mardi Gras is the pinnacle. The atmosphere around Taylor Square is pure joy — an overused phrase, perhaps, but completely warranted here — and the sheer spectacle, creativity, and emotional energy on display is second to none. (mardigras.org.au)

AFTER-PARTIES

The only shadow over the evening was that, for the first time outside the Covid years, the official Mardi Gras Party had been cancelled. But Sydney's queer nightlife ecosystem is resilient, and there was no shortage of alternatives. On the Friday, **Thick N Juicy** had already drawn a huge crowd to its Main Event party, famed for its seriously cruisy atmosphere and bodybuilder go-go boys — think URGE on steroids. (thicknjuicy.com.au) On parade night itself, the big decision for many came down to Heaps Gay or Poof Doof. **Heaps Gay** currently has the crown as the cool kid of the scene, attracting a younger, creative, gender-diverse crowd. Poof Doof, by contrast, has grown from a Melbourne dance party into a nationwide gay circuit institution: bigger, brasher, and perhaps a little more aligned with our bear-in-their-forties demographic. (heapsgay.com.au)

Poof Doof at the Ivy was epic. There were DJ sets from Mel C, a rooftop pool party so packed it felt surreal, and sculpted bodies in every direction. But what I loved most was that beneath all the torsos, lasers, and beats, people were still friendly. In one quieter room, sprawled on a couch to regroup, we were joined by a young jock enthusiastically explaining his burgeoning OnlyFans career and a man dressed head to toe in rubber with a wickedly dry Aussie sense of humour. Like a collective band of misfits, we danced, drank, explored, and eventually lost each other, giving us the perfect excuse to Uber back to bed. (poofdoof.com)

THE BEST HANGOVER CURE

The day after Mardi Gras, salvation arrived in the form of Joe's Pizza Kitchen at the **Captain Cook Hotel** in Paddington, a much-anticipated reopening attached to the historic pub first opened in 1914. This is the kind of casual Italian dining Sydney does so well:



Josh and James, Rusty Rabbit.

unfussy, authentic, and ridiculously satisfying. The Roman-style, twice-baked rectangular pizzas were a revelation — featherlight, crisp, fluffy, and topped with beautiful imported Italian ingredients that helped resurrect us. (captaincookpaddington.com.au)

For New Zealanders, **SailGP** comes with a little emotional baggage. Dreamed up by Kiwi Sir Russell Coutts, it has not had a smooth run on our shores, with Wynyard Point complications followed by Christchurch's regatta being disrupted by the presence of a protected Hector's dolphin. No wonder SailGP has not committed to coming to NZ. Sydney, by contrast, seems to have mastered the art of turning elite sailing into something impossibly chic. The 2026 Sydney Sail Grand Prix again centred its premium spectator experience on Shark Island, with boat transfers, food, drinks, and front-row views in the middle of the racecourse.

And what a place to watch from. That tiny island in the middle of the harbour feels like a secret handed only to the lucky, with the Opera House and Harbour Bridge framing the water beyond while the F50s carve past at astonishing speed. Sydney's event has leaned hard into spectacle, with twilight racing from 5:30pm and a hospitality set-up that feels part regatta, part garden party. At the finish, the Aussie Roos team came ashore to celebrate in the most Australian way imaginable: a champagne shoeey. (sailgp.com)

PANCAKES WITH A SIDE OF BEEF

A few days after the madness of Mardi Gras, breakfast at **Rusty Rabbit** felt like exactly the right kind of reset. Run by local Sydney hunks Josh and James, who launched the café at just 19, the place has spent the past 11 years becoming one of the city's hottest brunch spots. When we visited, the buzz was still swirling from Bad Bunny's recent stop-in. "It's been crazy ever since," Josh told us, as the packed café hummed around us on a rainy weekday morning. We ordered elaborately beautiful pancakes drenched in real passionfruit, ricotta, and strawberries, their famous sweet potato hash with bacon and avocado, and the signature Magic coffee — a strong double shot topped with a little milk foam. It was the best coffee we had in Sydney. (therustyrabbit.com.au)

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS BEACH

Energised, we tackled the Bondi to Coogee Coastal Walk, one of Sydney's signature pleasures: six kilometres of beaches, cliffs, and sea, threading past Tamarama, Bronte, and Clovelly before landing in Coogee. It takes around two to three hours, depending on how often you stop to gawp, swim, or caffeinate, and after a weekend of excess, the combination of salt air, sunshine, and a well-earned beer at Coogee Bay Hotel felt close to medicinal.

A FINAL SLICE OF QUEER CULTURE

Wanting something quieter and more reflective, we visited **Qtopia Sydney**, the world's largest centre for queer history and culture. Housed in the former Darlinghurst Police Station, it is a site layered with pain, protest, and reclamation: the same building where many of the original 78ers were once held now preserves and presents the stories of Australia's LGBTQIA+ communities. Qtopia officially opened its permanent home in February 2024, transforming a place once associated with persecution into one of memory, education, and pride.

What struck me most was how expansive the project feels. Qtopia spans multiple spaces, including the main museum building, performance venues, and the gloriously cheeky former toilet block near Taylor Square, now home to an exhibition on cruising and queer sexual cultures. It is moving, funny, political, and unafraid — much like Sydney itself. After a trip defined by spectacle and celebration, it offered something just as valuable: context. (qtopiasydney.com.au)

Sydney during Mardi Gras is exhilarating, excessive, and deeply affirming — a city where queer culture is not just welcomed, but woven into the fabric of everyday life. From Oxford Street glamour to harbour views and moments of hard-won history, Sydney delivers spectacle with substance, and we left feeling new! [#FeelNewSydney](https://twitter.com/FeelNewSydney)

For more information visit sydney.com
On socials follow [@Sydney](https://twitter.com/Sydney) and tag your Sydney experiences [#FeelNewSydney](https://twitter.com/FeelNewSydney)
Writer travelled courtesy of Destination NSW

Investing in Your Skin

This month we're talking results. Real ones.



@angusmcdougallnz

All I used was a gentle cleanser and Bepanthen Antiseptic Cream. It protects, soothes, and supports healing without interfering. After day three, still no active ingredients. I focused purely on barrier repair and hydration. The Skin Smiths B12 Ceramide Cream became my best friend. And I moisturised like it was my full-time job. Morning, night, whenever it felt tight.

You will peel. It takes over a week to calm. You might look slightly unhinged mid-process. But when that new skin settles in, the smoothness and clarity are honestly incredible.

