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Vincent Ward unveils latest long-term labour of love

By Shandelle Battersby

Rain of the Children is a companion piece to a film Ward made in 1978.

New Zealand director Vincent Ward has unveiled his latest long-term labour of love to a film festival audience. Shandelle Battersby reports from Sydney.

It may not have been rural heartland New Zealand or even downtown Auckland or Wellington, but there was a definite Kiwi feel to the world premiere of Vincent Ward's latest film at Sydney's State Theatre last weekend.

A small group of Australian-based Maori performed a passionate powhiri on the red carpet - welcoming a New Zealand contingent led by Ward and Tuhoe elders, Matu te Pou and Nancy Tait, to the first public screening of Rain of the Children at the city's film festival. Australian audiences were treated to another performance, including a haka, on stage before the film began.

Ward chose Sydney as the destination for the premiere after Rain became the only New Zealand finalist in the city's inaugural festival competition.

"The Sydney festival has been elevated into a major A-list event because of the competition. " "We were one of 12 selected from 1500 feature films previewed. It's a big honour and it was great that our Tuhoe collaborators could be here for it," Ward says.

The first New Zealand screening will be at the Auckland Film Festival in July.

"We'll have a special opening in New Zealand as well and we hope to have at least 100 Tuhoe there as part of that."

Part-documentary, part-drama, Rain follows on from Ward's 1978 observational film In Spring One Plants Alone about Puhi, an elderly woman caring for her mentally ill adult son Niki in the remote Urewera Ranges. Ward lived with the pair for 18 months in his early 20s to make the film, and the unanswered questions that arose during this time spawned his 30 years of interest in Puhi and her back story.

Chosen by the great Maori prophet Rua Kenana

to marry his son at the age of 12, Puhi was pregnant with her first child just two years later. She gave birth in the bush following a tumultuous police raid on their community in 1916 and went on to have a further 13 children. Tragically, the only one she raised into adulthood was her last, Niki, as the rest either died or were taken from her.

Ward set out to find how the loss of her children determined the course of Puhi's life and during his preliminary interviews discovered the old lady, and many around her, believed she was cursed.

"I wanted to piece together the puzzle of why she had become who she was," he says.

"There were things I didn't know about her and that really plagued me, so I went back to answer those questions."

Ward tells Puhi's tragic story masterfully, combining footage from In Spring with personal on-screen narrative, early photographs, dramatisation of historical events, and interviews with Tuhoe descendants.

A recent screening to 400 Tuhoe people was judged a success and the film was well received by its two Australian audiences last weekend, with many staying on for question and answer sessions.

The warmth and community support surrounding Ward's latest film marks a stark contrast with the controversy that haunted his previous feature, River Queen.

"It's nice not to work with anyone crazy, that really helps," he says in a veiled reference to River Queen's English star Samantha Morton. "It was good to work with really genuine, authentic people. Also, as the overall producer I felt in charge of my own destiny. I was able to get the film I wanted. And it's more than the film I set out to make."

Rain of the Children premieres at the Auckland Film Festival in New Zealand on July 12, 6.30pm at the Civic. See this Saturday's Weekends Timeout for details about the rest of the film festival programme.