

RAIN OF THE CHILDREN

(M) Directed by Vincent Ward
Reviewed by James Croot - Canterbury
Saturday, 20 September 2008



Ethereal Blend: Vincent Ward's mix of interviews, old footage, still photos and dramatic recreations combine to hypnotic effect in Rain of the Children.

Trust Vincent Ward to turn what could have been a dry, historical documentary into an engrossing, enlightening and evocative journey.

Known for his dream-like imagery and heartfelt storytelling, Ward's latest film plays to those strengths, while taking the docu-drama to new levels of adventurous, artistic endeavour.

Rain of the Children might be the amazing story of one seemingly "cursed" Maori woman, but at its heart it is actually the tale of how she bewitched, bothered and bewildered a young New Zealand filmmaker.

"The local people saw her as nothing special, but to me she was the whole world," Ward says.

He first encountered Puhi in the late 1970s, when he travelled to the remote Urewera range wanting to document the traditional Maori way of life. She was 80, he was 21.

"English wasn't her first language; Maori wasn't mine," he says. But gradually they bonded and Ward's observational documentary became *In Spring One Plants Alone*.

Puhi died in 1980, the year that film came out, but Ward has been haunted by unanswered questions about her life ever since and four years ago he began researching her extraordinary tale.

Blending interviews with relatives and researchers with footage from *In Spring*, still photos and dramatic recreations, Ward weaves a hypnotic, almost magical tale of love and loss. Jack Body (*Vigil*) and John Gibson's score is suitably elegiac, while Adam Clark (*Eagle vs Shark*) and Leon Narby's (*Whale Rider*) misty-mountain cinematography adds a mystic quality.

The presence of Ward himself as a guide is a master stroke, as he proves as engaging and informative a storyteller verbally as he is visually. Only Ward could make a scene involving a microfiche search seem like a key moment in a tense thriller. His emotional attachment to the project is obvious and likely to evoke the same response from his audience.

While there is an overwhelming sense of sadness, *Rain of the Children* is not without humour. There are tales of dogs choosing wives, and Puhi is outed as a serial bum-flasher.

The only false step appears in the casting. While mostly casting novices, mainly descendants of Puhi or her whanau, Ward also chose Rena Owen (*Once Were Warriors*) to play the floating presence of old Puhi. Her heavy make-up is distracting and the performance at odds with the understated nature of the rest of the project.

However, it is a minor irritation in a film that proves that Ward is still our most adventurous and free-spirited filmmaker. Long may he reign.

In English and Maori with English subtitles.