

WARD'S VIGIL

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New Zealand-born filmmaker, Vincent Ward, has already been acclaimed as Australasia's first true auteur and New Zealand's answer to Ingmar Bergman. His second feature, *The Navigator*, which he describes as "a medieval odyssey" opens around Australia in December.

Vincent Ward is as dark, brooding, but droll as his films. At 32 he is a feature film director of international standing, yet his rough, slightly unkempt black clothes, craggily ancient, but boyish face, and wary, weary, winsome eyes spell an enigma which belies his art-house fame. He has the demeanour of an intellectual nomad.

He apologises for the fact that the basement flat of fellow film director Phillip Noyce's Kings Cross terrace has, in the last two years, become a home base; walled with reference texts and files that formed the background for his most recent film success, *The Navigator*. It is clear the organised dishevelment, the balcony which overlooks the back garden, and the inner city of Sydney, appear to have temporarily seduced this nomadic New Zealander who, after doing the rounds of North American film festivals and European markets promoting *The Navigator* for the last three months, has returned 'home' to an Australian summer, and the film's opening in local cinemas.

The Navigator is an extraordinary second feature from Vincent Ward. When in competition at the Cannes 1988 Film Festival the international, intellectual press acclaimed it as "wondrous", "intense", "provocative", and Australian film critic Philip Adams reported from Cannes, that given *The Navigator's* "profound eccentricity" he was "quite prepared for a hostile reaction", but at the end of the premier screening in front of one of the most notoriously critical audiences in the world, Ward received a standing ovation, "that went on and on and on and on". Adams stated that it was, "one of the warmest responses I've heard in a lifetime at the festival".

The story of *The Navigator* begins in a medieval copper-mining village, in the Cumbria district of England, in the year 1348. It is a bleak, black and white world, where the miners live in fear of the impending plague which has wiped out entire populations within Europe. The nine-year-old Griffin's much-loved older brother Connor returns from the outside world in despair, until Griffin tells of a recurring dream, a colourful vision of hope for the village.

A party from the town must set out on a journey to make a tribute to God. Before dawn breaks, they must form a crucifix with copper from their mines and set the cross on the spire of the

tallest cathedral in the world, then their village may be spared. Charged with this goal, Griffin, Connor and four other medieval characters tunnel through the earth to a new world, the Antipodes in the late 1980s and they confront, in Ward's words, "The demons of our contemporary world, our technological monsters of destruction." He visually conjures a series of striking sequences as the medievals joust with the paraphernalia of a night-bound modern city – to their eyes both celestial and a living hell – as they seek the church at its heart.

Ward explains, "The story is a contrast between two calamitous ages, the medieval, and the 20th century, and defines parallels. I was interested in the comparison between the two periods as is discussed by Umberto Eco in his essays, and historian Barbara Tuckman in the book, *A Distant Mirror*. These works were an affirmation of the gut feelings I went on.

"The 14th century had plague, war and apocalypse on a vast scale; the Black Death wiped out more than a third of Europe, and there were vast wars such as the Hundred Years War, so that there are obvious parallels with the 20th century which has AIDS, wars, and the nuclear threat with its potential for further holocaust.

"The film has a lot of subtext to it and there is a range of things that come in to that subtext; such as technology, and the lemming-like race and acceleration of technology that the miners run into in the 20th century; that technology is in itself part of the crude machinery they used, seen many hundreds of years later transformed into vehicles, trains and submarines.

"What interests me are the discrepancies between what the miners perceive with their naive view of the 20th century world, and what we understand; these discrepancies comment ironically on what's going on.

"But the first thing that I am doing is telling an 'adventure story'. It's not a film that's aimed to preach at all, it's not meant to drown you in its content, it's there quietly asserting itself, but I didn't wish it to ever get in the way of the characters and the story.

"I didn't have a bible to bang as such, but there are a lot of different things *The Navigator* discusses. The film is essentially an act of faith by a village. Not necessarily religious faith,

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although there is religious faith in this because of the time period and the people, but it's more about having to take action even if it seems unlikely that one can achieve anything; and that's the only way finally one can effect change."

