



VINCENT WARD talks to JANETTE HOWE about his latest filmmaking journey.

Rain of the

“Vincent Ward’s (*River Queen*, *Map of the Human Heart*) deeply personal and incredibly moving film unravels and re-imagines the story of Puhi, the Tuhoe woman he documented in 1978 for his early film *In Spring One Plants Alone*.”

Clare Stewart, director, Sydney Film Festival 2008

The result is *Rain of the Children*, a cinema feature which explores his relationship with Puhi and leads into his telling the extraordinary story of her life. Through Ward’s eyes, we learn that Puhi was the daughter-in-law of the great Tuhoe prophet, Rua Kenana, who led his people to build a visionary settlement on their sacred mountain, Maungapohatu. At the age of 12, she was given to Rua’s son Whatu in an arranged marriage. Rua named her Puhi, ‘the special one’, elevating her to a position akin to a princess within his movement. In 1916, when the township was invaded by police and Rua and Whatu were arrested and another of Rua’s sons (her close friend Toko) was killed, pregnant teenager Puhi escaped and had her baby in the bush, alone.

She went on to have 13 more children. Most were taken away from her, either through death or claimed by the whanau to be brought up by others.

Her third husband, Clarkie, was mysteriously killed in a fight with another family member said to be protecting Puhi. Niki, her son with Clarkie, was her last dependant child. At the time Ward found her in 1978, she was living in fear of the adult Niki’s violent outbursts and worried about how he would survive after her death.

Rain of the Children is a complex interweaving of threads. Just as Maori used the art of flax weaving to pass on stories and history – here Ward uses the art of film to weave together the threads of one woman’s cursed life and her connections to her community. Puhi’s life is slowly opened up to its core as Ward undertakes a journey of discovery of both Puhi and himself as a filmmaker. Described as part folktale, part ballad, part mystery story, this is Vincent Ward’s most personal feature to date. In this article Vincent Ward recounts his 30-year journey to create *Rain of the Children*.

“The film started from a simple premise – I felt haunted by this woman for 30 years, so I went out to explore that. She dramatically affected me when I was quite young and there were missing bits to the story, the jigsaw, that I couldn’t understand, even though I had stayed on and off with her for 18 months.

“Questions like, why did she walk almost horizontally, was it simply because she swept with a short broom, as with some of the elderly women in New Guinea? Why was she called The Burdened One? Why did she pray almost obsessively? Was she just very religious? And I realised it was something quite different from that. She was very frightened of something, and something weighed down on her, and while it had an obvious reality to it, her schizophrenic son, the full weight of what it was I had no idea – and that was ultimately to do with her belief in a curse.”

The journey began with *In Spring One Plants Alone*. His experience in making this observational documentary about an old Tuhoe woman, Puhi, stayed with Ward; it revealed themes he would continue to explore in his later films, but the questions



Left: Whatu's body is returned. Right: Young Puhi.

Children

remained unanswered at the time, partly because of the nature of the film, and partly because of his relationship with Puhi.

"I wanted to just accept her, after all, I was 21 and in some ways she was like the grandmother I didn't know. I did not want to openly question her too much about her past, although I would catch glimpses. I was observing her current way of life and I feared that if I questioned her too much she would become uncomfortable and close up."

But Puhi's persistence in Ward's life compelled him to find answers. The catalyst came when researcher Lynette Read went back to the Tuhoë community and found that he was remembered – the door was open. Historian Judith Binney provided the first pieces of the jigsaw and the story started to reveal itself.

"I got a couple of clues as to why she was the way she was, and one of the biggest clues was from Judith Binney – that Puhi had lost a large number of her children. Judith had managed to research the dates of their deaths, and when I understood that, then I understood a lot more about her obsessions and her psychology."

Ward started to follow the threads, consulting and interviewing with local people, 85 interviews in all, and found Puhi's story akin to folklore in its labyrinthine twists and turns.

"The locals would have bits of the story – why did the son become schizophrenic? There were four different stories to do with that, one just being that the schizophrenic gene emerges in teenagers, or that he fell from a horse, or was taken by the patupaiarehe (mist fairies) and came back changed after two weeks ... So there's all these little stories, but what was incredible was they all tied to together."

Ward's personal quest for answers takes us into Puhi's world, which might otherwise be inaccessible. Footage of Ward as a young filmmaker shows his young self gazing into the lens. He is naïve, open, explorative. He declares on camera he "wouldn't trust his younger self".

"I needed to show a small amount of who I was so you can understand the nature of the interaction – I was young, I was a little naïve, and what allowed me to make the

original film was a personal relationship with Puhi, and somehow seeing some of that you get it, you can talk about it all you like, but you get it."

Ward describes himself as a 'reluctant participant' but – "In a way, *Rain of the Children* is a filmmaker's journey, my journey to find out about this extraordinary woman and the incredible events of her life, to uncover this mystery story."

While the story is at the heart of the film, the style sets it apart. Selected for competition in the Sydney Film Festival, The Sydney Film Prize is for new directions in film and selected films "must have emotional power and resonance; be audacious, cutting edge and courageous; and go beyond the usual treatment of their subject matter".

