

The Boston Globe

• FRIDAY, APRIL 23, 1988

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Grand and noble 'Map of the Human Heart'

By Jay Carr
GLOBE STAFF

Although he has made only three features, it's not too soon to call New Zealand's Vincent Ward one of film's great image-makers. While his new "Map of the Human Heart," is flawed, it's the kind of vaultingly ambitious film that stays with you long after the memory of many a more conventional success has faded. Grand and noble, spanning decades and continents, it means to be a sweeping romance about a couple victimized by racism — an Inuit Eskimo, Avik, from an Arctic village and a metis (half-breed), Albertine, who meet as children in a hospital in Montreal, are separated, meet again as adults during World War II, and play out their destinies.

You instantly believe in the children as kindred spirits, and you believe the sunburst of joy that breaks over Jason Scott Lee's face upon glimpsing Anne Parillaud's Albertine years later in London, where he's an airman flying bombing missions for the RAF and she's a WAAF who tracked him down through her job — analyzing aerial photographs. But their lives are complicated by Patrick Bergin. He's the dashing pilot who landed on Avik's ice floe as a boy and toted him off to the hospital. After returning to the Arctic to hunt U-Boats a decade later, he also bears Avik back to London and the RAF. But he also informs Avik that he and Albertine — eager to escape the imprisonment of her half-breed status — are engaged.

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way of playing air against earth in ways that echo Avik's rapture or despair. His story opens with Avik as a boy being tossed skyward by pals holding a blanket. The exhilaration of being airborne is diluted when his view of pure sky is invaded by the Brit's plane. Later, when he and Albertine meet in London, they dance across the glass dome of the Royal Albert Hall, giddy at having survived a buzz bomb, all but flying with love. Later, they make love atop a barrage balloon floating idyllically over the countryside at Uffington, sinking into its pillowy softness, lulled by its hugeness and silence. We see them in a long shot from above, poignant escapees. Still later,

MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART

Directed by: Vincent Ward

Screenplay by: Ward, Louis Nouru

Starring: Jason Scott Lee, Anne

Parillaud, Patrick Bergin, John Cusack,

Jeannie Morneau, Ben Mendelsohn, Robert

Juarez, Anne Galipeau

Playing at: Nickelodeon

Rated: R (language, a scene of sexuality)

Avik's plane takes a direct hit while firebombing Dresden — a mission he could have avoided had he been willing to promise Bergin's high-ranking officer that he'd no longer see Albertine — and down he plummets yet again.

On the ground, dreamwalking through the hellish Dresden inferno, he's so revolted by what he regards as the white man's cannibalism that he vows to return to the Arctic and shun the white world to which Albertine aspires. A new reworked ending supplies degrees of dramatic weight the film originally lacked, although there's still shortfall. Some concision helps, too, but Avik and Albertine still have too little screen time. Moreover, the framing story dissipates the tremendous focus Lévesque brings to Avik's role. Still, the moments that do work in "Map of the Human Heart" are breathtaking. Lee and Parillaud are invigorating presences when they get the chance to be and Ward is a director whose work you should know if you love film. "Map of the Human Heart" doesn't always fly, but when it does it flies higher than anything else now around. And don't wait for video. This is a film that cries out to be seen on a big screen.

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