

# THE MAP- MAKER

*New Zealand director Vincent Ward only makes films if he really feels like it. Eugene Byrne talks to the man best known in Hollywood for not directing Aliens3 about his much-acclaimed latest film, 'Map of the Human Heart' and finds that at the moment, he'd rather dig the garden.*

"We spent over half a million dollars on safety alone because we were dropping right onto the ice-floe edge by helicopter or plane 100 miles from anywhere. You see things there you've never seen before, not even on film." - Vincent Ward

With Vincent Ward's films, you must expect the unexpected. His debut feature, 'Vigil' was a rain-soaked tale set in a remote part of New Zealand charting a child's growing awareness of what a terrifying place the world can be. It was another four years before he followed it up with 'The Navigator', a unique and idiosyncratic epic about a bunch of medieval peasants from Cumbria travelling to a 1980s city to place a Celtic cross atop a cathedral spire as a votive offering against the Black Death in their home village.

Ward is not prolific. At the moment, he claims to have no specific plans following the release of his latest film, 'Map of the Human Heart', which comes four years after 'The Navigator'. "I'm looking at a lot of different material," he says off-handedly. "I take a lot of trouble to find material which I believe has freshness to it, and originality - whatever that means - I scour a lot of terrain before I settle on what I want to do."

For 'Map of the Human Heart' he scoured terrain quite literally. "I was travelling in the Arctic with an anthropologist friend of mine. At the time I had been writing a sort of love story about two people separated over a great period of time who formed a very strong bond in childhood and about how it affected them when they were older. When I went to the Arctic I changed the central character to an Inuit. I heard a wonderful story about a guy who used to go on mapping expeditions in the 1940s, and he'd pole-vault over creeks and crevasses, and as he'd pole vault he'd shout 'Holy Boy!' It was near the tree line, and on the rare occasions that they would find a tree, he'd carve 'Holy Boy' on them."

'Map' is the story of half-Inuit, half-white Avik, befriended by English aviator Walter Russell (Patrick Bergin) who arrives in his village on a map-making expedition. When the latter realises the boy has tuberculosis, he takes him on a plane ride to Montreal ('Holy Boy!' yells the exhilarated Avik as they take off) where he is consigned to a sanatorium and the less-than-tender mercies of fearsome Mother Superior Jeanne Moreau. Avik falls for half-Cree, half-white Albertine, and so begins a love story which spans lifetimes and continents, to be continued in wartime England by the now-adult pair, played by Jason Scott Lee (due to play Bruce Lee in forthcoming biopic 'Dragon', fact fans) and Anne Parillaud, she of 'Nikita' fame. The scene that everyone's talking about is the consummation, which takes place atop a half-inflated barrage balloon somewhere above the Home Counties. "You guys liked that, didn't you?" sniggers Ward.



Vincent Ward.

Much of the film is about characters being where they don't belong. After returning to his village from the hospital, Avik finds himself an outcast, scapegoated for the season's bad hunting. He travels to London, and as a bomb-aimer in the RAF witnesses the Dresden fire-storm. "He goes into the 'Civilised' world," says Ward, "yet it is right at the centre of a primitive act of savagery."

Unlike Avik, who follows his own instincts, Albertine is desperate to fit in. Though half-Indian, she is desperate to be part of white society, and so finds it impossible to be with Avik, who now finds himself competing with Russell in a classic metaphor of colonialist betrayal. But that's far from being the end of the story...

Just as his characters are outsiders, Ward is drawn in all his films to marginal places. "I grew up on an isolated farm on quite harsh terrain,"

he says. "When my father returned from the War he was quite badly burned. Three quarters of his body was burned in the Middle East, so my childhood memories of growing up are of this very harsh land that he was breaking in, the skeletal trees and this man who was almost as burned as the landscape, a scarred landscape and a scarred figure. That sense of terrain and of people working in a terrain I suppose comes from the viewpoint of my father working in this harsh and precipitous place."