Now, back to our regularly scheduled beauty programming.

I've upgraded my shave routine and I don't know why I waited so long. The *Clinique For Men Aloe Shave Gel* feels grown-up in the best way. It cushions the skin properly, minimises irritation, and doesn't leave you smelling like a teenage locker room. If you're still using foam

from a can, consider this your intervention.

For glow, I've been loving the *The Breakout Hack Rebound Skin Milk Toner*. It gives that glazed, glassy finish that looks far more expensive than it is (RRP \$35). I layer it for juicy skin, but here's my trick. Mix a touch with foundation and you've created your own dewy skin tint.



For that ethereal 90s supermodel moment, I'm loving the *Clinique True Highlight Weightless Illuminator Moonlit Pearl*. It melts into the skin for a soft-focus sheen. Not glitter. Not stripey. Just dewy cheekbones and lit-from-within radiance. The 90s are back, baby, and I am fully participating.

And finally, fragrance. I bought *Tom Ford Ombre Leather Eau de Parfum* for my partner for Valentine's Day and it is dangerously good. Warm, sensual, slightly rugged, but still polished. Spray once or twice on clean skin and leave it alone. Let it develop properly. Whether it's for you or your divine one, this is the kind of scent that lingers in the best possible way.

Lasers. The serious kind. Not the cute lunchtime peel kind. The kind that makes you question your life choices for three days and then thank yourself for the next three years.

There are so many different types of laser now. BBL (not a Brazilian Butt Lift), hair removal, pigment targeting, skin tightening, but the holy grail for me is Fractional CO₂, often just called Frax.

I've just finished a treatment plan and I can genuinely say it is next level. If texture, fine lines, or acne scarring are something you've battled with, this is the one. It works deep in the skin, stimulating collagen and refining everything in its path. It is an investment, but it delivers.

Now let's talk post-care, because this is where people get it wrong. For the first three days your skin is considered an open wound. That means no serums, no retinol, no vitamin C, and no sunscreen. Yes, really. So you simply do not go outside. Cancel brunch. Embrace your indoor era.



High, Low and a Little Bit Dramatic

There's a moment every year when getting dressed becomes interesting again.

The mornings have a bite, the afternoons are still pretending it's summer, and suddenly you're playing the fashion equivalent of temperature roulette. Coat or no coat. Layers or optimism.

It's also the time of year I start quietly stalking overseas websites.

While we're heading into cooler weather here, the Northern Hemisphere is moving towards spring. Which means their winter pieces are heading straight to the sale section. Coats, tailoring, boots, and beautiful heavy fabrics that suddenly drop in price because Paris and New York are done with them.

If you are willing to wait a week or two for shipping, there are serious deals to be had.

Sites like Net-a-Porter, SSENSE, MyTheresa, and Matches Fashion regularly mark winter collections down by 40 to 60 percent as they clear space for spring stock. It's one of fashion's best timing tricks and a very good moment to invest in a coat, tailored trousers, or boots that will last you years.

But dressing well is not always about spending big.

In fact, some of the most interesting outfits come from what the industry politely calls high-low dressing. Mixing investment pieces with affordable finds and making them look like they were always meant to be together.

Recently I put together an outfit that had been sitting in my brain for years. And the inspiration may surprise you.

Ever since watching Howl's Moving Castle, I've been slightly obsessed with Howl's silhouette. Dramatically high-waisted trousers, a billowing shirt, and a sharply defined waist. It's theatrical tailoring at its best and I have wanted to recreate it ever since.

So I finally did.

The trousers were the starting point. The Baba High Waisted Pants from Salt Murphy, which create that long, almost architectural line through the waist and hip. Into that went a crisp white shirt tucked in to exaggerate the proportions.

And this is where high-low fashion really starts to shine.

The shirt cost \$23 from Temu.

The hat that finishes the silhouette? \$9. Also Temu.

The tie is borrowed from my partner and pinned with a cameo that was given to me as a family heirloom, which instantly adds a bit of personal history to the look.

Then the luxury pieces quietly step in to elevate everything.

A pair of Dior sunglasses I found on CETTIRE, my Mi Piaci boots, and my Chanel Maxi Flap bag, which was gifted to me years ago and sourced through Fashionphile.

When you step back, it's the mix that makes it interesting. A \$9 hat sitting quite happily next to Chanel. A Temu shirt holding its own under Dior sunglasses.

Proof that style isn't about wearing expensive things.

It's about knowing how to put them together.

And sometimes the best outfit you'll wear all season starts with a cartoon wizard and a very good pair of trousers.

Get the Look

Hat
Temu - \$9

Shirt
Temu - \$23

Trousers
Salt Murphy - Baba High
Waisted Pants - \$271

Boots
Mi Piaci - Acton Ankle Boot
- \$380

Sunglasses
Dior - \$840

Bag
Chanel Maxi Flap Bag
- PRICELESS!



PHOTO | BASTIEN

MORE THAN THE MOUSE:

DISCOVERING ANAHEIM AS CHILD-FREE TRAVELLERS

*From sporting spectacles and exclusive members clubs, to the nostalgia of celebrating Disneyland's 70th year, **Oliver Hall** checks out what Anaheim offers for adults.*

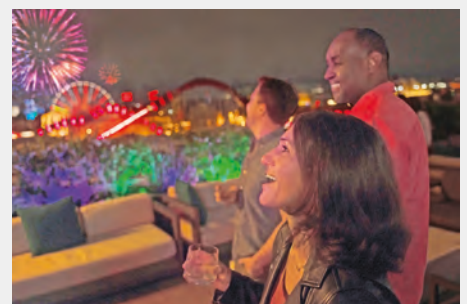
Arriving in Anaheim, we message our **Karmel Shuttle** driver at LAX to let her know we've landed, and she shoots back a text that instantly lowers the blood pressure: "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere." It proves an excellent first impression of a company that has built its name on Southern California airport transfers and is now expanding beyond its traditional LA base through its newer Karmel Connect model (@karmelshuttle).

That reliability matters after a long-haul flight. LAX's customs and security are quicker than they used to be, but baggage claim can still be slow. Our driver, Minnie, is unfazed. She has clearly seen it all before. As we head south, she points out notable areas on our journey, like Compton and Inglewood, and gives us a running commentary that turns a simple transfer into a soft launch for the trip. By the time we pull up at the **JW Marriott Anaheim Resort**, the city has already begun to make sense.

