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A Fantasy Suspense That Puts Adventure First

By CARYN JAMES

A film that shuttles between an English village in 1348 and a New Zealand city in 1988 had better be brilliant or it's likely to look very foolish. Vincent Ward, the director and co-writer of "The Navigator," takes every artistic risk his bizarre premise allows. He assumes a 14th-century point of view, moves from black-and-white photography for the medieval scenes to color for the present, and weaves evocative visual imagery into a suspense tale. The result is a dark, thrilling fantasy that places Mr. Ward, a 52-year-old New Zealander, among the most innovative and authoritative young film makers.

In the isolated mining village where the story begins, the people fear that the Black Death is approaching. A smart, wide-eyed 9-year-old named Griffin has a vision, which the film presents in snippets. Against the cold black-and-white of the village, we glimpse colored fragments of a torch falling down a tunnel, a cross being placed on top of a church spire and a body, cloaked in the everyday medieval robe that makes the cast resemble hooded

monks, tumbling from the church tower.

When Griffin's adored older brother, Connor, returns from the wider world with the news that children who have black sores beneath their arms are begging in the streets, the villagers know they cannot escape the plague much longer. They desperately interpret Griffin's dream. The village will be spared, they believe, if they find the tunnel he has envisioned and go through it to place the cross on the church steeple before dawn.

The stark light and shadow of the photography adds an eerie tone to the 14th-century scenes with their claustrophobic mines and the image of a half-dozen coffins set adrift to float out to sea. And when Griffin, Connor and four other men head through the tunnel and step ahead to a glistening, colorful future, they carry that eeriness with them. We recognize an ordinary urban skyline full of brightly lit buildings, but to their medieval minds this is the Celestial City.

Inevitably, the time travelers are baffled by modern inventions like traffic; their first challenge is to cross a busy highway. But "The Navigator," which opens today at the Quad Cinema, is not about modern

technology. It is more intent on carrying the faith of its medieval characters into our own skeptical age.

Griffin, naïve yet gifted with vision, is the perfect embodiment of that theme. Hamish McFarlane plays him with a wise blend of innocence and knowledge. As Connor, Bruce Lyons adds a trace of mystery to a man who is glorified as a hero by the villagers and by Mr. Ward's camera. And as Searle, the pragmatist of the group, Marshall Napier never quite allows us to dismiss his character's skepticism.

Because Mr. Ward shares the medieval characters' faith in Griffin's vision — they have, after all, landed squarely in the boy's dream-landscape — he effectively glides over the medieval-modern contrasts and builds suspense. Will they get the cross on the spire by dawn? Can they save the falling body from the fate Griffin has foreseen?

Despite his artistic ambition, Mr. Ward always opts for adventure over social comment. Griffin stumbles across rows of televisions carrying a news program about AIDS, but the film never equates the Black Death with the contemporary disease. That

is a shrewd choice, for "The Navigator" is based on illusion, not reality. While its atmosphere is ominous, it offers an intelligent escape from the 20th century.

"The Navigator" is rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"). A few scenes suggesting death may be too intense for small children.

From Black Death To 1988 New Zealand

THE NAVIGATOR: AN ODYSSEY ACROSS TIME, directed by Vincent Ward; screenplay by Mr. Ward, Kelly Lyons, Geoff Chapple, from an original idea by Mr. Ward; cinematography, Geoffrey Simpson; edited by John Scott; music by Davood A. Tahbiz; production design, Sally Campbell; produced by John Maynard; released by the Circle Releasing Corporation, 41 Quad Cinema, 12th Street between Fifth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas. Running time: 92 minutes. This film is rated PG.

Connor	Bruce Lyons
Arno	Chris Hayward
Griffin	Hamish McFarlane
Searle	Marshall Napier
Ulf	Neil Appleby
Martin	Paul Livingston
Linnet	Sarah Pierce