

## Writing poetry for the screen

By Nancy Scott

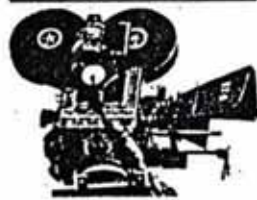
**S**UPPOSE you met young John Keats standing forlornly in a corner at a great big party. If you'd never heard of him, would you know he was a rare and special poet when he started talking to you?

An impossible question?

Probably, but it's one I've had on my mind the last few months. This is how it began: At the San Francisco Film Festival last October, overwhelmed with famous movie names and famous faces, I decided that sooner or later I'd like to talk to somebody nobody has ever heard of, some young person, maybe, who has just begun the long struggle to make a famous name in the movie business.

God knows there are millions of them, from the kids in the high school filmmaking classes to the young men and women who scrape together enough money (chiefly from grants) to finance tiny documentaries that will be seen once only at festivals, if they are lucky, and be thereafter relegated to archives and the college circuit.

I don't know what famous faces they fit over their own when they look in the mirror in the morning — George Lucas? Ingmar Bergman? Francois Truffaut? Martin Scorsese? — nor whether money and fame are more



### The Young Filmmakers

First of a series

and they are more similar to the American Indians than to the Australian Aborigines. Ever since the '30s, they've grown more and more urbanized, which has meant they've left behind the strong tribal and extended family culture they came from.

"In recent years there has been a movement back to find their own culture and language (which they weren't allowed to speak in their own schools) and a lot of pakehas were interested in that movement."

He stops to spell pakeha. He says, "It's the Maori name for whites."

He is scrupulous about spelling problematical words, and he also tries to be scrupulous about clear syntax, which is a good thing because his accent is such a strong colonial Cockney that it would tax Alfred Doolittle's ear. I've told him that I can't understand him on the phone at all, which makes him laugh. "Nobody can," he says.

Where were we? Pakehas. Yes. He says: "I had a certain suspicion that it was a fashionable bandwagon movement, and the reason that I decided to make the documentary was that I was a little skeptical. I knew there was a genuine center and I wanted to find what did remain of a grassroots culture in 1980."

Ward's 'In Spring One Plants Alone,' a study of an old Maori woman and her retarded son, will be shown tomorrow night at the York Theater



important to most of them than that mysterious process called art. I do know that for every movie maker you may justly call an artist, there are several thousand who are simply competent (or incompetent) professionals, and no more, and I realized that it would be a joyful accident should I find someone who might actually grow up to be a Truffaut.

But I did. He was standing in a corner at a great big party. Looking forlorn. I did decide that he was probably rare and special even before I saw his movies. I will cheerfully eat my words if he grows up to be the Robert W. Service of filmdom. Looking forlorn. I did decide that he was probably rare and special even before I saw his movies. I will cheerfully eat my words if he grows up to be the Robert W. Service of filmdom. Instead of John Keats, because he made his first feature movie when he was 21 and he is only 24 now, but I'm betting on Keats.

His name is Vincent Ward; he grew up halfway around the world from Hollywood on a sheep ranch in a community with a name I can't pronounce: Wairarapa. It is in New Zealand, where, until the last decade, there has been no movie industry to speak of, unless you count four feature films made between 1940 and 1970 as a movie industry. During the '70s, the situation began to change; I doubt that you could call it an explosion of activity, but as of 1978 (through an act of Parliament), the New Zealand Film Commission has helped to launch six feature films and two shorts.

Including the two movies made by Vincent Ward, who was going to be a painter and a sculptor ("that's what I've always been good at") and became a movie maker instead because there were a couple of cameras to play with at the university. No film courses, though, and no lighting equipment, which may have been a good thing. He says: "You had to learn to see in natural light, and I think that's why the films I make have a special look."