Where you stay can shape your reading of a place, and the JW Marriott casts Anaheim in a very flattering light. Attached to Anaheim GardenWalk and just minutes from Disneyland Resort, it manages that difficult trick of feeling close to the action without being swallowed by it. The palette is all brown, bronze and beige, with a genuinely calming, autumnal warmth.



Karmel Shuttle.



JW Marriott Anaheim Resort rooftop.

Rooms are luxurious, and ours has the kind of deep plunge bath that makes you want to cancel all further plans and become submerged for life. Marriott's own materials make a point of the rooftop bar's views over Disneyland and the fireworks, and for once the marketing doesn't oversell it. Parketry really is the highest rooftop bar in Anaheim, and it really does make those nightly firework bursts of Disney magic feel deliciously grown-up when watched with a drink in hand (@jumarrriottanaheim).

Visiting Disneyland as child-free adults means the city opens up a little differently. Still the happiest place on Earth, but we exchange tantrums for cocktails, retail therapy, live sports spectacles and the kind of travel pleasures that don't require mouse ears.

Downtown Disney is the first hint of that balance. Fairy lights line the streets, families drift between restaurants and large stores solely dedicated to Star Wars, and the whole precinct has that easy, festive energy. We head to **Jazz Kitchen Coastal Grill & Patio**, where the New Orleans influence is worn proudly. Disney bills it as a place for Creole and Cajun flavours paired with live music, and that checks out: downstairs we are serenaded by a gravel-voiced piano player doing terrific Beatles covers, while upstairs the balcony offers prime people-watching over the heart of Downtown Disney (@jazzkitchencoastalgrill).



Jazz Kitchen Coastal Grill & Patio.

Better still, the restaurant has personality. The menu is hearty, the desserts are absurdly good, and the service comes with the sort of colourful characters you can't manufacture. Our waiter is one of those unforgettable hospitality professionals who somehow turns dinner into theatre. By the end of the night, we are heading back to the JW with takeaway boxes and that smug holiday feeling that comes from ordering too much and regretting nothing.

Of course, Anaheim's headline act is **Disneyland**, and visiting during the resort's 70th birthday gives the whole place an extra shimmer, with anniversary entertainment and special tributes layered across the land, bringing an extra special sense of occasion that will wrap up on Sunday 9 August (@disneyland).

Maybe it is the choreography of it all. Maybe it is nostalgia. Maybe it is simply the pleasure of being somewhere that commits so fully to



PHOTO | **TAYLOR GREGORY**

escapism. But without dependants, we were free to enjoy the details as much as the rides: the immaculate theming, the parade energy, Avengers immersion, the adrenaline of Space Mountain still delivering, and Guardians of the Galaxy - Mission Breakout (formerly the Tower of Terror) still being one of the most thrilling attractions anywhere in the world. Disneyland at 70 is a wildly polished fantasy world that adults can appreciate on a whole other level.

That is even more true when you manage to slip behind one of its most famous velvet ropes. Club 33, the private membership club tucked away in New Orleans Square, has held an almost mythic status since it opened in 1967. Disney's original private membership club is one of the resort's most exclusive experiences. You need to know a member to get in, and that member is paying a seriously hefty annual fee.

Lunch at Club 33 is not just a meal; it is a change of atmosphere. Suddenly the park's bustle drops away and everything becomes hushed, elegant and secretive. For a few blissful hours, Disneyland stops being a theme park and becomes a sanctuary. With beautiful balcony dining and elevated French cooking, that feels miles away from Mickey.

Anaheim also rewards stepping outside the Disney bubble. One of our favourite watering holes is **Golden Road Brewing's** Anaheim brewpub, right by Angel Stadium and handy



Golden Road Brewing.

to the Honda Centre precinct. With more than 30 extraordinary craft taps, an expansive patio, moreish giant pretzels and a welcoming atmosphere, it's a place that reminds you California does day-drinking extremely well (@goldenroadbrew).

From there, we head to the renowned **Honda Center** (a buzz after seeing it on TV so many times) for an Anaheim Ducks game, and although we arrive knowing little about ice hockey, the American sports spectacle is impossible not to enjoy (@hondacenter). The Honda Center is the **Ducks'** home turf, with all the scale, noise and fan ritual you hope for from American sporting pageantry. The arena experience is slick, with tech to keep the crowd energy infectious, with kiss cams that compare you to celebrity look-alikes (@anaheimducks). An energising end to an enlightening stay.

For child-free adults especially, Anaheim is not about pretending to be kids again. It is about enjoying fantasy, comfort and spectacle on your own terms. And honestly? That might be the most magical way to do it.

For more information on attractions, deals and events, check out visitanaheim.org, and for flight options head to united.com.



Ducks game at the Honda Center.



THERE IS MUCH TALK ABOUT PEOPLE AND NOT ENOUGH TALK WITH PEOPLE”:

PRUDENCE WALKER ON QUEER RIGHTS, DISABILITY, AND BEING HEARD



Prudence Walker, Disability Rights Commissioner and rainbow rights spokesperson at the Human Rights Commission, discusses queer rights, accessibility, and why meaningful inclusion in Aotearoa must be shaped by lived experience.

In Aotearoa, conversations about inclusion often arrive in separate boxes. Rainbow rights sit in one corner. Disability rights in another. Policy, advocacy, lived experience. Each carefully categorised, discussed, debated.

But for Prudence Walker, those lines have never existed, because for many people, including Walker, identity does not divide itself so conveniently.

FINDING LANGUAGE, FINDING SELF

Walker’s journey into queerness was not marked by a single defining moment, but rather a gradual unfolding, shaped as much by absence as by discovery.

“Perhaps partly because a solid three years of my life as a teenager were dominated by injury, illness, and survival, I didn’t have social opportunities to the same extent as many teenagers do,” Walker says.

Like many queer people who came of age without language or representation, assumptions filled the gaps.

“I assumed that because I was interested in some boys, and later, men, that I must be straight.”

Bisexuality existed as a concept, but only faintly. A flicker rather than a framework.

“There was very little representation or acknowledgement of people who identified outside the binaries of straight, gay, or lesbian.”

“One day I changed my settings on a dating app, went on a date with a woman, and realised that I was open to dating anyone that I felt a connection with and that that connection had very little to do with their gender identity or sex.”

