

*"None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of final victory. It could only be the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers."*

Albert Camus - *The Plague*

# MEDIEVAL ODYSSEY

**O**N two very different days - one sun cut, one cloudy and iced with a dull rain - talking to Vincent Ward becomes a matter of getting the story through, as if fragments of the conversation might disappear into the light or blow away in a heavy wind. A New Zealand filmmaker of devastatingly visionary inclinations, he resides deeply, practically, within his work.

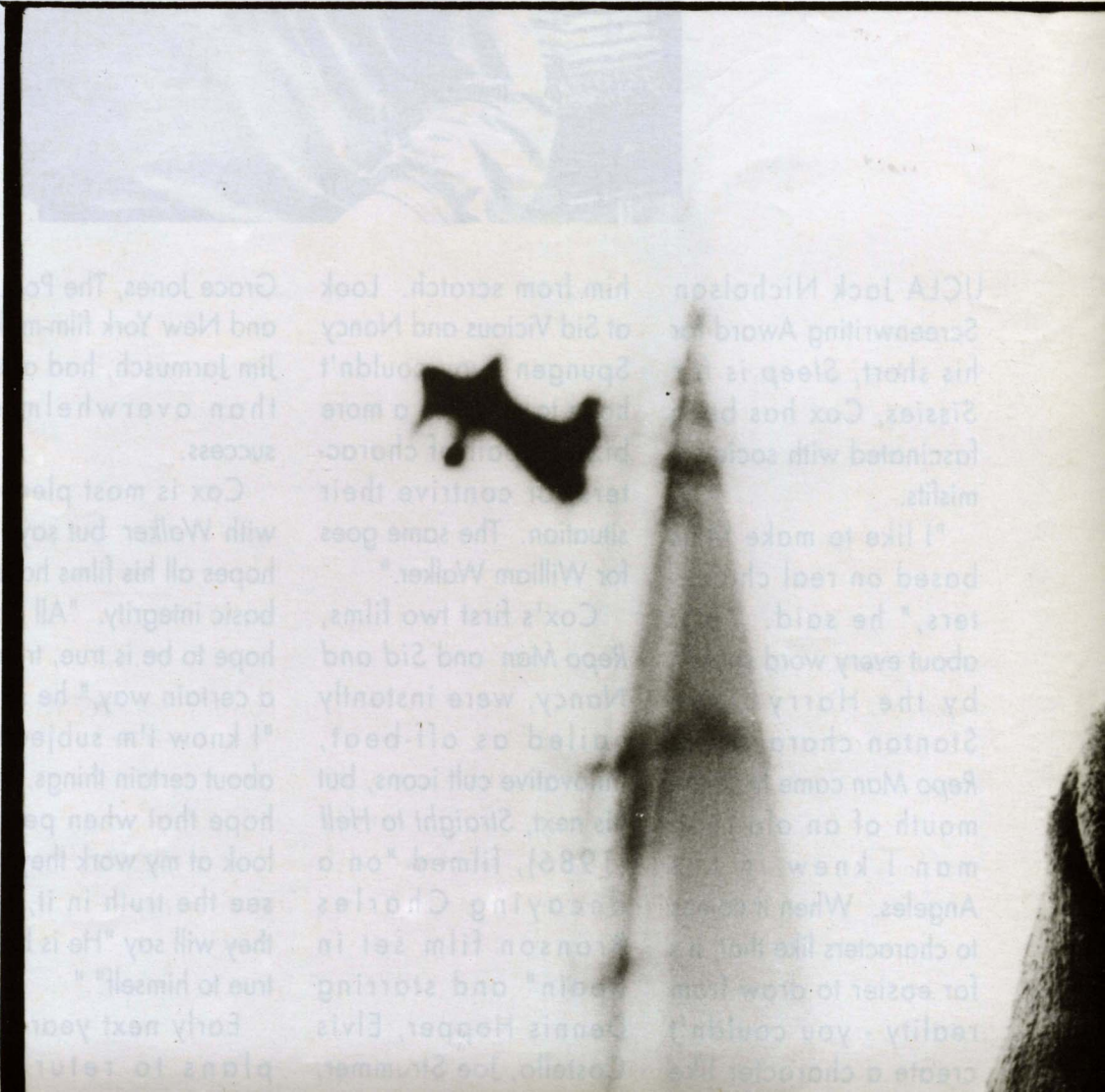
Quiet, carefully spoken, with a dry sense of humour, his dark, boyish good looks imply a mischievousness far less evident than the residues of age, responsibility and rigorous artistic discipline that almost seem designed to defend him from any false familiarity.