Fortunately for Ward, Albert Johnson, the indefatigable collector of movies for the San Francisco Film Festival, saw Ward's movies on a trip to New Zealand, agreed that they had a special look and brought them — and Ward — back for the new directors series.

I missed seeing them then. So did most of the press. So no wonder Ward was looking like a pauper at a gathering of princes when I first met him, standing in the corner. A fragile young man. Pale. Smudges under the eyes. Shy, wary, worried and tired. I think I may have suggested an interview just to see if he might smile.

I've seen him twice since then, once last fall and once last week, and each time he still looked shy, wary, worried and tired, but I have learned that he is about as fragile as a drayhorse (thus ends any save a metaphorical comparison to John Keats) and that I may have confused worry with his intense determination to be seen and heard and understood — on his own terms.

Whether American audiences will accept those terms remains to be seen. You can judge for yourself tomorrow night when his movies show at the York Theater (one night only). They are "In Spring One Plants Alone," a documentary written, directed and produced by Ward, about an old Maori woman and her son, and the short feature he made when he was 21 called "A State of Siege," which he directed and wrote with Timothy White as co-author.

I think that both movies are remarkable, but I'm not sure what I would have made of the documentary if I had not listened to Ward talk about it before I saw it last week, because it's entirely visual, without text or narration. Ward thinks that is as it should be; I think it was richer for me because I knew some facts that aren't explained on screen; I don't know which of us is right, but here is some of what he had to say:

"The Maoris are the Polynesian people of New Zealand



Ward traveled some 6,000 miles by car ("that's a long way in New Zealand") for six months until, quite by accident, he found the 82-year-old woman who is the heroine of his movie. She speaks Maori and she "personifies the spiritual in the everyday" that was once a mainstay of Maori life. Ward says, "Every part of her life was ritual." This fascinated and disturbed him, because every part of her life, from the chopping of wood to the washing of dishes, was such very hard work under circumstances of such severe poverty, and it had only one goal — the care of her son, who is 40 years old and mentally ill.

"He looked like a baby," Ward says. "He was very lonely and his only friends were kittens."

Later, as he talks about being the only white in a Maori community, he echoes that line, but he is talking about himself: "My only friend was a kitten. I was very lonely."

As he says it, he has a look of wry melancholy that you don't often see on the faces of American men of his age. There is something of the 19th century about Ward, or at least something not quite contemporary. Perhaps it's



The director at work behind the camera

because New Zealand is so isolated and so traditional; or it may have to do with his family. His mother is a German Jew who met his father in England before World War II. They came to New Zealand in 1947. "They bought a small area covered in scrub," Ward says. "It took eight years to break it in. They lived in the pioneering tradition."

They also lived in a cultural atmosphere that made its mark on Ward. He says, "Because my mother is German, I got interested in the German lighting tradition, in Fritz Lang, and I got interested in expressionist painting." He asks if I have heard of the German expressionist painter and lithographer Kathe Kollwitz; it occurs to me that Kollwitz and Lang seem a long way time and place from the old Maori woman and her son, and that there is something both poignant and ironic about carrying that artistic vision into the bush.

Please don't suppose, however, that Ward is all expressive shadows and gloom. He is a realist, too, and he does laugh, even when he talks about the rigors of making a movie about a deranged man:

"Every once in a while the son would start going crazy. He'd chase his mother with the ax or else he'd smash up the veranda, and every time I'd repair it, he'd smash it up again."

Ward finally fixed the veranda with 2-by-4s, which weren't so easily smashed. The son broke the windows instead. Ward thinks this is very funny, which I guess it is. Now. At the time, as he describes it, he and his tiny crew of three men must have set some kind of record for difficult filmmaking.

"The first problem was that the community was suspicious, and rightly so, and we could only film for six or



24-year-old Vincent Ward of New Zealand has two films to his credit: 'Within both my movies there is a very strong sense of the land'

Examiner/Judith Calson

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— From Page E1  
seven days out of every six or seven weeks because the old lady couldn't cope with us, even though she liked us. It was too much strain."