When Walker stepped into the national spotlight as Disability Rights Commissioner in 2023, the word that felt most accurate was simple: Queer.

A LIFE SHAPED BY COMMUNITY AND SURVIVAL

Before the Human Rights Commission, before national advocacy, Walker’s leadership began in

HUMAN RIGHTS

a space defined by both joy and grief: CanTeen.

Living with cancer as a young person, Walker became national president, an experience that forged lifelong bonds and a deep understanding of resilience.

“Through CanTeen I made many friends... we will forever be bonded in the experience of having been young people living with cancer.”

There was laughter, leadership, and connection, but also loss.

“We didn't dwell on that much at the time, we had a lot of fun... But we had sad times as well; too many funerals.”

And, crucially, an understanding that survival is not a clean ending.

“For survivors, the cancer journey doesn't end with treatment. For many of us, it results in chronic health conditions and/or permanent impairment.”

That lived experience of illness, disability, and community now sits at the heart of Walker's advocacy.

THE INVISIBLE GAP IN RAINBOW INCLUSION

In queer spaces, inclusion is often spoken about with pride. Diversity celebrated, difference embraced. But Walker points to a quieter, more uncomfortable truth:

Many disabled queer people still do not feel they belong.

“I have often heard from queer disabled people that they do not feel fully included in rainbow spaces, or in spaces for disabled people.”

The numbers back this up. In Aotearoa, nearly one in three LGBTIQ+ people are disabled, significantly higher than in the general population.

And yet, accessibility is still too often treated as an afterthought.

“If rainbow spaces are not intentionally designing for the inclusion of disabled people, then they are likely excluding disabled people.”

It is not just about physical access, though that remains essential. It is about recognising the full spectrum of disability: cognitive, sensory, psychosocial. Meaning that aspects like sound levels, lighting, the formats you put information out in, and transport should all be considered.

For Walker, it is about asking a simple but often overlooked question: Who is not here? And why?

ALLYSHIP BEYOND INTENTION

For Walker, allyship between rainbow and disabled communities is rooted in a “shared understanding of the effects of exclusion.”

Accessibility, in this sense, becomes less about compliance and more about curiosity.

Maybe the event information is not available in accessible formats.

Maybe there is no transport.

Maybe the space is too loud.

Maybe the venue simply is not accessible.

The solutions, Walker says, are already within reach:

“Talk with and seek feedback from disabled people and disabled persons organisations in your local community.”

It is a shift from assumption to collaboration. From designing for people to designing with them.

HUMAN RIGHTS UNDER PRESSURE

This year marks 40 years since the Homosexual Law Reform Act. A milestone that invites both celebration and reflection.

For Walker, it is also a reminder that progress is never guaranteed.

“Human rights are indivisible; we can't pick and choose,” Walker says.

Across Aotearoa and beyond, there is a growing sense that some rights are being quietly, steadily challenged.

“We are seeing challenges to our rights as rainbow people. Issues relating to the rights of trans people have particularly been under attack. Although not all of those challenges directly impact every one of us, they are all linked in the spirit of devaluing our existence and rights to freedom from discrimination.”

At the same time, Walker's work extends into areas that do not always make headlines but carry significant consequences, including emergency management systems and their responsiveness to disabled communities.

Because inclusion is not just about celebration. It is about safety, survival, and infrastructure.

BEING HEARD, NOT JUST SPOKEN ABOUT

For Walker, representation must go beyond symbolism.

“Something that I have consistently urged government, agencies, and indeed all organisations to do is to include disabled people in making the decisions affecting us.”

The same applies across rainbow communities, including takatāpui and takatāpui whaikaha Māori.

“There is much talk about people and not enough with people.”

It is a deceptively simple statement, but one that cuts to the core of systemic exclusion.

Consultation is not enough if it happens too late. Inclusion is not real if it is not embedded.

For Walker, meaningful change starts with shifting who is in the room, and who gets to speak.

LESSONS FROM DISABLED COMMUNITIES

Ask Walker what disabled communities have taught her, and the answer resists easy summarisation.

“I've learnt that we are as diverse as any population, that we are not a homogeneous group of people.”

It is a reminder that disability, like queerness, contains multitudes of identities, experiences, and strengths.

And, importantly, innovation.

Quoting late disability activist Stella Young, Walker reflects on the everyday ingenuity that emerges from navigating a world not built with you in mind:

“It's a genius idea to use a pair of barbecue tongs to pick up things that you dropped. I'm learning that nifty trick where you can charge your mobile phone battery from your chair battery. We are learning from each other's strength and endurance, not against our bodies and our diagnoses, but against a world that exceptionalises and objectifies us.”

Resourcefulness. Community knowledge passed between people, and a refusal to be reduced to inspiration or limitation.

MOVING TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE AOTEAROA

What emerges from speaking with Prudence Walker is not just a critique of systems, but a blueprint grounded in listening, collaboration, and intersectionality.

Aotearoa does not lack the language of inclusion. It lacks, at times, the practice.

And yet, there is possibility.

In queer spaces that actively design for accessibility. In policies shaped by lived experience.

