



VINCENT'S VIGIL

A Review by HELEN MARTIN

Vigil: 1984. Colour. 35mm. 90 mins. Drama. Starring Penelope Stewart, Frank Whitten, Bill Kerr, Fiona Kay. Screenplay: Vincent Ward & Graeme Tetry, Photography: Alun Bollinger, Designer: Kai Hawkins, Editor: Simon Reece, Music: Jack Body, Executive Producer: Gary Hannan, Producer: John Maynard, Director: Vincent Ward.

Vigil is an astounding film. The one we've been waiting for, knowing that yellow minis and massage parlours can be used honestly to hold a mirror up to our ragbag culture but knowing too that there's a lot of New Zealand that most of our film-makers haven't tapped yet. In this film, Vincent Ward, in evoking a landscape that is raw and beautiful, breathtaking and menacing, uses what is in the environment to serve as a metaphor for the inner lives of the four characters he has placed there.

There's a dark side to the New Zealand psyche that many of our writers have drawn on. Perhaps it has something to do with isolation. Maybe it's a result of the way the country was broken in. John Mulgan saw it. Keri Hulme and Janet Frame see it. The most explicit enunciation of it is probably in the stories of Ronald Hugh Morrison. And while Vincent Ward's characters keep it veiled the potential for violence is always there, just below the surface. See it in existential terms if you like. Or dig around in Jung and think about archetypes. Whichever angle you approach it from, Ward's way of presenting things gives you plenty to think about.

The story that unfolds in a 'once upon a time' sort of way is one of love and death, passion and ritual, and the ebb and flow of relationships as they form, break, form again is seen always in terms of the natural background against which they are set — the wind, the bush, the ravaged hills, the teeming sky. Death and birth have their own natural logic where the fittest survive and where those still living come to terms in their own way with tragedy and loss.

A valley at the foot of Mount Messenger is farmed by a hard-driving man whose determination to win against all adversity feeds the resentments of his frustrated wife and his puckish father-in-law. The old man, Birdie (Bill Kerr), describes the farmer as a man of little emotion. 'Silly bugger, Justin. Only time I ever saw him worked up was over them 'awks. His passion was 'awks. Or killin' 'em. He wasn't a smiling man, Justin.' So while Nature is unable to protect her own against the technology of humankind's ingenuity, it seems fitting that the farmer should die at her hands, unable to keep a toehold on a cliff that has been scored by rain and wind.

Enter the outsider. In close-up we see the face of Toss, the farmer's daughter, as she watches and listens to her father die. As the camera pulls back to long shot we see her tiny figure dwarfed by hills and bush and, on the skyline, a stranger with a gun. None of the themes that touch essential things in us are new. But as this story unfolds we see them in a new light, universal themes played out in a setting and with characters that we can identify as our own. The intrusion into the private and limited world of the young girl and her family of a man who says little, who appears from nowhere, who has no past, profoundly alters the balance of things as the woman, her daughter and her father come to terms with the death.

To Birdie, the loss is simply dealt with. Life must go on. There are jobs to be done on the farm. The pragmatic thing to do is to hire the 'stranger', Ethan Ruir (Frank Whitten). When Toss (Fiona Kay) asks him the whereabouts of the Valley of Death that the priest talked about

at the funeral he replies, 'Priests make simple things complicated so as to keep themselves in work.' He would rather explore the mysteries in the everyday, fascinating Toss with his stories of the tractor that 'sends out little miniatures of itself. They hit your eyeballs then explode. Flash!' In Ethan he sees an ally, someone to share his passion for invention. 'See I've got this idea for a sheep dip. Sheep do all the work.' For Birdie the farmer's death is more release than tragedy. What does devastate him is the collapse of his Heath Robinson contraption that gives up the ghost, cog, pulley and engine, as soon as it is set to work. Like Shakespeare's Fool his philosophy is blunt and deceptively simple. 'What you see depends on who you are.' Bound to Toss in their resistance to the new status quo that is evolving on the farm he answers her anguished, 'I think I'm dying, Grandpa,' with the laconic reply, 'Aren't we all?'

