

A Hypnotic Look at an Old Woman

By Judy Stone

A talented young New Zealand director with uncanny insight into the lives of older woman will present his two unique films at the New York theatre tonight. Vincent Ward's drama, "A State of Siege", and his documentary, "In Spring One Plants Alone", were shown in the last San Francisco International Film Festival's New Directors' series.

"A State of Siege", based on Janet Frame's novel, won the Golden Hugo Award at the 1978 Chicago Film Festival and a special jury prize at the Miami Film Festival. The documentary is about an 82 year old Maori woman's struggle for survival also took Chicago's Silver Hugo Award in 1980.

Ward, 24, educated originally as an artist, uses few words to express moods in his films. "A State of Siege" is an almost hypnotic look at a middle-aged art teacher facing retirement, after a career spent trying to explain perspective, texture, shade and color. Her private life seems to have been spent caring for her dying mother.

We meet her on the eve of her decision to leave the city and venture to a seashore retreat where she will paint and live a life of her own. She is warned to keep her doors locked, and as she goes about routines in her dilapidated home, we learn of her past: a man who did not return from World War II, a demanding parent, unimportant memories of students.



She is an incongruous sight on the beach, painting the roaring surf in her schoolmarm's dress and flowered bonnet. Gradually, her isolation at home plays on her nerves; she hears strange sounds and tries to call the police and a neighbour. Her growing sense of fear is muted, but there is something frighteningly infectious about it in the quietly powerful performance of Anne Flannery, her eyes lost in reverie.

Ward evokes more horror with his play of light and shadow in this low-budget movie than Stanley Kubrick was able to create in all of "The Shining". Finally, what Ward expresses is the devastating horror of utter loneliness.