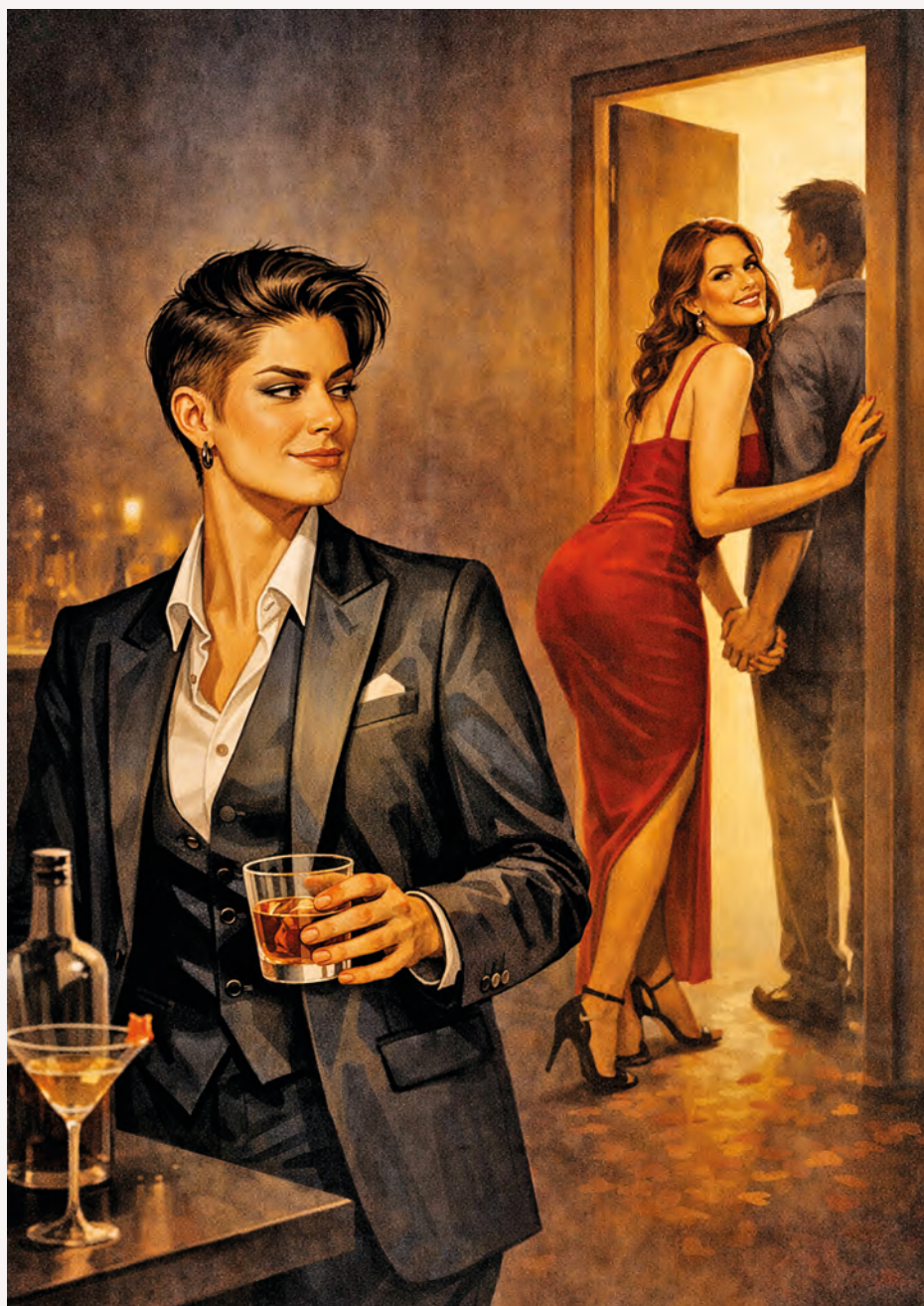
In communities willing to ask who is missing, and why.

Walker's work sits at that intersection, where identities meet and systems are challenged to do better.

Because, ultimately, human rights are not separate struggles. They are shared.

And as Walker reminds us, they are indivisible.

STRAIGHT BAIT, SOFT LAUNCHES AND THE RISE OF “HETEROFLEXIBLE”



Jessie Lwethwaite asks what “heteroflexible” really means, and examines how it sits within queer dating culture.

As a butch woman, I am no stranger to being “straight bait”. I couldn’t even tell you how many times I have been at a party, at a bar, or even at a cheeky after-work function where, around drink four, her straightness gets a few corners. You all know what I’m talking about: the type that has a boyfriend or husband, but don’t worry, because he doesn’t consider anything she does with girls cheating... cause girls don’t count... right?

And as arousing as being told I don’t count is, it is basic knowledge for us older lesbians to just not mess with these girls. This is something we also advise to the baby gays among us. These girls are like a blue-ringed octopus: they may look really pretty, but touching is going to be very painful.

But there is a word that I have been hearing more and more lately that has me examining this basic tenet of lesbianism. Heteroflexible. By no means a new word, I’m sure many have heard it for years now, but it definitely seems to be having a resurgence. So what is it actually, and are women who are heteroflexible part of the community or a cautionary tale we tell to the gaybies?

Many of the women who fall under this label might well be genuinely attracted to women, but are sure they could never fall in love with us. To be fair, sexuality is weird and wonderful, and not everyone’s wiring is the same. Some people genuinely experience sexual attraction and romantic attraction like they’re on different group chats. They can happily hook up with women but only ever picture a shared power bill and a joint Kmart air fryer with men. That’s a real experience, and it deserves a name that isn’t “just a phase I had in uni”.

However, in my experience, quite a few are not attracted to women; they are attracted to men who are attracted to the idea of a woman who is bisexual. These are the “he just likes to watch” girls.

Now, obviously, if you are down to be a side-quest, that is 100% up to you, I can’t tell you what to do. I’m not your mother. And this doesn’t mean anyone needs to be ashamed of only feeling romantic attraction to men.

The heart wants what it wants, and sometimes it wants beard oil and a mortgage. But if your body is happy to RSVP “yes” to women while your heart is staying home in sweatpants, the kind thing is to say that out loud.

“Hey, this is physical for me, I don’t see myself in a relationship with a woman,” is not unsexy. It’s actually wildly hot to know where we stand before we start writing our joint Bunnings card into the script. You know what is sexy? Communication, consent, and setting expectations. Hot.

Being heteroflexible as opposed to bi or pansexual is also way less challenging a label. It’s queerness with plausible deniability. Queerness that still somehow centres straightness and doesn’t require a call to Grandma or a gender reveal party for each subsequent new partner.

So to the “I’d sleep with women but never fall in love with one” crowd: you’re allowed to be exactly who you are. Keep your label, change it later, throw the whole thing in the wash and see what comes out, it’s fine. And if you do one day find yourself accidentally in love with a woman you were “never” going to fall for, don’t panic, just pick up the phone and explain pansexuality to Grandma. Good luck!

OUT & ABOUT

EAGLE BAR AFTER DARK

Auckland's iconic Eagle Bar serves up the perfect night out: strong drinks, a legendary jukebox, a lively dance floor and a back patio made for meeting new people. From couch sessions by the 27 Club wall to late-night boogies with new friends, every visit feels unforgettable, fun and full.



