THE INSPIRATION

The idea for RIVER QUEEN has been with Ward for many years.

He says, “You have stories that you want to tell and when those ideas have matured and you’ve thought about them long enough, that’s the time you’re ready to tell them. This was one story I really wanted to make. I wanted to draw on my experiences of what it was like for someone of one culture living in another culture and the richness of that experience.

“For years I had been searching for the right story to tell about someone going into and experiencing a native community. One of my early steps toward this was to develop what became the starting point for *The Last Samurai*. Although I spent three years on that project, I felt there was a truer, more personal story for me waiting in my own country.

“Both *River Queen* and *The Last Samurai* are set in the same time frame when there were a number of defiant last stands around the world from native communities attempting to retain nationhood – whether Samurai and peasants in Japan, Zulu warriors in Africa or Native Americans “ghost dancing” on the plains – their world was closing in. It was a volatile time full of unique contrasts. New Zealand was no exception. But here was a world that we have never witnessed before on film – at least not like this.”

Ward also had his own real-life experience to bring to this story. In the late 1970s, he lived for 18 months as the only Pakeha (white New Zealander) in an isolated Maori community in the remote Urewera Ranges, filming his award-winning documentary *In Spring One Plants Alone*. This experience, plus his Irish ancestry, led to his desire to make *River Queen* about an Irish woman who lives amongst Maori in the 1860s.

“I experienced things that were tough and things that were really fantastic, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything,” he says.

“It gave me a glimpse of a vanishing set of beliefs that drove me to further investigate the beginnings of the nation I had been brought up in. Living so closely with another culture made me more conscious of my own Irish ancestry and I began thinking about the extraordinary clash of values that must have happened when European and Maori met.”

For the *River Queen* story, Ward transposed his experience to the 19th Century, where there were greater extremes and greater division between Maori and Pakeha and there were people in between, trying to find ways of getting along together.

“The film is a story about a woman who goes in search of her son. It is set against the great battles of the New Zealand land wars of the mid-19th Century. In her quest, Sarah crosses the divide between the cultures – Maori and European. The larger theme, of those who are caught in the no-man’s land between opposing sides, is made intimate as she strives to find identity, a search made harder by a world that is dramatically shifting.”

Ward says he has noticed that the exploration of the lives of people caught in the middle ground between two cultures has become a recurring theme in his work and attributes that to his family background.

“My father, who was a New Zealander of Irish Catholic descent, came home from World War II with a young German Jewish wife, who had escaped Hitler’s Germany as a child and survived as a British military driver in Palestine. They settled in an isolated rural community where she knew neither the language nor the customs. I always felt there was negotiation between them heightened by the cultural divide. I have become fascinated with that type of transaction – seeking, through film, different ways to decode it.”

Although *River Queen* is a fictional story, there are elements inspired by real people and events from New Zealand’s history, which Ward has creatively woven into the fabric of his story about Sarah’s search for her kidnapped son and which give the story its rich and vibrant texture.

In the course of research, elders told Ward and co-producer Tainui Stephens that they see value in the stories of their forbears being re-told and the lessons re-learned. Stephens says, “This cinema dramatisation of history is a chance for Maori and Pakeha alike to celebrate the stories of their tupuna.”

Aspects of (the character) Sarah’s experience are inspired by the real life of Caroline “Queenie” Perrett. The incident in which Sarah’s father Francis is reprimanded for excavating Maori burial grounds while building a road is derived from the story of British farmer William Perrett, who cleared a burial ground in Taranaki to make way for a railway in 1874. In retaliation, Maori captured his eight-year-old daughter Caroline, who lived amongst Maori for 55 years, until discovered by a relative in 1926, in Whakatane on the opposite side of the North Island. She had married a Maori farmer, had five children and did not wish to change her life by “going back” to Pakeha society.

The renowned Ngati Ruanui warrior chief Riwha Titokowaru, whose extraordinary guerrilla warfare skills led his people through the war in Taranaki undefeated, was the inspiration for Te Kai Po, the chief played by Temuera Morrison. Baine, the British major played by Anton Lesser, can be seen as inspired by Titokowaru’s real-life enemy Lieutenant Colonel Thomas MacDonnell and the film’s pivotal battle scene is based on their battle at Te Ngutu O Te Manu in Taranaki in 1868.