He grins with some pleasure and some chagrin, and says: "Out of those six or seven days, you could guarantee she'd also go away for a day or two. Now, I'm pretty determined,

images that are as economical as any poem and as hard to describe in brief prose as any poem.

It has an effective sound track — a quiet piano score and natural sounds that are sometimes magnified — but it has so little dialogue you might as well be alone in an empty forest. Or a silent movie. What you see is what you understand, save for one moment when the teacher talks about her terrible

He grins with some pleasure and some chagrin, and says: "Out of those six or seven days, you could guarantee she'd also go away for a day or two. Now, I'm pretty determined, but I met my match, so we'd travel 400 miles back to the city, then I'd have to rehire the crew."

Sometimes Ward sent the crew back and stayed behind; this was a strain, between the sad, lonely mad Maori and the suspicious community, but the old lady came to think of him as her grandson. He talks about her as though he were: "If you can imagine this most determined, bloody-minded but marvelous old lady, bent double because of the weight she's carried on her back all her life."

By now it's pretty clear to me that Ward has two qualities that mark him as an artist — determination, which you may call perseverance if you like, and the gift of compassionate observation. The two qualities are evident in his face. It's a gentle face, but when he talks about a difficult moment, he sets his teeth and he looks like a feisty cat. A lynx.

An artist, certainly, but rare and special? His choice of subject for his first feature movie "A State of Siege" convinced me that, yes, he is; seeing it convinced me that he is a poet.

The movie is an adaptation of a novel by Janet Frame about a 53-year-old art teacher who retires to an isolated cottage near the sea. It is short, it is terrifying and it is full of



Anne Flannery plays a frightened woman in Vincent Ward's 'A State of Siege,' tomorrow at the York

little dialogue you might as well be alone in an empty forest Or a silent movie. What you see is what you understand, save for one moment when the teacher talks about her terrible loneliness and her fear of "an intruder," who is prowling outside in the darkness.

I suppose you could say that it's a movie about paranoia, but that's too precisely clinical a description for the fear that Ward invokes — fear that all of us must have felt at some time or another, particularly those of us who are women. He creates an uneasy drama out of everyday chores (scrubbing a hideously dirty old bathtub or cleaning out a medicine chest), and he makes nature frightening in ways that my intellect tells me are childish and irrational, which did me no good on the spot: There is one long, powerful tracking shot of a wave roaring ashore that almost sent me running from the theater in panic.

He has a painter-poet's eye for the land; this does not strike him as unusual: "Just about every New Zealand film and novel has a strong feeling for country; within both my movies there is a very strong sense of the land — a certain predatory sense of the land, a sort of ominous violence of the elements. That's again very much a New Zealand tradition."

Ward's own estimate of his work is that it is demanding, that it "makes audiences work." He's quite right, but it's exciting work and worth the effort even though there are moments in both movies when the images shift from acceptable ambiguity into obscurity. I can't, for instance, assess the end of "A State of Siege," because I'm not sure what happened, and I still think that the Maori documentary is sometimes more a puzzle than a poem.

But I don't think Ward means to be deliberately obscure. There's no pretension to him. He may grow into that (the Jean-Luc Godard of New Zealand), but I doubt it. At the moment he is still reliving the experience of making the Maori movie. He says, "I want to make use of that experience and put it into another film. I want to catch the paranoia that was there in that little valley and watch it blossom. It won't be about Maoris, though."

The frivolous thought occurs to me, because I am uneasy over Ward's apparent preoccupation with emotional derangement, that he'd have a great future in Hollywood as a director of horror movies — should he abandon his own poetic vision.

I don't think he will. He's too honest. When I asked him about the future distribution of his movies (unsure at the moment) and whether the Maori film had been seen on TV in New Zealand, he said: "I can't put it on New Zealand TV because I promised the old lady I wouldn't."

Of course.