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PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH



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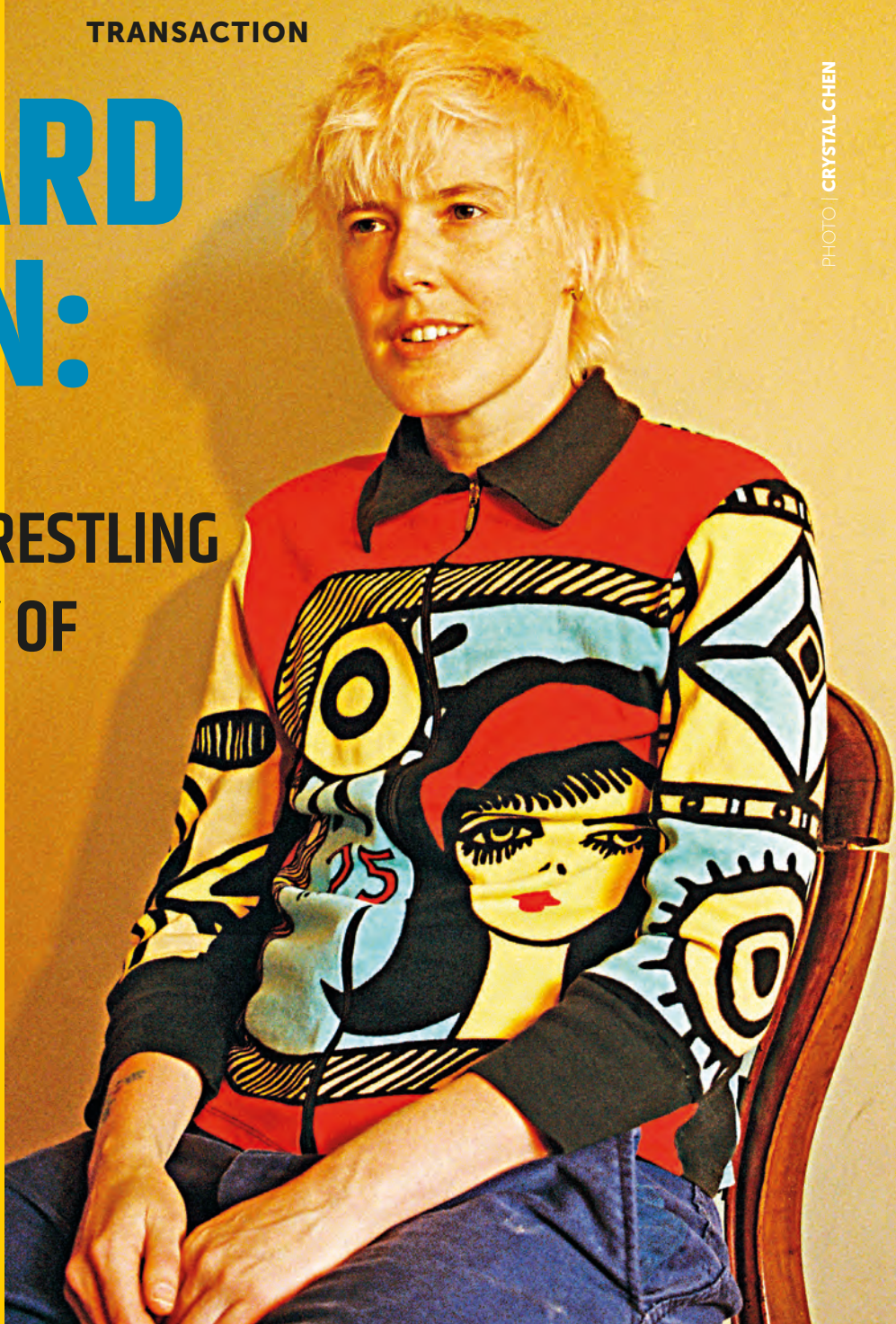
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MAINARD LARKIN:

FROM RANDA TO REINVENTION, WRESTLING AND THE BEAUTY OF STARTING AGAIN

*For many in Aotearoa's queer music scene, Randa was a familiar name, making sharp, playful, visually rich hip-hop that felt dreamlike and self-aware. **YOUR EX** (then *Express*) has followed that journey for years, with our interviews in 2015, 2016 and 2017 capturing an artist who never quite sat still.*

Now, that artist has stepped into an entirely new skin.



Enter Mainard Larkin — an alt-country project that swaps beats for banjo, but keeps the same cinematic instinct that has always defined his work. If Randa was about colour and fun, Mainard Larkin leans into something deeper: vulnerability, grief, and the strange, stubborn hope that sits on the other side of both.

“I was about nineteen when I started playing shows and releasing tracks as Randa,” he reflects. “It was a great outlet... writing fun songs that felt very dreamlike and colourful.”

But time changes things.

“Being in my thirties now, I’ve really enjoyed learning how to create work that feels a bit more vulnerable and true to some harder emotions and experiences.”

It’s not just a sonic shift (Mainard sings where Randa rapped) — it’s a personal one. Where Randa often felt effortless, this new chapter is deliberately uncomfortable.

“I’m excited to feel nervous about performing again.”

A DIFFERENT KIND OF STORYTELLING

The move into country music wasn’t entirely unexpected — at least not for Mainard.

“I started listening to country music around 2019 and was particularly attracted to the storytelling nature of this genre,” he says, citing Orville Peck’s *Pony* as an early gateway.

That sense of narrative runs through Mainard’s debut album, *Rattlesnake Boy*, a loose concept

record built around the story of a pro wrestler grappling with decline.

“I became a huge fan of wrestling when I was a kid... There are so many heartbreaking but also inspiring stories about the lives of pro wrestlers.”

But beyond the spectacle, wrestling offered something more intimate: a framework for exploring emotional truth.

BENEATH THE PERFORMANCE

When asked whether the physical and emotional toll of wrestling mirrored anything in his own life, Mainard opens up.

“I think most people carry pain or grief at some point in their lives, if not throughout,” he says.

One of the album’s standout tracks, *One*

TRANSACTION

Headlight, was recorded during a particularly heavy moment.

“The day Shannon and I recorded it, I was super down and had been experiencing a pretty rough wave of OCD... It felt super cathartic recording that song, like a place to channel the weight of grief and heaviness.”

That sense of catharsis runs through the record. What begins in grief slowly shifts towards something softer — something like hope.

“Some of the tracks... felt like expressions of grief, and as the album took shape, hope became a strong theme also.”

It’s a perspective that feels especially resonant in an ever-uncertain world.

“I spent a lot of time thinking about faith and doubt... how we as humans allow the mystery of the future to be a source of curiosity as opposed to it being something daunting.”

IDENTITY, EVOLUTION AND QUEER VISIBILITY

For an artist who has always been in conversation with identity, this new project feels like a natural progression.

