

VARIETY

Wednesday, May 2, 1984

Vigil

(NEW ZEALAND-COLOR)

"Vigil" is the strongest, most personally inspired film to come out of New Zealand to date. In form and content, and in its detailed and immaculate concern with visual imagery, it establishes in a single blow the place of its creator, 27-year-old Vincent Ward, as a unique film talent.

"Vigil" has been a time in the making. After completing two award-winning short features, "A State Of Siege" (Golden Hugo winner at Chicago) and "In Spring One Plants Alone" (Grand Prix co-winner at Cinéma du Réel in France) he began work on this, his first feature. It was four years in gestation before a 10-week shoot in a remote valley during a wet winter and early spring of 1983.

Ward's landscape is archetypal New Zealand but universal as well. His four main characters, locked as certainly within themselves as within the primeval valley they occupy and farm, constantly confront each other and withdraw as in the manner of an ancient dance.

Central figure is 11-year-old Toss (Fiona Kay), on the threshold of womanhood and caught in the tragedy of the death of her father and the coincidental arrival of a stranger, Ethan (Frank Whitten). It is primarily through her eyes, actions and interpretation of events, that the impact of Ethan's presence upon the household is registered.

While Toss is fascinated by Ethan's mysterious aura, her mother Elizabeth (Penelope Stewart) is reawakened from a joyless marriage, and her grandfather Birdie (Bill Kerr) finds a comrade for his eccentric pranks and grandiose mechanical inventions.

The remarkable quality of the film is the way it gives fresh resonance to universal themes. Ward's canvas contains the detail of old woodcuts found in brassbound bibles. Hawks swoop like angels of death down the ravines of rain-forest mountains; the act of searing off lambs' tails assumes the significance of an age-old rite.

The director is supported strongly in realization of his vision by the superb photography of Alun Bollinger, cameraman on Ward's two short features, and Jack Body's music, which never overpowers but blends subtly with sound effects and images.

The acting of the principals is never found wanting. Kerr, in a role that gives full rein to his skilled comic gifts, is particularly fine, while Stewart, an Australian actress, finds both the remoteness and innate sexuality within Elizabeth. Whitten personifies expertly the ominous aloneness of Ethan.

But it is young Fiona Kay who is the essential touchstone of the piece and with her Ward has discovered a near-perfect alter ego. Her Toss is imbued with restless inner intensity that is always compelling. Her elfin quality resides in the truest sense of that description, mischievously supernatural, never cute.

"Vigil" is filmmaking at its finest and most satisfying. It will not be an overnight commercial blockbuster in cinemas throughout the world; but it seems destined to do strong business on the increasingly lucrative art film circuits.

— Nic.

(Film is first Kiwi feature to be in competition at 1984 Cannes Film Fest. —Ed.)