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'VIGIL': MYSTICAL, EARTHY VISION OF LIFE'S CYCLE

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Vigil" (opening Friday at Westside Pavilion) celebrates nature in its eternal cycle of life and death as it is experienced by an imaginative, isolated New Zealand farm girl named Toss (Fiona Kay) on the brink of puberty.

In his first full-length feature, Vincent Ward, the most gifted and original of New Zealand's film makers, has created an extraordinary visual and psychological experience, a work of awesome beauty at once mystical and earthy, robust and eerie. It is screen poetry of the utmost rigor, achieving maximum effects from minimal means.

Soon after our introduction to starkly beautiful, slate-gray landscapes, we're shown Toss' father clutching after one of his sheep in a high crevasse; Ward cuts away as we hear the man keening as he plummets to his death. His widow, Elizabeth (Penelope Stewart), is consumed not by grief but by the single-minded desire to sell off the place and get out as quickly as possible. And when we catch her—much to our surprise—looking longingly at a tutu and worn ballet slippers, we see her in a new way: no longer a worn farm wife but a still-young woman with the hollow cheeks and elegant jaw line that would have been just perfect for a ballerina.

The tall, bearded stranger (Frank Whitten) who comes to the farm bearing the shepherd's bro-

ken body keeps hanging around, looking for work—and looking over the attractive widow. Elizabeth dismisses him rudely, but her crusty elderly father (Bill Kerr), an eccentric inventor, can't handle all the chores himself. We know this Ethan will be back, just as we—and Toss—know this is the man who's going to take her father's place. And just as an erotic tension develops between the man and the woman, a resentment starts building in the girl, so stunned by her father's death and so confused by what's happening between her mother and the intruder—and also by what's happening inside her own body.

Ward brings to his story a stunning double vision. To Toss, Ethan is a hooded, bleak figure who looks to be straight out of "The Seventh Seal" and who in her imagination becomes the Devil's Angel. To Elizabeth, he's just a seedy-looking but forceful and insinuating guy who gets harder and harder to resist. Ward's deft switching between points of view of terse, matter-of-fact adults and an innocent, dreamy girl has the effect of anchoring his turbulent, romantic images in the grit of truculent everyday exchanges and routines.

Ward has everything going for him—perfect cast, remarkable cinematographer Alun Bollinger, subtle composer Jack Brody and clearly sympathetic co-writer Graeme Tettey—but "Vigil" (Times-rated Mature for adult themes and situations) is all his, a unique work by a major talent who only this year turns 30.