

## River Queen

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**YOU'VE GOT TO ADMIRE** Vincent Ward's resilience in the face of adversity. After five years of devoted personal preparation on *River Queen*, he was ousted from the director's chair mid-shoot and replaced by DOP Alun Bollinger, only to be asked to return to edit and reshoot parts of his movie. Ward, who claims his hair went grey during the process (can you blame him?), stood waist-deep and alone in the freezing Thames to complete the film's bookend shots. All this after a production which was spooked by cryptic Maori warnings of impending disaster suffered horrendous winter weather, and on which a demanding Samantha Morton – who was hospitalised during the shoot – allegedly feuded like mad with the crew.

It's quite the feat, considering that what could have been *Lost In La Mancha 2* is in fact a robust and highly entertaining picture. Though undermined by slightly erratic pacing and a third act that feels a touch underwhelming, the film has an abundance of rollicking action, wonderful imagery and committed performances. It's a viscerally engaging adventure that works the emotions.

In the lead, Samantha Morton conveys a conflict and a trauma as desperate as the personal journey her character undertakes; her performance is intense, unpredictable and compelling. You can sense her immersion in the part, and she makes a tough heroine. Kiefer Sutherland's Irish brogue is cartoonish but he's dedicated, although chief villain Lesser helps himself to a scenery buffet. Temuera Morrison, meanwhile, is a forceful presence, even when he's bizarrely war-mongering in various sexual positions. Better still is the dependable Cliff Curtis as the warrior who falls for his brother's girl; it's this theme of family bond irrespective of race and conflict – shared by co-writer Toa Fraser (director of upcoming Kiwi film *No. 2*) – that resonates most.

There are rousing set-pieces, too. Ward's spectacular vistas prove that New Zealand's scenery is even grander *sans* hobbits and centaurs, his camera finding awesome sights that underscore the tumult of the character drama.

Against all odds, then, *River Queen* holds it together. Vincent Ward can rest a little easy, for once.

**LUKE GOODSSELL**

### VERDICT

An emotionally involving and visually arresting adventure.