If there are private confes-

sions to be made, they lay beneath the broader, near Tarkovskian resonances of his imagery. A heady cinematic alchemist with an acute ability to suggest the mystical powers of the imagination, and its sad, often magically pragmatic relationship to concrete reality, Ward in person remains very down to earth.

It's a tension and a balance that infuses his filmic flights with heavier qualities, most particularly the contradictory energy between visionary will and physical constraint, and the transcendent dramas enacted on that battlefield between the mind's eye and the world outside it.

This is especially true of his latest film **The Navigator**, perhaps best described as a tragic fantasy, part requiem and part sacrificial ode of hope for a twentieth century accept-



ing futility as an objective fact.

**The Navigator** tells the strange tale of a group of Cumbrian peasant copperminers in 1354 who tunnel through the planet on a quest that brings them out the other side, to a 'celestial city in the Antipodes in 1988.

The reason for that journey, and the keys to it's progress and success, are inspired by the fragmentary dreams of a nine year old boy called Griffin. As one character fearfully says. "You've got us all sleep-walking boy", as much a comment on Ward's cinematic practice as the story he unfolds.

Griffin is a guide, a navigator, a kind of innocent prophet whose special sight provides "a rite of passage for a group of people who go out to do something for their village because they are facing a crisis."

That crisis is the Black Death, and the simple, superstitious village people believe they can only be saved by taking their copper, forging it into a cross, and placing it at the top of the highest church in Christendom at "t'other side of the world."

And so with Griffin the child seer as their eyes, goes his handsome, heroic brother Connor (burdened by hideous sights from a previous journey out into the world, the adventurer whose once noble purity is damaged by experience, and whose outline at a meeting insinuates the shadowy outline of the Grim Reaper); Searle, a realist who must rise above the narrow measure of his world; his naive, simple brother Ulf, carrying for luck an icon of the Virgin Mary close to his quivering bulk; the absurdly philosophical Martin, a parody

of logic with a leprechauns face; and Arno the one-handed ferryman, comically fierce because of his disability.

Aside from a few lapses into melodramatic overstatement, Ward achieves a suspension of disbelief as this unlikely pack travel from the monochrome black-and-white starkness of their medieval lives into the vivid, colour-charged vision of modern times. The kind of literally fantastic illusion-forging you might wish to compare, as an act of storytelling, to something like Wim Wender's **Wings of Desire** and Andrei Tarkovsky's **The Sacrifice** as told in the form of a child's medieval fairytale.

Undoubtedly flawed, but ultimately convincing and compelling, Ward strives to cast a symbol-drenched fable which deftly touches on AIDS and the whole nuclear issue in a stunning scene where Griffin encounters the alienating horror of hundreds of television screens in a video arcade. What's suggested is an affecting parallel between twentieth-century consciousness and the bubonic plague.

Modern crises manifest themselves as questions of consciousness, or nullified imagination and nihilistic or dehumanised cultural practices and mores. In allowing the peasants to find a possible saving path through choosing to enter the story in Griffin's head, a child's view, Ward insinuates that by giving people back a sense of imaginative power their creativity can alter and assert possibilities. If not without some suffering, or sacrifice.

