

CITY LIMITS

February 1 - 7 1985

C I N E M A

Dreams and rain



Powerful, parochial, poetic... SIMON CUNLIFFE soaks up the splendour of 'Vigil' and meets its director.

I've been fascinated by light as long as I can remember.' Speaking about his debut feature film, 'Vigil', 28 year old director Vincent Ward begins to sound like your average self-inflated art school graduate. Yet five minutes of his film allays any such suspicions.

This film, the first from New Zealand to be entered in open competition at Cannes, is a visually poetic, at times exhilarating piece of cinema. With the aid of stunning camera work by Alun Bollinger and an original and highly integral score from Jack

Body, Ward has moulded a film whose setting is at once fiercely parochial, yet whose themes and concerns remain unusually and powerfully accessible.

'Vigil' tells the story of four people locked in confrontation by circumstance and the unyielding landscape against which they exist. The setting is New Zealand's 'heartland'—wet, isolated and depressed farm country.

Ward tells how he covered 18,000 kilometres scouting locations, how, on having settled on them, he had sets constructed to fit the 'images I had in mind', images which would lend a suitably 'primitive feel to the environment'. In 'Vigil' the mist really are damp, the rain so wet you can almost feel it. Coming from a farming background, Ward felt

quite at home creating such an environment. But the depiction of a mundane, prosaic reality is not Ward's concern.

'A lot of films here (New Zealand) come out of a realist tradition, a colloquial realism tempered by American genre films—my interest lies elsewhere. I'm looking for pockets of the outside world to match my own interior vision', he has been quoted as saying.

In 'Vigil' that vision is presented predominantly through the eyes and imagination of Toss (Fiona Kay), an eleven year old girl living with her parents and grandfather on an isolated farm. The death of her father and the simultaneous appearance of an enigmatic stranger, Ethan (Frank Whitten) propel Toss into a world

where magic and dreams predominate.

Though uninterested in a conventional approach to story-telling Ward remains concerned to tell a story, and tell it successfully. He seems worried by the world 'tableaux' attached to the film and its possible implications. Responding to a comment on the quality of his images he is anxious rather than flattered: 'Do they interrupt the flow of the narrative though, do they intrude?'

What perhaps does intrude in an otherwise admirable film is the portrayal of the relationship that develops between Toss's mother Elizabeth (Penelope Stewart) and Ethan. Having invested the film with its heightened visual elements through the visions, the imagination and dreams of Toss, through the eccentricity of her grandfather, Birdie (Bill Kerr), and through the brooding countenance of the mysterious 'hawkman' Ethan, the relationship between Elizabeth and Ethan allows the film to descend into a disappointingly conventional portrayal of desire and sexuality.

Some observers have recognised in Ward's work the influence of various acclaimed film-makers. Robert Bresson and Tarkovsky are names that crop up. Ward himself is rather impatient with comparisons, with cine-literacy quizzers. 'Ask me about anything except the films I've seen,' he says somewhat defensively. However, if pressed on cinematic mentors, he does admit to a special admiration for Carl Theodor Dreyer and Buster Keaton.

Regardless of his own sentiments, comparisons are a fact of life that Ward may have to get used to. For not only is 'Vigil' a singularly ambitious and resonant film, indicating a new maturity in New Zealand cinema, it also confirms the arrival on the international film-making scene of a remarkable new directorial talent. ●

'Vigil' is at the ICA. See Cinema: Selections for review; West End for details.