

Movie reviews with Vicky Roach

When maternal love conquers all



RIVER QUEEN [M]

★★★★☆

Director: Vincent Ward

Starring: Samantha Morton, Kiefer Sutherland, Cliff Curtis, Temuera Morrison and Rawiri Pene

Screening: Selected cinemas

Once *Were Warriors* star Temuera Morrison travels back to a time when the Maori were still at war with their British colonisers in *River Queen*, a 19th-century drama about a woman who gets caught in the crossfire.

Rather than tell the story from the point of view of the soldiers, director Vincent Ward (*Vigil*, *The*

Navigator) has chosen to use the tenacity of maternal love as his moral compass. This allows him the fluidity to chart a brutal and complex world where allegiances are constantly shifting and death comes swiftly and without warning.

River Queen is set in New

Zealand, in 1868. Sarah (Samantha Morton), who lives with her soldier father (Stephen Rea) in a frontier garrison on the river Te Awa Nui, falls pregnant to a Maori youth and gives birth to a son, Boy (Rawiri Pene). Seven years later, Boy is kidnapped by his Maori grandfather in an act of revenge.

Abandoned by her father, Sarah dedicates her life to finding her son. She survives – just – as a healer. Her one ally is a broken-down soldier named Doyle (Kiefer Sutherland).

Sarah's desperate search leads her deeper and deeper into rebel Maori heartland, up the mist-shrouded river, which is bordered on either side by thick vegetation.

When chief Te Kai Po (Morrison) falls ill, she agrees to travel to his village to try to cure him in the hope of finally being reunited with her child.

There's an ominous echo of *The*

Heart Of Darkness in Sarah's dangerous, blindfolded journey upriver, to a place where no white woman has travelled before. Village life, however, is easier to adapt to than she might have thought. Sarah slowly becomes reconciled with her Boy, who now thinks of himself as more of a man, and falls in love with his uncle (Cliff Curtis).

As the warring tribes close in on each other, this fragile little family of three is caught in a densely-forested no-man's land. Doyle is similarly stranded.

The brooding New Zealand bush, through which the fictitious river snakes like an artery, is perhaps the star player here, although Morton and Curtis are charismatically cast as the cross-cultural couple.

River Queen is the sort of troubled gothic love story New Zealand filmmakers do so well.