

THE DOMINION POST



A Mighty Totara Has Fallen; River Queen a fine tribute

Wi Kuki Kaa, one of our great theatre and film actors, has passed.

Wi (Ngati Porou) was a major figure in the social, cultural and political life of Aotearoa. Wi's screen roles included Wiremu in *Utú*; Iwi in the beautiful, magnificently instructive *Ngati*; Trinity Roots' serene, meditative *Little Things*; and a fine, piquant last role, Old Rangi, in **River Queen**.

I did not know Wi and I did not know he had cancer. I last saw him at the Wellington premiere of *River Queen* in November. He charmingly cracked a couple of great one-liners, and rightly pointed out how the film was better than *Utú*.

"It was the silence of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention," Vincent Ward uncannily invokes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in his frequently brilliant *River Queen*. There's a magisterial aerial shot of the winding Whanganui River, establishing the potent sense of place, as Irish Sarah (a tremulous Samantha Morton) heads up river to find her kidnapped boy.

With shades of *Huck Finn* and *Apocalypse Now*, this 1860s journey, set as the last Maori bastions resist British colonisation, plumbs the nation's soul. Including some shameful colonial behaviour and attitudes which some people still indulge; but thankfully *River Queen* doesn't succumb to black armband or illusory golden age rhetoric, illuminating our complex past with appropriate shades of grey.

River Queen, more ambitious and vital than *Utú*, takes the creative indemnity of "fiction", but is essentially based on real peoples' stories. Temuera Morrison portrays Te Kai Po – think legendary warrior Chief Riwha Titokowaru – with his scorching "I have tasted white flesh... I shall not die" challenge to his British army nemesis. Like Morrison, Cliff Curtis blazes charisma as Wiremu, who fights for both sides. W Ward deftly avoids the condescending, jarring pitfalls of well-intentioned but mutton-headed works like *Dances With Wolves* and *The Last*

Samurai.

The fog of war in the new world, literal and metaphorical, is captured by Ward and his superb cinematographer Alun Bollinger (*Vigil*, *Heavenly Creatures* and *Perfect Strangers*). Bollinger's brooding images – leisurely paced but gripping – utilise a multihued, beautiful palette of green, peppered with blood red.

There are some inventively filmed, invigorating haka. Think *Kapa o Pango*, but with a battle for your land and way of life, rather than a rugby game, at stake. The following Kiwi versus Iwi Rumbles in the Jungle are rugged and visceral.

Unlike *King Kong*, the film is a piercing, contemporary analysis of Conrad. Deeply thought and charged, it teaches and warns, as well as entertains. Unlike Conrad, *River Queen* respectfully, powerfully understands and conveys the Maori world and Maori concepts; mana – Chief Te Kai Po's, the Whanganui River's – and Maori spirituality. (Slothful, lost reviewers, such as the American who scribed Beth and Jake's ultimate *Warriors'* confrontation as "You have no manner", may find *River Queen* confusing or underweight.)

A second viewing swayed a few initial doubts. Like *Whale Rider* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *River Queen* convinces that you don't have to be indigenous to tell indigenous stories. Ward, who lived for 18 months as the sole Pakeha in a remote Maori community in the Ureweras, deserves a lot of mana. This is his history, this is my history, this is your history – every New Zealander should see *River Queen*.

Wi, a proud, inspiring artist, will be missed. Arohanui, rest in peace, haere, haere, haere.—
Alexander Bisley
Aside from additions and amendments, much of this material was originally published in The Dominion Post.