

# the guardian

Thursday January 24th 1985

NEW ZEALAND is a tough terrain for film-makers. Only four indigenous features were made in the 35 years up to 1975 and, although the past eight years has witnessed a minor industrial revolution with 30 features completed, this latest South Sea bubble may be about to burst.

Generous tax concessions for New Zealand film investment were withdrawn last year, and the industry is keenly awaiting the plans of the new Labour administration.

Although few of the new Cabinet have a great interest in film, the Labour Party claims to value New Zealand's cultural integrity. Its credibility would be tarnished if it failed to give the same support as the government it defeated.

The industry has an enviable track record. While yet to produce an international hit like Australia's *Mad Max*, the producer, Larry Parr says that the percentage of New Zealand films regaining their budget is higher than that of any country in the West. "This is because our budgets are

small and the films reasonably good," he says.

The industry's ability to sell its films abroad is illustrated by the London opening of *Constance* last week, *Vigil* tomorrow, and *Utu* next month.

*Vigil* is the latest film of Vincent Ward, a 28-year-old film-maker whose work combines austerity with compassion. "I'm interested in people and trying to make something cinematic," he says.

*State Of Siege* won critical plaudits, including a prize at the Chicago Film Festival. A 52-minute adaptation of a Janet Frame story, it is an extraordinarily tactile film with a Bergman-like intensity. Ward sees it as "a form of suspense story turned inside out. You see a woman alone and aware that there's an intruder outside. You learn about her past and fears, not just about the character outside."

*Vigil*, Ward's first feature, which is set in a demonic yet strangely beautiful landscape, looks different from any other New Zealand film.

"With *Vigil* I consciously

set out to make a film that was entertaining and accessible without being *Starsky and Hutch*. I think it's important for films to say something as well as entertain. With each new film I try to reach wider without compromising."

*Vigil* has an unusual genesis. "It was like a detective story in terms of the process I went through. I had this dream. In it two men on horses were fighting but instead of lances, one had a possum trap and the other a shovel. I tried to find a way to develop a story which used that dream. It was like a mist you had to uncover."

In *Vigil* the dream becomes that of an 11-year-old girl, played by Fiona Kay, whom Ward found only after two years visiting intermediate schools and interviewing 18,000 children. Ward is a demanding director: "I was tougher on her than I was on any professional actor or actress. If I didn't like what she had done I would tell her it was junk. And if she was upset about anything she kicked me on the shins."

He believes he has to be tough to make a film that

stands apart. "I want the most singular result. Sven Nykvist once said: 'A cameraman is judged by whether he can produce a result that the director wants.' That applies to any member of the crew."

Brought up in a family that has farmed for four generations, Ward has in his time been a hunter, possum trapper, and amateur wrestler. His films offer strong images of rural loneliness and isolation, although his next will be set in a city. "The place is less important than the story. I believe everyone has a story and these are the stories I'm interested in telling."

*Vigil* may be a very personal film, but because of its environment and social background it is firmly rooted in the country's national cinema. As Ward sees it, New Zealand is at a turning point. "In the past five years it has moved from an essentially pioneering society obsessed with the values of necessity to a society which has values other than bread and butter."

"I think it extraordinary that a country can be divided and people get their heads split open over the visit of a

rugby team from a country thousands of miles away. That wouldn't happen in many other countries but shows that New Zealand is now a country whose values are not purely concerned with shelter and produce. This sort of a society is more open to new ways of seeing."

It is not only the lowering landscape in *Vigil* that created a challenge. It is the New Zealanders' quest for an identity. As Maurice Shadbolt wrote in *Strangers And Journeys*: "Take words like success and failure away and there were just people trying to make senses of themselves."

The themes found in the works of such writers as Duggan, Sargeson, Lee and Cross have found their way into New Zealand films, but for how much longer? Unless the new government can find a way to support New Zealand films its best young directors may have to go abroad to work. Ward makes no bones about it: "If there is no more money for the film industry I will leave New Zealand. I don't give a damn where I go as long as I can make films."

**Brent Lewis**