“100%,” he says simply, when asked if Mainard Larkin represents another step in that evolution.

Looking back at his earlier work as Randa, there are still threads that connect the two.

“That visual element, for sure... presenting another world for listeners to climb into via music. And a clever sense of humour.”

But there’s also a deeper layer now — one shaped by lived experience, including his identity as a trans artist.

“I do feel very privileged to represent being a transgender/trans-masculine person who shares and performs art and music,” he says. “It’s so lovely how many queer artists exist now... young people can look up to queer artists and know that it’s not just okay but can also be very wonderful to be trans/queer.”

It’s a sentiment that feels worlds away from the landscape he first

emerged into — and a reminder of how much has shifted.

CAMP, THEATRE AND THE SQUARED CIRCLE

If the wrestling metaphor feels unexpected, it also makes perfect sense.

“Wrestling has such a fascinating mix of theatre, camp, and physical performance,” he says. “I think both the squared circle and the stage give room for all of that.”

That sense of camp and performance — something queer audiences instinctively understand — becomes a bridge between genres, between identities, between past and present selves.

The wrestlers who inspired the album read like a hall of fame: Kevin Von Erich, Shawn Michaels, Eddie Guerrero — figures who embodied both spectacle and vulnerability.

And like those wrestlers, Mainard Larkin’s work lives in that tension between persona and truth.

HOPECORE, BABY

At its core, *Rattlesnake Boy* is about what happens when things fall apart — and what comes next.

“I hope when listeners... digest these tracks, they are reminded that it’s very okay and universal to feel lost, broken or like a total fucking loser at times,” he says.

It’s a disarmingly honest sentiment, delivered without polish.

“Sometimes life feels like such a dark tunnel and you can’t see the light for miles... it’s always there, but it takes a long while to get back to the light.”

And when that light does come back?

“Feel that kiss from the big hot sun.”

He laughs, then adds:

“Hopecore is where it’s at, 2026 baby.”

**Mainard Larkin’s
Rattlesnake Boy album
arrives on Friday 22 May.**

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FOUR RESTAURANTS REDEFINING HOW CHRISTCHURCH EATS OUT

We check out the standout restaurants helping shape Christchurch's evolving dining scene — from vibrant city bistros to vineyard-views.

There are meals you enjoy, and then there are meals that recalibrate your expectations. Christchurch dining has entered its recalibration era, grounded in confidence around local produce, inventive flavour combinations, and thoughtfully designed dining rooms.

As the city's hospitality scene continues to mature — with growing attention from national guides like the Good Food Guide — these four restaurants offer a clear snapshot of where Christchurch dining is headed.

ODEON

Set between the gleaming new Court Theatre and the Isaac Theatre Royal, ODEON's urban dining room softens its industrial bones with warm globe lighting, spongy booths and solid timber tables. The soundtrack is confident and clearly curated — breakbeat rhythms sliding into vampy jazz.



Odeon.



Inside Odeon.

The drinks set the tone early. Oversized wine glasses, Mediterranean-leaning cocktails, and a house-made 'orangelcello' instantly transport the table. "I feel like we're in London," my dining partner beams.

Food here is bold and playful. The house-cured lamb pastrami earns its reputation — deeply savoury with house pickles and a punchy mustard made with Three Boys ales. Kingfish crudo provides contrast: delicate and fresh, dressed not with citrus but a summer berry gazpacho and savoury fennel — unexpected and mouth-watering.

Beef manti dumplings arrive gloriously over-the-top, swimming in hung yoghurt and chermoula. It's winter comfort food with swagger. An absurdly indulgent bowl of crispy potato skins with egg yolk emulsion is the kind of dish no one ever finishes — but everyone orders again.

odeon.co.nz

TWENTY SEVEN STEPS

Climbing the stairs above New Regent Street feels like entering a secret hideaway — though judging by the packed room and international accents, the secret is very much out. Tables are tight, and the energy is gloriously chaotic.

Twenty Seven Steps is intimate, bustling, and unmistakably loved. Auckland friends tell us they book every time they're in town, and that loyalty makes sense.

Run by former couple Emma Mettrick (front of house) and chef Paul Howells, the restaurant carries the lineage of their much-loved Little Bistro in Akaroa.

The menu champions local ingredients, especially Canterbury meats, with dishes that feel generous and complete. Charred octopus



Twenty Seven Steps.

arrives smoky and tender alongside sherryed cannellini beans — a dish that momentarily transports you to Spain. Eye fillet melts under the fork, and the venison is paired with cooked berries that lift its richness beautifully.

The wine list leans Waipara, with rare vintage options available by the glass or half-glass — a gift for diners who love great wine without committing to a mortgage-sized bill.

Finish with the legendary crème brûlée: darkly caramelised, impossibly creamy, and worth every spoonful.

27steps.co.nz



Tussock Hill.

DINING



TUSSOCK HILL

Tussock Hill begins with a view that quietly takes your breath away. Set in Cashmere, it overlooks Chardonnay vines and the sprawl of the city below.

Having previously worked at Queenstown's acclaimed Amisfield, Head Chef Adam Harrison brings a forager's sensibility and meticulous technique. The influence is unmistakable. This is full commitment to local produce, with an onsite vegetable garden doing much of the heavy lifting and aesthetically pleasing plating that adds a subtle touch of theatre.

The hay-smoked tomato tartare with buffalo curd, chervil and sourdough crackers is inventive, beautifully balanced, and something I'd never think to order — yet it immediately blows me away. The New Zealand king crab that follows, pickled in Chardonnay vinegar and paired with fermented tomato sorbet and pink peppercorns, is equally impressive. Finished with elegant touches of dill, it looks like Christmas on a plate.

tussockhill.co.nz

EARL

Earl doesn't announce itself as the best — it simply behaves like it knows it is.

Lively, central and buzzing, the room recalls Ponsonby's early-2000s SPQR energy: loud enough to feel electric, warm enough to feel welcoming. With the stadium opening nearby, this place is only going to get busier.

Owner Tom Newfield has cultivated something rare: a collaborative kitchen where staff help shape an ever-evolving menu, and vegetarians are genuinely well looked after. The wine list is deliberately tight — twelve wines, six white and six red — handpicked by the team, with a preference for Italian varietals grown in New Zealand.

We dine on Tuesday's weekly pasta night, where our casarecce with slow-braised lamb is stunning — and a steal at \$28, including a generously poured glass of wine.