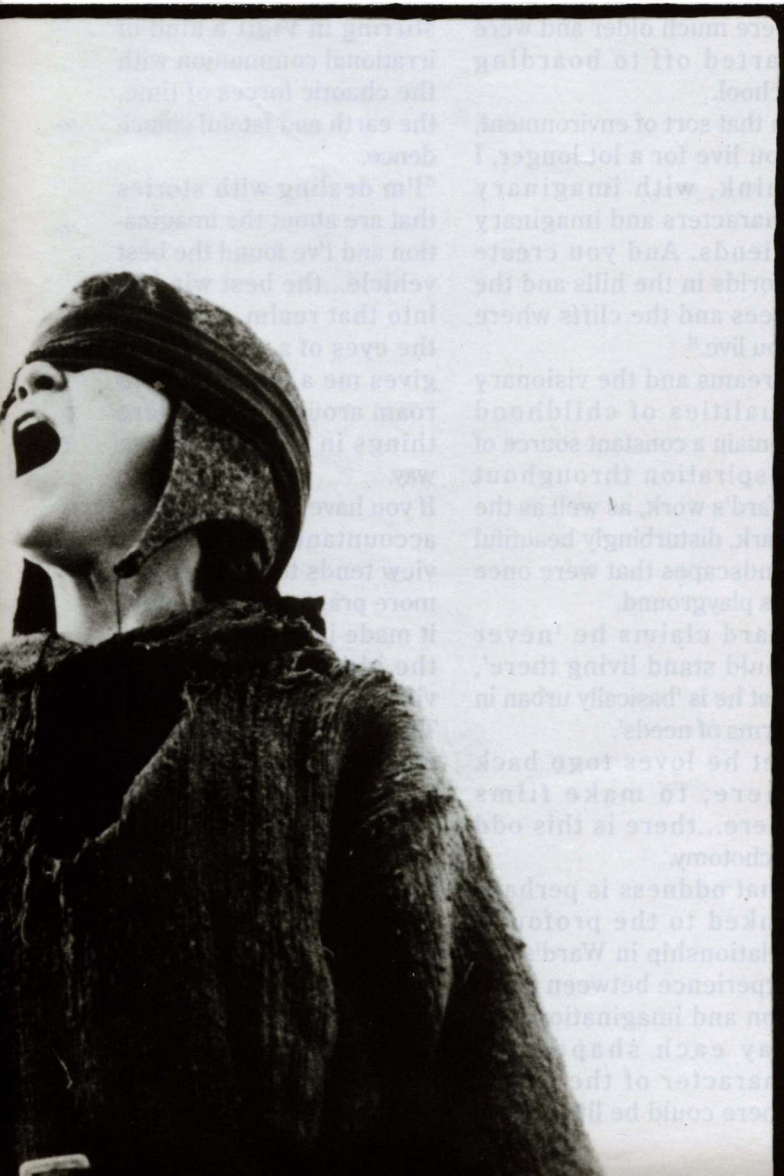
It's ironic that both my meetings with Ward should take place almost within the shadow of an old church on the fringes of Australia's best known red light district, Sydney's Kings Cross.

If we grasp hold of the

notion that cathedrals in medieval times were The Bible written in stone, the architectural vision of God's voice, we might draw a strength from the images of **The Navigator**, from the notion of creativity, rather than destruction or impotence, as a modern God. In a sense it's this affirmation of storytelling that makes **The Navigator** such a great adventure.

"I think the story in the film does have a parallel with the actual process of writing a story. And it also has a parallel with detective stories. In a detective story there's a crime at the beginning and parts of it are glimpsed. And for the rest of it they have to put together the fragments, but the fragments change meaning as they learn new information. And so the murderer that looks like a man turns out to be a woman, or whatever twists there are in those 1930s detective stories.

So what really struck me was if you took that kind of detective story, but took it to a world of visions or dreams, you had an inherently cinematic idea. Which I hadn't really seen used. In other words, somebody has a dream or vision of something, and for the rest of the story they're trying to remember or understand the fragments of it. And as they go along they learn new information which informs those fragments and leads them to a destination partly aided by those fragments. That's also just like the process of writing a film. In my case I don't begin with a thesis. I have some visual ideas and a couple of things I'm interested in exploring. And it's like a detective story, trying to uncover what's worthwhile...how best to use them, what best story to weave around them, and what's actually worth talking about, what's actually *really* of interest to me from those visual



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fragments."