What Liz (Penelope Stewart) mourns at the death of her husband is not the loss of the man, but of the life she could have had as a ballet dancer. Her joyless life with Justin has embittered her. Her initial reaction to the stranger is one of suspicion and fear. What she fears most is the re-awakening of feelings that have been a long time dead. When she offers herself to Ethan she does so with anger. 'You're a greedy so and so. Take what you want then.' But in the lovemaking that follows she finds a fulfilment that is as moving as it is unexpected. Another shake in the kaleidoscope and Toss, watching through the window, must make sense of what she has seen.

Ethan Ruir is a survivor. He drives a shark of a car and totes a big gun. He has a vigil to keep, waiting in his hut on the hill for Liz to 'warm up', taking the love of the woman, the mateship of the old man and the trust of the young girl when they offer it. To Ethan, the predatory hawks are kinder spirits, strong and powerful, taking what they want, leaving when there is nothing more to be had. It is extraordinary that this character, who on paper sounds pretty despicable, is presented in such a way as to evoke feelings of neither antipathy nor empathy in the viewer. He just is. And while Liz, Toss and Birdie make him the vehicle of their fantasies, he is able to remain detached even while he admits their involvement.

Vigil is essentially the story of Toss, and her psychic journey towards womanhood is painful and traumatic. Living in isolation in an environment where elemental forces are heavily present and where the apocalyptic teachings of the Catholic religion are jumbled in her mind with her own world of fantasy, the eleven year old child keeps watch as she tries to make sense of what is happening around and to her. One title considered for the film was 'First Blood, Last Rites'. The girl's first bleeding occurs as she watches her much loved father die. At his funeral the priest's hollow words, 'Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night nor the arrow that flieth by day,' offer her no comfort. She is more interested in the Valley of Death. She lives in a valley, doesn't she? What you see depends on who you are. At the moment of the death she sees the man with the gun hunting the goats on her farm. The two events are fused in her mind. Did the stranger somehow cause her father to lose his grip and fall? Watching Ethan docking lambs, fascinated by his efficiency with the knife, she stands so close that a spurt of blood covers her face. Washed in the blood of the lamb. How can you reconcile a theology which talks about a Good Shepherd who looks after His flock with the reality of the way things actually happen? How can she think of herself as a lamb of God when she knows that the end product of sheep farming is a carcass hanging from a butcher's hook?

In her first glimpse of the fummy business that goes on between men and women Toss watches her mother making up her face in preparation for a visit from Etham. What's it all about? Toss smears the lamb's blood on her lips, tentatively at first, then roughly, all over her face. watching the couple through the sights of Ethan's gun she sees her mother laughing in a new way, hears him say, 'We should make a good team.' In an effort to keep her father with her she sets up a shrine in an old car body at the foot

of the fatal cliff. Beside it, in the oozing mud, she buries a lump of cooked lamb, plate and all. On a stick that serves as a cross she pours blood. She pulls on her father's balaclava and wears his coat for protection against Ethan's 'silent bullets'. Finally, she turns to the man with the knife, hoping that his mysterious power can be put to good use. 'Can you call my father?'

She sees magic in the play of light and colour as he holds a bottle of liquid up to the sun, believing him when he says, 'There's a shadow in the glass. A spirit.' A man with that sort of power must have some answers. She asks him, 'God doesn't care, does he? If God doesn't care, I don't care either . . . beans to God!' Shouting in shared exuberance they dance their defiance, silently watched by Liz. What you see depends on who you are. The woman who spits on Ethan and says, 'Keep your hands off my daughter', is there, not much later, in his arms. When Ethan strokes Toss's face in a gesture of friendship she bites his fingers. She later watches her mother bite his fingers in the ardour of lovemaking.

Toss has no child companions but she has a book to feed her fantasies. In the old family bible she finds an engraving of Lucifer, the angel with the sword, and in a searing waking nightmare she sees her father and Ethan as jousting knights. Their weapons are farm implements. Ethan wins. He has now crystallised in her mind as the avenging angel and she tells him in her dream, 'I know who you are.' Her next fantasy is even more terrifying. This time she is the victim. In an empty, eerily-lit shearing shed that serves as a metaphor for her desolation, Ethan bundles her up like a sheep and comes at her with electric shears. Waking, her hand is covered with the blood of her first menstruation. 'Dear God, please, please help me. I'm bleeding all inside me.' And then, in an act symbolic of her changed self, she takes off the balaclava that she has worn since her father's death.