In another connection with Titokowaru, Englishwoman Ann Evans was an inspiration for one of Sarah's experiences in the film. Evans had been a nurse with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War and moved to New Zealand in 1862. In the late 1870s she was living in Hawera, South Taranaki, where she was known as "Ann the Doctor". She was asked by a group of Maori to treat a sick man and was led, blindfold, to the secret home of Titokowaru, where she spent nearly two months treating him for pneumonia, after which she was returned safely to her home, again blindfold.

In Ward's story, Sarah lives with her father – a "butcher's surgeon" and healer – on the raggle-taggle edges of the British army camps. After the disappearance of her son, Sarah adopts her father's trade and is called upon by both the army and the Maori for her healing services.

Ward says Sarah is contemporary in some of her values in that she has the singularity of a lone parent and is drawn to work in a largely male domain. "She becomes a military medic, a healer and - by necessity of her search – an adventurer. She is game. She dares to go into the enemy camp and challenges convention in her daily contact with men, with whom she claims an equal footing."

At the interface between the two sides of the war, Sarah lived in a time when the demarcations were not always clear. *River Queen* shows that allegiances were blurred and also changed constantly, with some Maori fighting for the British while some Europeans fought on the side of the Maori. There were occasions when members of the same family faced each other across the battle lines.

Ward says: "There is one battle *in River Queen* where you know all the key characters on both sides of the battle line and they know each other – in other times it might have been sorted out like a domestic argument but here they are using live ammunition to iron out their differences.

"Through Sarah, the film constantly walks this seemingly contradictory line as the two cultures seek to co-exist."

DIRECTOR'S NOTES by Vincent Ward

STYLE AND PRODUCTION:

For me *River Queen* has been a passion project undertaken over many years - an opportunity to hook into and journey into a unique part of the Maori realm through the eyes of Sarah our central character – a woman, who through circumstance has values very akin to ours. Allowing us to perceive how the exchange between the two cultures might have operated at the interface – and even more so: to live and experience it.

In parts of nineteenth century New Zealand, rivers were the only highways. And it is along these rivers from the coastline "into the interior" that our story takes place.

The “interior” was a large tract of dense bush at the heart of New Zealand’s central North Island that was almost impenetrable, where few Europeans dared to venture and fewer still returned.

Much of the New Zealand terrain has changed since then, forest has given away to farmland and first-growth native bush is hard to find anywhere close to the major cities, where trees have been felled many times over.

For our unit it meant travelling a crew up rivers close to some of the actual sites that some of the last warrior chiefs had once reigned, to where “first growth” native bush still existed with all the primeval majesty of ancient forest.

This in turn meant we needed a large and mobile crew to get into and service these inland river locations.

Due to the requirements of the financing for the film and Samantha’s changing availability, I found myself of necessity shooting in the middle of winter. While this had some advantages in terms of the look of the film, it gave us an unexpected challenge on how best we could limit the number of water scenes and safeguard our actors while still conveying a strong feeling of interaction with the river. Custom made water protective dry suits were critical to this as they could be worn under their costumes, and delaying the filming of the river scenes as long a possible until the spring. And to protect against the elements even in the most remote locations surprisingly you would find a heated tent for actors metres away from the shooting.

Preparation for the film was essential and the key crew needed to become very familiar with the locations. I gave detailed demonstrations of how I planned to shoot the particular shots I had in mind for every location, showing crew what particular angles we would use and refining it three or four times over with the many preparatory visits we made.

The years of preparation were paying off: More than two years of liaison with the local Maori tribes, and research into every possible aspect of that period – from medical practice through the making of ammunition, the varying styles of music – Maori and European, and aspects of the cultures that had been gleaned from hundreds of books and were now in picture form. I now made them available in huge visual folders for the crew – circling those aspects that were more relevant than others.

For many months we had been going around schools looking for our potential child actors – searching in Auckland, Wellington and Wanganui and bringing them together for extensive workshops. We were training young talent while I ascertained their appropriateness.

