

'VIGIL': A NEW FILM POETRY FROM NEW ZEALAND

By ANNETTE INSDORF

Now that films such as Bruce Beresford's "Breaker Morant," and Peter Weir's "Gallipoli" have established the Australian cinema as a source of sustained interest for American audiences, it may be time to extend our sights to New Zealand. "Vigil"—at the Westside Pavilion—is a striking introduction, not only to the haunting textures and rhythms of a place, but to the unique sensibilities of its young director Vincent Ward.

The first film from New Zealand ever to compete at the Cannes Film Festival, "Vigil" has been hailed by critics as a stunning poetic achievement.

"Vigil" is told primarily through the eyes of Toss (Fiona Kay), a tomboyish 12-year-old who sees her father fall to his death near their isolated farm. Although Toss is then drawn to the mysterious charm of the new hired hand (Frank Whitten), she sees him as an intruder who's trying to take her father's place. Her fears are exacerbated by the glances he exchanges with her still-attractive mother (Penelope Stewart) and the complicity he develops with her eccentric grandfather (Bill Kerr). In this remote valley, Toss watches those three and begins a rite of passage.

During a recent interview, Ward explained the personal and aesthetic origins of "Vigil" and recounted the difficulties of shooting for 10 weeks in an isolated, wintry New Zealand valley. For the 30-year-old director, who also wrote the screenplay, "Vigil" emerged less from a story idea than from a set of images and disparate experiences.

"I come from four generations of farmers," Ward said. "I've lived in a remote and quite raw, claustrophobic community. And when I made a documentary about an aging Maori woman who lived with her 40-year-old paranoid-schizophrenic son, it was more than a film. I became her adopted son and lived with them for two years in an isolated little valley, without running water or electricity."

The immediate result was the film "In the Spring One Plants Alone," co-winner of the Grand Prize at the Cinema du Reel in Paris. The secondary result was that Ward "started to translate the feelings I had there—claustrophobia, being a *Pakeha* (white man or outsider), occasionally being resented for filming. I translated this Maori situation to a slightly rigid, small Catholic family."

He was interested in the question of "what happens to that family after the farmer's death, especially with the entrance of a stranger into the community. But my real interest was the world seen through this child as she interprets reality. She takes little bits, puts them all together, and something new is formed through her



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That description sounds like Ward's own version of writing the script of "Vigil." "The process of writing was to let fragments grow, over a long period of time, into a film. I was trying to clear away things like in a mist, to find the central story to these characters,

which gradually emerged. I intentionally didn't make a plot film. For a long time there was a battle between the three characters and myself, with each one saying, 'It's my story.'"

The four-year gestation was necessary not only for the story to cohere in Ward's mind, but for the exact locations and performers to be found. The handsome director recalled "an extraordinary search—I saw 80,000 miles by car, plus traveling by plane. It was hard to find the environment that I'd envisaged in my mind."

For the key role of Toss, Ward claimed that he saw 16,000 schoolchildren. "I was afraid the story was open to total sentimentality, so I had to find a child who wasn't precocious or cute. I avoided the actor's agents and looked for someone who never acted before but was open. For two years in a row I went around schools, spending 60 seconds per classroom. If a child had an interesting face, I watched her. I eventually interviewed 200 children between the ages of 10 and 12—with their parents. I chose 50 for workshop, and then it was down to five."

Ward's extraordinarily exhaustive location-scouting and casting were rivaled by his meticulous visual preparation. The former art student admitted, "I wouldn't write anything unless I could envisage it precisely and know how I could achieve it in terms of lighting.

"I've been an art director," he continued, "and I worked closely with my art director of 'Vigil,' checking photos of every prop. Ninety-nine percent of the sets were designed for particular shots, like where the window would go to let in the most light. The cameraman would actually fine-draw images from the rough sketches I gave him."

A fine example can be found in the scene where Toss is in a bathtub that's about to overflow. When she goes under water, the camera work shimmers and fragments. Similarly, one can see how brutality is transformed by a child when blood from a freshly killed lamb splatters onto her face; a few minutes later, she makes lipstick from the blood.

Ward's meticulous attention to detail was possible because of the small crew, and because of his training.

"My main interest was painting and drawing," he recalled. "Then I became totally hungry for film at around 19, and devoted myself completely. I learned by falling on my face."

At 21 he co-wrote and directed the short film "A State of Siege," adapted from a novel by Janet Frame. It won awards at both the Chicago and Miami film festivals and was hailed by U.S. critics for its extraordinary visual power.

"But when I finished it, I felt I wasn't ready to do a feature. I hadn't lived enough. So even though there was money for me to make a feature, I did a documentary instead." And after his second international prizewinner—so physically arduous that the muddy water of "Vigil" must have been easy by comparison—the director was ready for the challenge of a sustained fictional work.

"Vigil" set house records in a number of New Zealand theaters when it was released, then opened successfully in Sydney. Ward is especially pleased about that because "New Zealand films have traditionally not done very well in Australia, and 'Vigil' reversed that trend in Sydney. It's also in its second year of theatrical distribution in Germany," he added with a smile.

His latest project is "The Navigator," whose screenplay he began writing in New York two years ago. "Then I went back to New Zealand to prepare it for shooting later this year," he explained. "It's about five men and a visionary child on a quest in a 20th-Century city."

When asked if he considers "The Navigator" a departure from his previous work, Ward replied, "It's a much more muscular narrative than 'Vigil,' but quite atmospheric. The last four films I've done have actually been about women and this is about six men. And where the previous ones have been introspective, this is a more driving kind of narrative. It's also on a much larger scale.

"But it has in common with my other films a sort of view or perception of the world," he continued, "always related to the central character." Can that vision be described? "No, it has to be seen," he concluded.

Insdorf, an associate professor at Yale and Columbia, is the author of "Francois Truffaut" and "Indelible Shadows."