Toss has lost her innocence in a world that is loaded with silent bullets. The magic of childhood becomes nightmare, the demons are alive and well and living in her valley. When Toss offers her grandfather an apple he takes a bite then spits it out. Forced to eat from the Tree of Knowledge Toss has her own comeback.

How would you resolve all of that? The ending of the film provides a resolution to Liz's despairing, 'We can't stop the hills caving in on us.' that is just right.

Vigil is Vincent Ward's first feature film. It grew partly out of his experience in making *In Spring One Plants Alone*. 'I felt that there were two films to be made while I was making this documentary — one was the documentary, and one was a drama. More than anything, it was the feeling there, which I wanted to translate into a feature film — the feeling of claustrophobia, of paranoia, and, at moments, of genuine human warmth, because the people were very isolated and very lonely, and so those moments of warmth, although they were short, were very intense. So partly it came from that and partly it came from the experience of growing up — isolated — on a farm. When you grow up, as a small child, on a farm by yourself, you roam in your imagination, you create realms and worlds. You fantasise a lot, with fierce nightmares. You see glimpses of what is going on, and each of these glimpses are put together and they form something else.'

Ward was aware that in making a feature he needed to master aspects of film-making he had not previously attempted. 'Film for me is an ongoing thing. You draw on your experiences, what you've observed. There's a real art in telling a story. It's easy to be obscure under the label of "art" but it's hard to do something visually strong that tries to experiment with the medium and has a strong narrative.'

One of the strengths of the way the story is told is that Ward knows the power of silence and space. A screen does not have to be filled with busyness, the spaces between things can be as eloquent as the things themselves. Ward knows how to make a visual statement by ensuring that the spatial relationship between the characters on the screen reflects what is happening in their relationship at the time,

how to place a character, say, in the bottom corner of the screen so that the setting is seen as much more than backdrop to events. Most of the humour in *Vigil* is provided by visual jokes, usually not seen by the characters themselves.

As in *In Spring One Plants Alone* the symbols are there, inherent in the reality of things as they are. It's a matter of seeing them. Perhaps the most powerful use of symbol in *Vigil* is found in the physical conditions under which the people live. Shakespeare knew about weather. In *The Tempest* the storms and calms are a direct reflection of the emotional states of the characters. Thunder, lightning and rain accompany the witches as they plot on the heath in *Macbeth*. When Nature protests so stridently there are things to be resolved. New Zealanders think a lot about weather too. But while in the cities the main concern is whether the washing will dry or the barbecue will have to be cancelled, to those whose livelihood depends on the

(the view from the hunter's hut of the farm huddled in the valley). The visual image provides metaphoric expression to human feeling, (the robust, unbreakable spirit of the old man seen as he drives his hut away). Nature is shown as a force which is both mythical and archetypal, (the wind wrenches Toss's memorial to her father from the mud and whisks it heavenwards).

Such a style involves a paring down to essentials, an intensity of vision so that what is there is seen in a direct and powerful way. In using these methods Ward makes his audience work, interpret, find their own connections. And while the landscape is stark, the film is anything but. The texture of the images is always rich, often startling. This is partly achieved by the unhurried pace, with lots of long takes that enable the viewer to absorb every detail of a face, a tree, a chair. Ward chooses his camera angles with care, creating powerful effects that range from the sense of foreboding engendered by the low angle shot of Ethan



Toss : First blood, last rites.

land the vagaries of wind and rain are vital. The opening scene of *Vigil* underlines this. Birdie, huddled by the fire, is saying to Liz, 'You know, the more I think about it, the more we're headin' for the South Pole. That's why we're gettin' this wicked weather', and through the window we see the poor farmer burning lambs that have not survived the rigours of being born in such conditions. The landscape Ward shows us is embattled by the elements. Bashed by the wind, trees grow horizontally. Constant rain turns earth to slimy mud. The tensions felt by the people in the valley are reflected in the landscape where tree stumps are chiselled to gaunt and tortured forms. There are other recurrent motifs — tractor, hawk, gun, Toss's stick — that also serve as symbols as well as a means of keeping the threads connected.

