

## River Queen

Allan Hunter in Toronto || 29 September 2005

Dir: Vincent Ward. NZ-UK. 2005. 114mins.



**Long before Peter Jackson became the Lord of the Kiwis, Vincent Ward was the leading light of New Zealand cinema. After disappointing Hollywood ventures and aborted projects, Ward finally returns home for *River Queen*, a labour of love period drama that emerges virtually unscathed from a difficult, fractured production history.**

The story of an Irish woman caught in the crossfire of the conflicts between white colonialists and the native Maori population, *River Queen* is slow to capture the interest. Frequently it feels as if *The Last Samurai*, *Dances With Wolves* and even *The Mission* have all stolen much of its thunder but it gradually builds into an absorbing mixture of personal drama and history lesson.

Focusing on the spectacular, untamed scenery of the New Zealand locations, the star names and the romantic aspects of the story could provide a diligent distributor with a modest, middlebrow arthouse success.

Ward spent three years developing a project that became the starting point for *The Last Samurai*. *River Queen* is also set in the 1860s and also deals with a clash between cultures as the modern world takes shape and ancient, traditional cultures are staging a last, desperate defence of their nationhood.

A fictional tale inspired by various true events, the film finds its focus in Sarah (Morton), a young Irishwoman who has grown up in the frontier garrison of Te Awa Nui. Pregnant by a Maori boy, she gives birth to a son who she calls Boy.

Boy (Pene) is kidnapped by his Maori grandfather

when he is seven. Sarah's quest to retrieve the lad takes her up river to a Maori village where she is able to heal ailing chief Te Kai Po (Morrison).

She is reunited with Boy and starts to fall in love with his uncle Wiremu (Curtis). Her loyalties and her heart are torn when Te Kai Po declares war on the colonial forces led by sadistic British commander Baine (Lesser) and including her good friend and fellow countryman Doyle (Sutherland).

*River Queen* initially struggles to find its focus. Events are rushed and the story is not given the chance to breathe and develop. Admittedly, Ward has a good deal of material to cover as he tells of Sarah's relationship with her father (Rea), tries to convey life under British military occupation and give some weight to the character of kilt-wearing Irishman Doyle.

Matters do improve once Sarah's single-minded devotion to her son starts to shape and simplify events and she embarks on a quest that owes something to the iconic John Ford western *The Searchers*.

Given its basis in historical fact, *River Queen* is a little too generic for its own good. There is not enough of the telling detail or incident that would make it seem more special. Ward also has an unfortunate fondness for using slow motion for emphasis.

However, the powerful story does eventually take hold, the journey into Werner Herzog-style territory is striking to the eye and Morton provides a strong emotional constant amidst all the battles and conflicts.