Vincent Ward keeps digging around in my story, wanting to know what I'm looking for, how I'm seeing what I'll do, the context it will be presented in. Used to the rigour of his own approach, possibly suspicious of my surface casualness, trying to be helpful and even, almost, take hold of the direction, he wants to shape his answers into my imaginary landscape. Preferring to see myself like the boy Griffin, who in turn is a kind of alter-ego

them...between your private life and your work. You can almost put them in different areas, different rooms."

And so it goes. Me in a different room looking, Vincent Ward in another avoiding. There are times when the interview teeters on the brink of a bemused standoff.

As always it's the primacy of the story everyone can share in, rather than the vicarious revelations of personal experience that matter.

"Inevitably, what you're

is a search to find out and be aware of different people's stories, and to try and listen to them rather than impose something else on top of it."

*And understand how a person's life story has forged them?*

"Yeah. And also try and understand the world that's going on around you."

*Well, that's what I meant when you asked me what I want out of this story. I've got some awareness but I'm trying to get your story and marry it to mine.*

"(Bursts out laughing)...Yeah...Yeah...it's bizarre."

Vincent Ward was born in 1956 in New Zealand, growing up on a farm in Wairarapa, a North Island province. The youngest of four children, his family was "reasonably isolated from other farms and certainly from people my age. The rest of the family were much older and were carted off to boarding school.

In that sort of environment, you live for a lot longer, I think, with imaginary characters and imaginary friends. And you create worlds in the hills and the trees and the cliffs where you live."

Dreams and the visionary qualities of childhood remain a constant source of inspiration throughout Ward's work, as well as the stark, disturbingly beautiful landscapes that were once his playground.

Ward claims he 'never could stand living there', that he is 'basically urban in terms of needs'.

Yet he loves to go back there...there is this odd dichotomy.

That oddness is perhaps linked to the profound relationship in Ward's life experience between isolation and imagination, the way each shapes the character of the other. There could be little other

reason for filming **The Navigator** on a frozen volcanic lake more than a thousand metres above sea-level in the Southern alps of New Zealand. Conditions there were so cold that many got frostbite and Chris Haywood (Arno) was driven to build himself an igloo.

The landscape in Ward's debut feature, **Vigil**, is only marginally less threatening. You literally hear the earth groaning as the mountains slowly collapse in on a farm unable to resist the water-sodden shivers of nature's more dissolute commands. Ward describes **Vigil** as 'more personal', the story of a young girl called Toss and her eerie wakening into sexual wakening in the midst of her experiences in the dying valley.

Natural mysticism and a landscape of ominously hallucinogenic awesomeness are filtered through Toss's dark innocence, stirring in **Vigil** a kind of irrational communion with the chaotic forces of time, the earth and fateful coincidence.

"I'm dealing with stories that are about the imagination and I've found the best vehicle...the best window into that realm...through the eyes of a child. It just gives me a lot of room to roam around and explore things in an imaginative way.

If you have a story about an accountant their point of view tends to be drier and more pragmatic. Somehow it made it easier to accept the idea of a dream or a vision guiding someone in **The Navigator**, to have a child. And then there's this tradition in literature to do with children who have some special gift, like *The Starchild* or some of Oscar Wilde's characters. A very old tradition. **The Navigator** because of those storytelling traditions in a way, is subtitled *A Medieval Odyssey*. Halfway through writing I realised



for Ward, I'm happier to follow traces, intuitions, fragments and the accumulation of what little incidental information and gestures Ward is willing to let me have. Along with the filmic analyses and philosophy I want accidents, gossip, irrelevancies, a look of the face, a movement of the hands.

Ward finds this 'reasonable enough', but only reluctantly sheds light on his private history.

"The work's one thing; your relationships are something else. Maybe you use aspects of them for your work, but there don't need to be any dark tentacles between

trying to do is find the story of each person and weave it together into one grander story. Everybody has a story. You've got a story. I've got a story. Whatever it is. Or a main story with a lot of smaller stories.

