

Daily Herald

September 1986

'Vigil' stands alone on bare, stark imagery

VIGIL, written and directed by Vincent Ward, produced by John Maynard in association with the Film Investment Corporation of New Zealand and the New Zealand Film Commission. Opens tomorrow at the Samuel Goldwyn Pavilion, West Los Angeles.

Toss.....Fiona Kay
Elizabeth.....Penelope Stewart
Ethan.....Frank Whitten
Birdie.....Bill Kerr

By Deborah J. Kunk
Herald staff writer

New Zealander Vincent Ward, who turns 30 this year, directed his first feature when he was only 27. That film, "Vigil," which opens tomorrow at the Goldwyn Pavilion, is an uncommonly mature debut for such a young artist. Original in look and concept, the story is told exclusively from the point of view of its central subject, a sensitive farm girl coming of age in a remote and solitary landscape.

"Vigil" nestles its intimate human story into a huge canvas of place: the bare, lonely rocks and hills of a New Zealand sheep station. Living in rural isolation are 12-year-old Lisa (Fiona Kay), nicknamed "Toss," and her small extended family — father, mother (Penelope Stewart) and maternal grandfather (Bill Kerr). The land and weather dominate the lives of the few human inhabitants (and the film): They are silent, hard-working and poor.

Very early on, the father falls while shinning down a cliff face to free a snared sheep. He dies, and his daughter, in grief, reverts to the wild, becomes halfway feral. She wanders the land encased in layers of clothing for her ritual protection, wide-eyed with a kind of primal innocence. Toss' sheltered life has left her especially vulnerable to such a loss. Though she tries to mourn in her own way, she senses only threat. The winds of change have blown off the land, bringing Ethan (Frank Whitten), a poacher and potential rival to her father's memory.



Fiona Kay as Toss stands guard in her valley in Vincent Ward's film "Vigil."

Ethan meets Toss on common ground. They are fellow pagans, and she understands instinctively that this strong, young man is a predator. She picks up his vitality, too, even before her mother does: It could save their struggling family, but without a father, she can't spare her mother's attention. Transfixed by the effort to make sense of death and sexual attraction at the same time, she goes to her grandfather for advice, but he has already withdrawn into age.

Like Toss, "Vigil" is inarticulate, relying very sparsely on dialogue. The music is also minimal, so that the sound track seems filled with

Toss' footsteps and her frightened breathing — an intensely intimate perspective on character. If you fall under its spell, "Vigil" sucks you right inside the small body of Toss, into her complete pact with the natural world and inside her emotions, even her fearful awareness of total betrayal.

Ward's perspective is so consistent, it is like re-entry into a child's private world, sealed in secrecy. We even hear muffled voices through a wall, not words, when the adults are speaking in a room adjacent to Toss. Our identification is so complete that real events are sometimes interrupted by events that Toss dreams, including a phantom joust between her dead father and Ethan, who ride at each other holding shovels instead of lances.

And in the wool-cap helmet and muddy boots she affects for protection, Toss almost looks the part of a medieval squire, training for knighthood and the honor of carrying her father's banner into battle. This primitive touch carries over into the look of Ward's film, which is beautifully photographed. Earth tones predominate — mud browns, grass greens, sun gold, gray mud. Bluegreen mildew adds color. The camera often views the action through natural screams of mystery — fog, or the air above fire, buckled by heat. A poor man's funeral is dark and silver, seen through driving rain.

Ward seems to sense and pounce on the small details that promote his theme: the universe's indifferent tug which propels people toward death when they least expect it; toward life when they least desire it; and toward understanding always, even when it leaves a little girl defenseless, utterly bereft, waiting for death without knowing that she's not dying, just growing up.

Ward distinguishes himself, as does cinematographer Alun Bollinger, composer Jack Body and each of the four excellent actors. "Vigil" immerses viewers in pure cinematic magic, a rare thing in our jaded day.