Ward acknowledges, "To make each of my films has been a step of faith. The act of faith made by those who follow Griffin on his quest has a parallel in the making of *The Navigator*: It was a very hard film to make." It was a four-year collaboration with producer John Maynard before the final cut on celluloid was achieved. Ward says of Maynard, who also produced Ward's first, much acclaimed feature film, *Vigil*, "The only reason *Navigator* was ever made was due to his sheer determination and bloody-mindedness. He is very loyal."

Vigil had taken two years to organise and three years to finish. Initially, the same time schedule was attempted for *The Navigator*; but in the third year of conception when Ward and Maynard were preparing to shoot, they couldn't raise enough money. So, they chopped down all the sets and fired the crew, and Ward moved to Sydney to live while he and Maynard raised money from the Australian Film Commission to initiate a first-time AFC-NZFC co-production.

Ward frequently asserts that, "A film shouldn't take four years to make." Yet, he concedes that the fourth year of extra research, script rewriting, casting and planning for *The Navigator* resulted in, "a much better film, although I don't want to put a qualitative value on it".

"As a consequence of raising Australian finance for *The Navigator*; we had to fit in with AFC guidelines, so the film had many more Australians involved in it, but that certainly didn't harm the film in any way."

To film *The Navigator* took 10 weeks of six-day-a-week shoots in the middle of a New Zealand winter, with most of the scenes shot at night in difficult locations. A crew joke went: "Vincent found a location today. We're not using it; you can get there by road!" Although the joke is an exaggeration there were a few locations that fitted the anecdote; filming in the first week at isolated Lake Harris in waist-deep snow in unpredictable weather. The lake was only accessible by helicopter or a three-day climb along a steep path and the cast

and crew had to be flown in.

Asked if he has an obsessive personality Ward states, "Between films definitely not, but when I film I do become quite focused on things." Can he be unreasonable in his demands of other people? "I'm never unreasonable. No, I don't know; I hope not. With all the night shoots what I would have liked was a big break in the middle. But we couldn't because of the extra cost that that would have entailed, which is enormous."

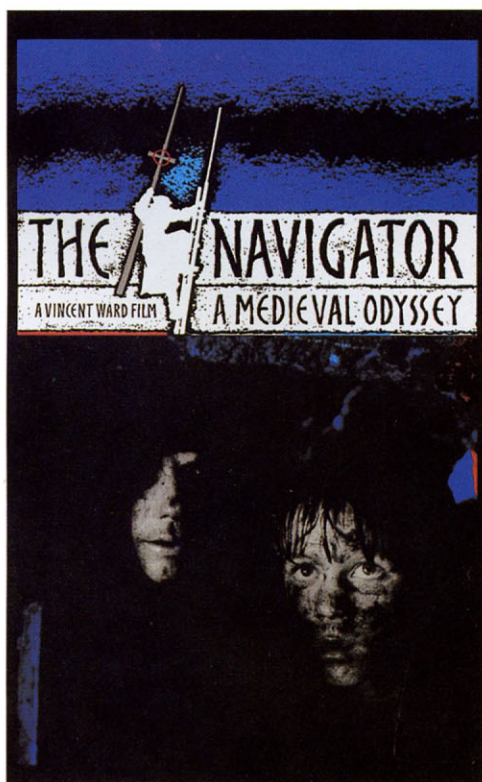
Financially there were many compromises. "The last two films I've worked on, the producer's given me the choice. He's presented the budget as a kind of cake; if you take a large bite somewhere, you must take a smaller bite somewhere else, and you decide where you're going to take the bites."

The Navigator's medieval scenes were shot in black-and-white. The 20th century and Griffin's visions are shown in colour. However, for "purely financial reasons" the whole film was shot on colour stock and the black-and-white scenes were processed in the lab. Despite how difficult this was for cinematographer Geoff Simpson, the end result is exquisite, using slightly sepia tones with black-and-white; and colour, using tones from medieval art to portray the 20th century as a medieval vision. The blues are the same as those used by the Limbourg brothers in Duc de Berry's *Book of Hours*, and the fiery, hellish tones are those of Bosch, Bruegel and Grunewald.

Ward has been acclaimed as Australasia's first true *auteur*; but says vehemently, "I don't like the word, in fact I hate the word, because it's incredibly pretentious. You focus on things, it's your story, but other people help you realise that story, and contribute to it. I'm only grateful for the label if it gives the director the freedom to make the films he wants without being cramped by either a strongly producer-led, or accountant-led, aim to feed the video market."