So when you're digging around writing, you try to find a person's main story. For most of our parents their main story is going to the war. For the men, anyway. That was the biggest experience of their life, the big journey. Where probably through being in an extreme situation they learnt most about themselves.

Always with my films there

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find to it was Homer's *The Odyssey*.

"In that case a character goes out on a journey, a quest as it happens, by sea, and encounters extraordinary events and individuals, some of them almost magical. And he comes back to face the consequences of that voyage, after going into strange territory. And this story is a bit like that. Except the odyssey is in the twentieth century. But nothing occurs without cost. With **The Navigator** I didn't set out to tell a story about sacrifice, but that's the way it evolved.

"But it's more probably a story about having to believe in something in order to achieve anything. For me, just even in a basic, everyday way, whatever it is...if you're nihilistic, and it's very easy to be, and feel that's everything's pointless...even if you're sceptical you have to believe in *something*, so you can effect change. In order to effect change in any way. Or to do anything...even just ordinary daily things. Otherwise you're directionless."

Ward's father was a third-generation New Zealand farmer. His mother grew up in Hamburg, leaving Germany in 1932 (at age 11) to live in Israel.

When war broke out she joined the British Army and drove damaged convoy trucks to places where they could be repaired and returned to battle. During this time she met the New Zealand soldier she would



marry at the end of the war. "My upbringing was Catholic, but it was pretty laidback. I never got that enthusiastic about it. And my parents were pretty relaxed as people. But I have a strong sense of people working physically with things, like my father. My father never believed in debt. And still doesn't. But he's a very easy man to get along with, a very tolerant man.

He came back from a war he never expected to return from because he was old

when he went to war. He was older than most of them and he'd actually seen a lot of people return from the First World War. So when he bought this farm and spent six years breaking it in, everybody said it was ridiculous...because he wouldn't borrow money and it was all bush, scrub and gorse...he used to work 10-12 hours a day, physically breaking it in, using a flamethrower and an axe. My grandfather did that with a farm. And my great grandfather did that. The all started from scratch. No one seemed to inherit much. And my brothers just been doing the same. In fact my brother had to work for ten years to get enough money for a farm. He worked as a contract fencer and he used to be able to carry one concrete post on each shoulder at a pace up a hill. Now he's a small guy, but he's very

muscle. And he's got hands like slabs of meat. And my fathers got really big hands. He's a big guy, at one stage he used to be a bouncer. They're governed by the things they do rather than...(a long silence occurs, as if to say action is louder than words)...They've always had some sort of interaction with trying to shape something to the image in their mind. I'm talking about farms, I'm talking about land. Trying to shape *land* which is in a crude and fairly harsh state.

In both **Vigil** and **The Navigator**, they're very physical sort of people. They're people who have been stained or affected by where they lived. You can see it in their faces. You can see the landscape, the harshness of their lives, in

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harshness of their lives, in their faces. A lot of the time I use non-actors just to get the right faces. For the two children in **Vigil** and **The Navigator** I saw about 100,000 schoolchildren each, just scanning classrooms, getting glimpses from 110 schools, to find the right face.

"I identify with the process of making things. I don't just mean as a filmmaker. Being a filmmaker, personally, doesn't make that much difference to me. What I really enjoy doing is working and creating things. In a lot of ways I'd be as happy, I'd get as much pleasure, out of being a carpenter, or working as a painter or sculptor, which is what I intended to do originally."

Ward's face seems to be moving out of the shadow of his privacy, his soft hands agitate the air.

"So I identify with the

miners in **The Navigator** very much, for example. It doesn't come into the story, except by implication, but they would start each day being dropped into a mine where they would have to fit, or clear out all the water before they could even start their pick-work.

Did I tell you how they used to crack rock? They did wonderful things. Like they'd create big fires underneath the ground, and then suddenly chuck water on the rock, and the rock would crack!...So that kind of physical thing is very important to me in film."

Ward looks down at his hands. "Well, I think we got something fairly coherent there, finally."

He laughs, still moving on into my story. The land of the imagination is hard work, and at the end of the day, if fate is on your side, you get to sleep, perchance to dream..