Much of 'Map' was made on Baffin Island, inside the Arctic Circle where the mercury regularly falls to less than 20 degrees. "We had all the usual trouble," he says, "such as cameras freezing up all the time. But we came well-prepared. We spent over half a million dollars on safety alone because we were dropping right onto the ice-floe edge by helicopter or plane 100 miles from anywhere. You see things



Anne Parillaud (adult Albertine) and Annie Galipeau, who plays young Albertine in 'Map of the Human Heart'

there you've never seen before, not even on film. One day we were filming and there was this bay full of black water going for about half a mile and we had a scene set up in front of it. There wasn't anything in the bay except for a dinghy, and within the space of the shot, in just about two minutes, about half the bay filled up with ice. The Eskimos just screamed at us to get the boat out of the water or it'd be crushed. The environment changes so rapidly."

At this point, your correspondent foolishly observes that the crew would have had to be real careful with the antique aircraft they land on the ice. "Ah. Well, it was an enormous flying model, actually," says Ward. "Even the figures in it were remote controlled, and you could mount a camera in it. Then we had a full-scale set with a working motor that we had in the Arctic which was actually towed by Skidoos, a little bit like a stagecoach only instead of horses it had six snowmobiles and Eskimos - just out of shot of course."

Aeroplanes and aerial photographs are a recurring theme of the film, whether they're of polar bears and whales, the destruction of Dresden or that barrage balloon scene. "It's partly this shamanistic thing of people flying. A lot of associations are also to do with a sense of freedom, escaping the limitations of being earth-bound," he says. Seeing things from above is what maps are about, and this film is pre-eminently about maps and map-makers.

"Here is this guy (Avik) with an almost innate sense of finding his way. If you look at Inuit art - and it's the same with Aboriginal art in Australia - because they live in places that are seemingly featureless they had to memorise the terrain as if seen from the air. So I liked the idea of having a guy who saw the world almost as if he could see over the horizon, he had an intuitive sense of surviving in that terrain, and pitting him against a European mapmaker, with a more academic, mathematical, scientific viewpoint. Finally, as the story is partially a love story, the terrain they share in common happens

to be the woman they both love."

Avik carries what he considers a 'map' of Albertine in the form of a chest X-ray of her filched from the sanatorium. Later, he communicates with her via aerial photographs, while in a closet in his office Walter keeps a mannequin of a woman plastered with maps.

The danger for a filmmaker - who happens to have a superb visual sense - playing intellectual games like this is that you can end up making a very cold, contrived film. You could end up like that Peter Greenaway, a man who makes lovely pictures, but films that often want for human feeling. Ward was aware of this hazard and worked hard to avoid it. "We made a deliberate decision not to make a film that was purely intellectually-based, and we wanted a film where you were less aware of the filmmakers and more directly absorbed in the characters. Less emphatically intellectual and quite deliberately more emotional - that's how we wrote it, constructed it and filmed it."



Robert Joamie as young Avik in 'Map of the Human Heart'

As befits someone of colonial farming stock, Ward is determined to plough his own very idiomatic furrow. He can be cussed and unbending. It's not that he clings preciously to some notion of artistic integrity or is bothered about 'selling out'. He just wants to do his own thing. This, after all, is the man who is best known in Hollywood for not directing *Aliens*<sup>3</sup>. Invited to do the job, he disliked the original script, spent five months re-writing it but finally dropped out. "Essentially I found that the story was being watered down, and on a project of that scale it's very hard to maintain a single viewpoint on the material, which is kind of necessary for it to have any singularity to it otherwise it becomes a mishmash of everything you've seen before." Of the final product, he says diplomatically that "under the circumstances they made a very good job. It's not the film I would have made, but given the pressures they were under they did well."

This experience neither rules in nor rules out future trips to Tinseltown. "I'm pretty much material-driven. I get a lot of American material to read, it's just whether a particular project interests me. It's not that I have a burning desire to live and work in Los Angeles. I can if I want, it's just whether I like a particular project."

For someone hailed as one of the most unusual talents in contemporary cinema, he's curiously blasé. He has no big projects in the pipeline, nor any soaring ambitions, "just to make several good films". At the moment he's spending a lot of time working on the garden of his Sydney home, an activity whose futility he cheerfully acknowledges. Surely the Artist has to work to ensure his immortality? "No. I don't believe that theory. Film stock only has a limited life. So does videotape. The only thing that filmmakers have in common is that all their films won't last. If that bothered me I'd be wiser working in marble."

● 'Map of the Human Heart' plays at the Arnolfini, Bristol, from Fri 16 to Sun 25 July. See *Film Diary* for details and review. 'The Navigator' is screened on BBC2 on Sun 11 July at 12.05am.

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