In Ward's commitment to accuracy in the creation of *The Navigator* he commissioned a researcher to, "literally go down medieval copper mines in Cumbria" and photograph and measure them.

He extensively researched the clothes of the miners of the period, and modelled the wardrobe of *The Navigator's* medieval cast on the style of dress worn by German miners who



Medieval miners, Martin, Arno, Griffin and Connor, venture into the 20th century.



Griffin confronted by television sets.



Medieval miners in snow.



Medievals (with their horse) do battle with the submarine.



Climbing the cathedral.

worked throughout Europe at that time. For his music, he used researchers in Britain, Italy, New Zealand and Australia to build up a large collection of medieval and Celtic music to provide the composer, Davood Tabrizi, with a base from which to work. Ward insisted on the use of entirely traditional instruments with an emphasis on percussion and pipes. He employed a dialogue coach to train his mixed cast of professionals and newcomers to speak in the soft country Celtic accent of the Cumbrian people; and to initially determine who the cast would be, he travelled to England and Australia to expand his "pool of available talent". Asked whether this latter expense could be justified within the constraints of a tight budget, Ward replies, "The main thing you have with a film are the people in front of the camera. I've never agreed with directors who say they can get a performance out of anybody. I choose to deal with people who have a feel and a talent; they are what makes a film live and breathe; that's what comes first before anything else. The old saying, that it's lives not lenses. If you miss with the people you put in front of the camera then forget it, just walk away. And if somebody takes that right away from you, then also walk away, because there's no point."

Ward certainly didn't 'miss' with his cast in *The Navigator*; they are a wonderful mixture of contrasting characters and physical traits representative of people one would imagine to live in the Dark Ages of Europe. To cast the boy, Griffin, Ward visited more than a thousand classrooms over a two-year period. He's very pleased with Hamish McFarlane, his eventual choice for the role. "Hamish not only had the right look, he had the right qualities, he's very talented, he's very determined, and he had a kind of realism that I liked and he was incredibly professional although he'd never acted before in his life." Ward is as impressed with Fiona Kay who was the 12 year-old lead in *Vigil*. Both children have now an implanted enthusiasm for filmmaking. Hamish bought a video camera with his earnings from *The Navigator* and is making plans for behind the camera as well as in front.

Does Ward have a preference for using children as his protagonists? "I don't see it like that. I just work with people. My last two films happen to be dealing with imagination and I found

a child a better vehicle to get into that realm, rather than actually wanting to make a film about a child."

Ward's work prior to his recent films included *A State of Siege*, an adaptation of a Janet Frame novel, which he directed while still at Art School when only 21. It won awards at the Chicago Film Festival (a golden Hugo), and the Miami Film Festival (a gold medal for Special Jury Prize). The film, *In Spring One Plants Alone*, is an extraordinary and moving documentary capturing the life of an 82-year-old Maori woman and her paranoid schizophrenic, totally dependent 40-year-old son, who lived a primitive lifestyle in the mountainous bush region of the Ureweras, New Zealand. Ward's obsession and commitment are exemplified by the fact that in order to film *In Spring One Plants Alone*, "I very bloody mindedly sat there for two years, living with them, and I nearly went out of my mind. Some very odd things happened to me" As to *what* happened, he is evasive, yet in speaking of his memories of filming that life, the people, his eyes film with the hint of tears. "I spent two years in a Maori community and it has probably changed me more than anything else."

Recalling the depth of Maori spirituality and the mystic quality of all his films, Ward is asked how he perceives himself and the world spiritually: "There are some things you put into films that I don't even really like to talk about. I don't feel comfortable talking about, and I think my attitudes are fairly divided anyway, are not really resolved. Maybe there's an instinctive thing that creeps into my films, but which consciously I'd probably have some problem reconciling." Very likely; his family are fourth generation New Zealand farmers with the respective parental heritage, German Jew and Irish Catholic.

Vincent Ward, the artist, paints films with the rich primitive images of earth, fire and water. The ethereal quality has caused him to be described as New Zealand's Bergman.

Now resident in Sydney, he's contemplating a film using Australian light. "I've been thinking about that a lot lately." But first, "For four years I just read 'medieval', it's like having lived as a hermit to some degree, so I'm surfacing, and then when I've had enough of surfacing, I'll get down to work." ■