"The style of this film has grown out of the needs of the film. I set out to make an accessible feature film for cinema that would use whatever means required to reach a wider audience and tell that story. Whether that was drama, documentary, archival stills, personal POV, interviews, anything that would allow that story to be told accessibly and vividly and bring her life alive, so I didn't have the aims of someone making a documentary per se. My aim was to bring her life alive accurately, but to bring it alive."

"Initially I started with serious consultation with Tuhoë elders. I went out and interviewed and interviewed and interviewed. I was nervous about it initially but Tainui Stevens came along and gave me confidence, which was great because it wasn't something I had done before. I got their stories, the stories to do with her and the world she grew out of. And then I realised that to make those stories crystalline I would have to dramatise them. So I went out and dramatised their stories using mokopuna and sons and daughters and people who had done the interviews, so it had this wonderful communality to it. I was excited by what they did, they managed to release their own authenticity into the drama, which isn't always easy for someone who isn't used to acting, so it gave it this unity."

"I was lucky that several other actors, non Tuhoë, helped out for a day or two on key speaking parts: Temuera Morrison, Rena Owen, Waihoroi Shortland and Taungaroa Emile ... who had the experience to pull off the more difficult pieces."



Young Puhi on horseback.

“I don’t know that I personally believe in curses, but I do believe that if you believe in a curse it has tremendous power and can absolutely affect you. There’s no question in my mind that Puhi believed in curses – she gave advice to others about what to do if such a fate befell you, and her son Niki also talked about them.” **Vincent Ward**

“I kept doing interviews and doing drama and discovering more and more and more. So I would follow a thread, I’d go back and see the same person, I’d find another relative that lived somewhere else, I would find another family line that another family line didn’t know about and gradually people came to realise that I was very much for the old lady and they liked the old movie which helped enormously, so that was the process.”

Editor Chris Plummer worked alongside Ward in shaping the story. “Chris Plummer said every decision he made, he made on some sort of idea of love. That was his one line mantra. And that doesn’t mean it’s gushy – love can be complicated, can be destructive ...”

The production was shaped by the emerging story and the need to dramatise elements. But this wasn’t a big budget shoot – small crews and small shoots meant a flexibility and budget that wouldn’t have been possible otherwise.

“There were two of us on a drama shoot, I was cameraman, and Shayne Radford was everything else ... mainly art director. We filmed six girls in a boat in Lake Waikaremoana, Shane brought the boat down from Auckland and all the costumes. I was shooting on 16 mm, frantically trying to use a handbook on how to use my light meter. Another shoot we staged a battle scene half way up Mt Maungapohatu with a six person crew, and that had horses, guns, soldiers and about 12 local extras.

“It was refreshing and I wouldn’t want to do it all the time and it doesn’t suit a lot of films, but it allowed this film a freedom... we did it in 14 short shoots, so that would give us a long time to plan them in between, but if you tried to do a longer shoot with that smaller crew it wouldn’t have worked.”

The interviews have a cinematic quality that is difficult to achieve when you are also after intimacy. “... that’s Leon [Narby] and he has such a lovely eye. I had two fantastic cameramen, and then there’s material from the old film which Al Boll and Leon shot, and for this film Leon shot the interviews and Adam Clark shot the drama recreations and they both have quite different styles but they work together really well. And other people also did some pick up shooting and drama shooting: Rewa Harre came in for a brief shoot.

“Maori have a saying ‘my past lies before me’. It might be one person speaking but actually it is an accumulation voice of stories talking – so to achieve that visually I would film it in such a way that faces would overlap, so there would be two or three people in an interview generally speaking, and it also meant that the people you could see in frame could comment.

“I’m just a storyteller and I am trying to find a good way that will communicate. I’m using whatever ways I can through film to articulate those stories. I’m trying to retain an authenticity to it, and find the authentic stories within it, even if it’s folkloric, even if they are hearsay, or one person has one opinion and someone has another.”

While illuminating Puhi’s personal struggle, the film reveals a tumultuous time in Tuhoē’s past, and feels resonant with the events of today. “It doesn’t set out to be an overtly political film, but if you show one person’s history, if you show one grain of sand on the beach you get a picture of all the grains of sand on the beach. I think they are issues that are very real to a lot of people down there, they don’t go away, and have been more in people’s minds because of the various claims – but my film is more a human-based film than issues based, it’s a humanistic story about one person’s struggle, no matter how many times you knock them down somehow you get up for the next round, which is one of the things that inspired me.”

Understanding Puhi is one part of the journey we see on screen, but there is also the filmmaker’s journey. There is a sense as you leave the film that this journey was profound. Finally giving voice to Puhi must have laid to rest some of the questions.

“... I’ve come to some sort of peace about it and I hope she has in terms of her own life ... I think the thing about Puhi is that all through my life I’ve felt that if I run into problems that somewhere she would be standing behind me, that she would kind of walk with me even though she is dead. I felt that I could always in my mind turn towards her for inspiration in that she went through so much and would always get up again no matter what hit her. I don’t think having completed this story and knowing the fullness of her life that she will disappear. I always feel she will be with me with the gift of knowledge and love and kindness.” ●