When he made *State of Siege* Ward drew on his interest in expressionism in charting his individual style. He does that again in *Vigil*. The self is mirrored in external objects (Toss in tutu and gumboots). The use of colour conveys the human passions (the gun lit up in red as Toss empties out the bullets). The arrangement of objects suggests dramatic relationships and tensions, (Toss watching Ethan and Liz through blurred glass). The space between things tells as much about their tensions as the things themselves,

carrying the body of the dead farmer to the almost surrealistic shot of Toss holding herself under water in the bath. Figures move in and out of frame, sometimes leaving the screen empty. We view land and people through flames, smoke, rain, mist, glass and mirrors — images that are blurred, veiled or partly obscured serve to remind us that 'truth' is not the objective commodity we imagine it to be. Keeping all this taut is the concentration on the central character, Toss, and the observation of the unities of time, place and theme. There is no escape from the consequences of those initial catalysts, the death of one man and his replacement by another.

The sounds that tell the story are as pertinent as the images. In an interview given in Paris last May Ward explained the meticulous care he took with the sound track: 'Sound for me is very, very important. Often there is a special sound that I like, and a scene will evolve from it; it'll suit the storyline and the flow of the film. I was after sounds that merged and were echoing and very low key, then I wanted to shock the audience suddenly with absolutely distilled, sharp, clear sounds which finally merge into the background again. In practical terms, I had a very good sound recordist and boom operator on location, but I also like to manipulate the sound track a

lot. I had a much longer time on the sound editing of the film than other New Zealand filmmakers have, and spent more time mixing it than other New Zealand films do. It is a highly selective soundtrack. I demand that each sound contributes to the film: to the emotion or the feeling or atmosphere of a scene. For example, I minimised the use of bird song to keep the sense of landscape stark and bare.'

There's not a lot of talking in the film. This reflects the kind of people they are, isolated, inward-looking people who each inhabit their own world and have their own, idiosyncratic view of things. This makes any conversation that does occur all the more pertinent. It's communication which always carries an underlying sub-text, currents of feelings which are expressed obliquely rather than overtly. It's an aspect of *Vigil* that enhances the sense of enigma any mystery and keeps the viewer working.

Jack Body's music, composed for the film, is wonderful. It lives and breathes, building tension when things are tight, brightening the lighter moments when things ease. Some music is used for sound effects, some as echo effects for the dialogue. Most of it is there purely as music, as sound accompaniment to what is seen.

Vincent Ward is a man to whom professionalism means commitment, and he demands that those working with him share that conviction.

The story for *Vigil* germinated in his mind over a number of years. The film's producer, John Maynard, maintains that Ward 'must have seen every girl between the ages of 10 and 12 who went to school in Auckland' when he was searching for Toss. The dozen or so who were selected took part in an intensive drama course before Fiona Kay (who, it has been noted, looks remarkably like her director), was chosen to play Toss. Ward says, 'Partly I chose her because of her strength and determination. She

had to be determined, above all else, to last the distance.'

Then there was the search for the right location. Ward says, 'It drove me crazy'. He drove thousands of kilometres to find it. The Taranaki valley was just right — but there was nothing in it. Enter the production department. Led by Kai Hawkins, a team set in place a farm house, huts and a shearing shed. The buildings had to be specially aged. Roads into the valley had to be built. Horticulturists advised on the planting of trees, hedges, even moss. A lawn was laid around the house.

The crew were on location for 16 weeks — 10 of those for the actual shoot. When the sky cleared, rain machines were used. John Maynard's recollections of the working conditions are pretty vivid. 'It was wet and cold. We had problems with keeping gear dry and clean. And with morale — we were pretty isolated. The mud smelt. The costume designer spent a lot of her time just getting the mud off clothes. There were a lot of quite special problems in the making of the film'.

It says a lot for Ward's talent as a director that all this could be brought together to produce such a wonderful film. The acting performances are faultless. The camera work of Alun Bollinger is superb. And the care and commitment have paid off in the response that the film has already received. *Vigil* is the first New Zealand film to have been admitted to the official competition at Cannes. At the first official screening there it received a standing ovation. It has since been sold to the U.K., Germany, Sweden, Portugal and Canada. It is soon to go to France and the U.S.A.

There seems to be a lot of nationalistic fervour around these days. Some of us find it hard to get worked up over rugby teams or long distance runners. But to think that *Vigil* is a New Zealand film. Well. That's really something.