Earl feels confident and completely at ease with itself — unmistakably the one to beat.

earl.co.nz

So book your tables now


Christchurch's dining scene no longer needs to prove itself. These four restaurants represent a city that's found its voice, trusts its talent, and continues to grow in confidence.

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GIVEAWAYS



Double passes to **Mr Loverman** screening

Join YOUR EX and Sky's Rialto Channel for an exclusive screening of the first two episodes of **Mr Loverman**, the BAFTA-winning drama adapted from Bernardine Evaristo's celebrated novel. This funny and deeply moving story follows a charismatic 75-year-old Londoner hiding a secret love that has lasted half a century. Sunday 12 April, The Capitol Cinema, Auckland.

Double passes to **Stephen K Amos** in **Auckland and Wellington**



British comedy favourite Stephen K Amos returns to Aotearoa this May with his brand-new show, **Now We're Talking**. Packed with sharp wit and feelgood energy. We have double passes to give away for Wellington and Auckland performances.



Double pass to **Silo Theatre's Playfight**

Silo Theatre presents **Playfight**, Julia Grogan's award-winning debut and a fearless, funny portrait of girlhood. We're giving away a double pass to the preview performance on Thursday 14 May at Silo Hall in Auckland.

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Lush's Mother's Day collection is handmade with care, pairing fresh ingredients, floral fragrance and beautifully crafted products designed to feel personal. The 2026 collection features Yummy Custard body wash, Crème Brûlée body scrub and a Rose Jam candle — a thoughtful treat for someone special.



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CLASSICAL



ARE YOU A FRIEND OF DOROTHY?

Follow the yellow brick road to one of Auckland's most enchanting live film experiences. *The Wizard of Oz Live in Concert* invites audiences to rediscover the magic of the beloved 1939 classic as the Auckland Phil performs the score live, perfectly synchronised with the film on screen. Taking place at the Kiri Te Kanawa Theatre, Aotea Centre, with performances at 7.30pm on Friday 8 May and 2.00pm on Saturday 9 May, this is a chance to step into a world of wonder, nostalgia, and pure cinematic joy.

When a cyclone sweeps through Kansas, Dorothy and her loyal dog, Toto, are carried away to the dazzling Land of Oz. Along the yellow brick road, she meets the unforgettable queer-coded companions: the Scarecrow in search of a brain, the Tin Man longing for a heart, and the Cowardly Lion determined to find his courage. Together, they journey towards the Emerald

City while facing the Wicked Witch of the West, who may not be as 'Wicked' as 1939 audiences thought she was.

What makes this event truly special is the chance to hear Herbert Stothart's lush orchestrations of Harold Arlen's iconic songs brought to life by the Auckland Philharmonia in real time. From the aching beauty of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' to the sparkling delight of 'The Merry Old Land of Oz', every note promises to sweep audiences deeper into the film's rich Technicolour dreamscape.

Perfect for families, film buffs, and music lovers alike, *The Wizard of Oz Live in Concert* is rated G, with parental guidance advised, and is recommended for ages 10 and up. This will be a spellbinding event where timeless storytelling and the power of a live orchestra come together in unforgettable style.

Book now at aucklandphil.nz



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8 May



2pm Saturday
9 May



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HOW *MR LOVERMAN* EXPANDS WHAT QUEER TV CAN BE

Premiering on Sky's Rialto Channel from Sunday 19 April, the BAFTA award-winning *Mr Loverman* centres on a mature Black gay love story filled with humour, pain, longing and emotional depth.

Queer television still has a habit of narrowing its gaze. So often, the stories that make it to screen are about youth, beauty, discovery and desire in forms that are palatable to the mainstream: young, white, urban, newly out. That is part of queer life, of course, but it is nowhere near the whole picture. What makes *Mr Loverman* feel so vital is that it pushes far beyond those limits, placing an older Black gay love story at the very centre of the frame.

Based on Bernardine Evaristo's novel, the series follows Barry, a 74-year-old Antiguan-born Londoner whose sharp suits, swagger and wit mask a devastating truth. Married to Carmel for 50 years, Barry has also been carrying on a secret relationship with his best friend, Morris, for just as long. As the lies sustaining his life

begin to crack, *Mr Loverman* becomes a story not just about revelation, but about what it costs to spend decades unable to live openly.

Evaristo has spoken plainly about what first drew her to the story. "The idea of an elderly, Caribbean gay protagonist seemed the perfect way to address this," she says, after noticing how the generation who emigrated from the Caribbean to the UK in the seventies had so often been presented as entirely heterosexual. For too long, older Black queer men have barely existed in popular culture. *Mr Loverman* refuses that erasure, insisting that these men, their histories, their desires and their contradictions, are worthy of serious attention.

It also insists that queer life does not end with youth. Lennie James, who plays Barry, calls it a "grown-up love story", and that phrase gets

to the heart of what makes the series land so powerfully. Barry and Morris are not reduced to symbols of repression or nostalgia. They are lovers, companions, survivors and, in Barry's case, a mass of contradictions: charismatic, selfish, funny, vain, tender and cruel. The relationship at the heart of *Mr Loverman* is not polished into respectability. It is messy, bruised, loving and painfully human.

That complexity is what lifts the series above series like *Heated Rivalry*. Nathaniel Price, who adapted the novel for screen, points to anti-gay bias, violence and masculinity as key themes, noting that "historically it's been harder for gay black men to come out". *Mr Loverman* understands that Barry's life has been shaped by far more than private fear. Family expectation, Caribbean masculinity, homophobia, respectability and survival all press in on his choices. The show does not excuse the damage Barry causes, especially to Carmel and his family, but nor does it flatten him into a villain. Instead, it asks viewers to sit with the emotional wreckage created when a person feels they must divide themselves in two.

At its core, *Mr Loverman* asks the question: is it ever too late to start over? For queer viewers — especially those used to seeing only one kind of story reflected back — that question lands with real force. This is a series about ageing, yes, but also about possibility. In giving us an older Black gay love story full of humour, hurt, longing and dignity, *Mr Loverman* expands what queer television can look like. More than that, it reminds us that love, and the courage to face it, does not belong only to the young.

For more information on *Mr Loverman* and other high-quality independent films, documentaries and television series, visit rialtochannel.co.nz.



"Bold, spiky tale of a gay man who starts to regret living a lie. Magnificent TV that will tear your heart open."... *The Guardian*.

mr. loverman

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