By this stage working in four countries, I had chosen my adult cast. In assembling the actors I began with organizing their training: horseback riding (sometimes in water), canoeing, Irish accents, singing, learning haka and period Maori dialects, rifle practice - to name but a few, while all the while keeping the rehearsal process alive. All the key elements needed to be set in place before we could practically begin.

High on the agenda was to set the style – countless conversations over the costumes, sets, props and colours, locking them in place – creating an earthy world of mist, water, and fire. A forest palette with verdant moss green and glimpses of luminous water was used wherever we could. Monochromatic tones, rich in black, would be contrasted by the exaggerated explosion of muzzle flashes, and the scarlet of Sarah's military jacket while the deep blue colours of the flags and uniforms would (hopefully) scintillate in the background.

Then we were down to nuts and bolts: countless practical conversations over water safety and stunts. We trained the horses not to respond to rifle fire or nearby burning buildings. Extras were chosen who were accustomed to living and working in the winter bush terrain. Hundreds of people working for many months in rugged bush and on winter waters and through out we maintained an almost perfect safety record.

Then to help with planning I detailed and distributed storyboards and extensive shooting lists that I had been preparing for months. Now the style of both the performances and cinematography were firmly resolved. We would need to shoot some of the film documentary style with hand held cameras not only to heighten the gritty authentic feel but also because the schedule was tight: To meet it some things would need to go our way.

My motto was simple: "Make of disadvantages your friend:" The hills around us would become our major sets. Why create period townships when we have seen so many cliched in every western and period film and when the land herself has so much more power conveying a people who lived hard and survived subsumed by it.

The small numbers in the "rebel" Maori village would suggest a people who were beleaguered and out numbered, without allies and with little chance of victory. The lack of Maori extras would speak of a hidden enemy that moved invisibly through the bush so the colonials would never know where their foe would be. It was not who you could see in the battles but who you couldn't see that mattered. The lack of light in the winter would make the jungle fighting more frightening as in this light the rifle flashes would be sudden and engulfing coming out of dense bush and darkness. No one would know

where the Maori enemy was. The mud and cold breath was not something you would recreate in a studio. And in this wintry bush terrain – a world without women – set in darkish treescapes, one woman with pale features would stand out while her part Maori son and the weathered elemental men she knew radiated around her – like spokes in a wheel – these men - all of them, would blend into her physical terrain as through them she sought to find out who she was and where she belonged.

Apart from more performance-orientated moments, this was the film that I had imagined and scripted with very clear and sharp images, often rewriting for particular locations. Right down to the last extra I had cast actors and extras that had the look I wanted. It was so crucial for a film in this period to look authentic. For the casting of Europeans it meant avoiding the false beard look that typifies colonial style films and cast the real thing. Similarly many Maori today have a different look from their ancestors, possibly due to intermarriage and less harsh living conditions. I wanted people who looked like their great-grandfathers. So the look of the faces was critical. Many of the extras I cast in fact had great-grandfathers who fought on either side during the wars. Being an extra in these battles meant so much more to them. They were in some sense dealing with a part of who they were and where they "belonged" - and in so doing echoed the themes that the film explores - identity and belonging. They not only looked like their great grandfathers - Maori and Pakeha – but they were acting out their grandfathers' battles. In a sense the faces are our landscapes – and the landscapes of the film are written on peoples faces - so much so that they seem geographically part of the terrain they inhabit. The casting and the locations were the key to the look of the film and I had firmly locked all of this in place by the time we started.

Most of the key crew had worked with me before and I knew that they would help me realize the vision of the film I had in mind.

I directed the film through many different challenges and though at times things seemed to engulf us we pushed through in collaboration, one way or another, no matter what was thrown at us.

I was lucky that in the five months in post production I had the opportunity to add an extra 60-odd shots to shape it fully into the film that I had in mind when I first began it some five years earlier – even shooting some of it myself, alone in the Thames. At this time visual effects artists in three countries gave generously to help fashion a world often creating a large number of shots from scratch. And crews in two countries worked with me on further additional shoots for no payment but simply out of a belief in the material and the hope that with their help I would be able to sustain the one single vision that we aspired to. Commitment and invention proved to be our bywords.