

The New York Times

FILM VIEW/Caryn James

YOU HAVE TO LOVE A MOVIE that casts Jeanne Moreau so convincingly as a nun. That kind of skewed but astute thinking is typical of the New Zealand director Vincent Ward, and it makes "Map of the Human Heart" a lively new version of a laughable genre.

In its soul, the movie is a big, old-fashioned World War II melodrama: Will the war-torn lovers get together? Will the hero, ace bomber pilot that he is, survive his most dangerous raid? Will the heroine be waiting for him? They don't make movies like that anymore, for a good reason. Today, who would take such a cockeyed story seriously?

But this romantic adventure is seen through a scrim of contemporary social awareness. The hero is half Eskimo, the heroine half Indian, and the war is much less to blame for their problems than the ethnic

'Map of the Human Heart' is a traditional romantic adventure seen through a scrim of contemporary social awareness.

prejudice of white society. Mr. Ward, who also created the story, takes the soapy sensibility of favorite war-era romances like "Casablanca" and "Waterloo Bridge" and, without changing the historical setting, updates the attitude. The result is melodrama without guilt or camp. The play is blatantly commercial, but it was good enough for "Dances With Wolves"; and it certainly works here.

Though "Map of the Human Heart" borrows many old-movie conventions, its reach through 30 years and several countries is more ambitious than the films on which it is modeled. Don't panic if you've seen the preview, a jumble of scenes suggesting only that the story has something to do with John Cusack making maps somewhere snowy and another man flying planes somewhere fiery.

The film, like all successful melodramas, has an engaging narrative that carries viewers over the plot's complications and outrageous coincidences. In 1931 an English map maker named Walter Russell arrives in the Arctic and meets Avik, the half-Eskimo boy. Walter learns that the child has tuberculosis and takes him to a hospital in Montreal,



Jeanne Moreau, Robert Joamie and the director Vincent Ward on the set of "Map of the Human Heart."

where he meets Albertine, the part-Indian girl. "Eskimos hate Indians!" Avik yells when he learns of her background, and he punches his new friend. The children (played with natural charm by Robert Joamie and Annie Galipeau) are obviously fated for each other. So, of course, they must be separated.

They are reunited in England in 1944. Avik (now played by Jason Scott Lee) has joined the R.A.F., and Albertine (who has become Anne Parillaud) is working for British intelligence, both thanks to a suddenly treacherous Walter (Patrick Bergin). All this is told in flashback by the middle-aged Avik, sitting in

the Arctic in 1965, talking to another map maker (aha! John Cusack).

The map that matters most, however, belongs to Miss Moreau, in a small but crucial role that defines the film's clever strategy. As the nun who takes charge of the young Avik and Albertine at the hospital, she points

to a chart that shows "hell, where the Protestants go." It is she who tells Albertine not to act like "a half-breed" if the girl doesn't want to be treated like one. Primly self-assured (and almost unrecognizable as Miss Moreau until the actress's voice is heard), the character embodies all the wrongheadedness and intolerance of her society. The 1990's spin concerns the way Albertine accepts those views, while Avik comes to despise them.

Ingrid Bergman or Vivien Leigh would never have confronted Albertine's problems. She tells Avik plainly that she wants to marry a white man and be regarded as proper. Avik's future is determined when he is sent to bomb Dresden. In 1965, looking back, he tells the map maker, "After Dresden I thought all white people were cannibals, and I couldn't live among them." Such ethnic awareness offers 1990's viewers a fresh view of the past and a foothold in this distant world by providing an attitude that makes sense today.

The social theme never overwhelms the romance and adventure of the story. Mr. Ward seems to savor the time-honored appeal of near-misses in love and war. The young Albertine says she will one day sing on the radio, and years later Avik hears a familiar voice carried over the airwaves in the Arctic. When they are adults, bombs fall during their first rendezvous, on the roof of Albert Hall. Such scenes suggest the dash and daring viewers savored in old movies that many people grew up watching.

But Mr. Ward's quirky touches and contemporary sensibility turn the nostalgic material into a sweetly entertaining modern romp. The young Albertine gives Avik a memento of their days together in the hospital: an X-ray, which he cherishes.

"Map of the Human Heart" extends the 37-year-old director's playful use of genres and interest in fluid social attitudes. In his 1988 film, "The Navigator," medieval men are led by a visionary child through a tunnel in the earth, emerging in the 20th century. An adventure story with a brain, "The Navigator" recreates a medieval sensibility and sees the 20th century through anachronistic eyes. That film was more innovative and imaginative than "Map of the Human Heart," but they share an approach that layers past and present, using adventure as a vehicle.

At the end, "Map of the Human Heart" shows signs of too much tinkering. There is a sad conclusion, then a fantasy of a happy ending, as if someone had insisted that the audience needed to see everything work out perfectly. Until that coy moment, Mr. Ward's contemporary savvy invigorates a tired genre and allows viewers to believe in a past where an X-ray is a romantic object and Jeanne Moreau is a nun. □

SUNDAY, MAY 2, 1993