

Film Review: Rain of the Children

Bottom Line: A visually poetic docu-drama reveals an old Maori woman's extraordinary life.

By Megan Lehmann

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Venue: Sydney Film Festival

In the stunning docu-drama "Rain of the Children," New Zealand-born filmmaker Vincent Ward revisits the past to unravel a mystery that's niggled at him for three decades. Here meticulous research reveals the family secrets burdening the stooped old Maori woman who was, in fact, the subject of Ward's 1978 observational film "In Spring One Plants Alone." It's a masterful companion piece -- a kind of marathon director's cut -- but it also stands alone as a haunting historical epic. "Rain" is guaranteed a warm art house reception.

Ward introduces us to his 21-year-old self with amusement. Back then he was an earnest art student, who lived with 80-year-old Puhi and her mentally ill adult son, Niki, in the remote ranges of New Zealand's north island. He recorded striking images of this old woman scratching out a lonely existence and fussing over her son. But he sensed a troubling undercurrent and, 30 years later, set out to discover what it was she was trying to chase away with her ceaseless praying.

Combining early photographs, personal narration, interviews with descendants of her tribe and gloriously shot re-enactments, Ward paints a portrait of a remarkable woman who believed she was cursed -- and for good reason.

After being chosen by the Maori prophet Rua Kenana to marry his son, she fell pregnant at the age of 14. Over the years, she had another 13 children, all but one of whom either died or was taken from her. Niki was her only surviving child.

It's a tragic tale, compelling in its personal detail and almost mythic in its sweep. As he showed in "Map of the Human Heart," Ward is a romantic, but here he undertakes an almost forensic exploration of both rational and mystical interpretations.

Is Puhi cursed, as much of her tribe believes, or the victim of bad luck? Was her son brain-damaged in an accident or truly visited by demons? Ward communicates through grand gestures and indelible images: The stark beauty of a white horse standing watch over a suddenly orphaned Niki is not soon forgotten.

Production companies: Wayward Films, Forward Films and Vincent Ward Films. Cast: Puhi Tatu, Niki Takao, Temuera Morrison, Rena Owen, Miriama Rangi. Director: Vincent Ward. Screenwriters: Vincent Ward, Alison Carter and Louis Nowra. Producers: Margaret Slater, Tainui Stephens and Vincent Ward. Director of photography: Adam Clark, Leon Narbey. Production designer: Shayne Radford. Music: Jack Body and John Gibson. Costume designer: Pauline Bowkett, Gavin McLean. Editor: Chris Plummer. Sales agent: New Zealand Film Commission/Rialto.

No MPAA rating, 98 minutes.