



**A STATE
OF SIEGE**

Vincent Ward: living on celluloid

At 23 Vincent Ward has already made an internationally successful film – **State of Siege**, soon to be shown on TV1 – and in the years ahead he promises to be one of the spearheads of the New Zealand film industry. Staff writer Gordon Campbell meets the man and the movie-maker.

MIDWINTER in Christchurch may have its attractions, but diving into stagnant half-frozen ponds isn't one of them. But let's assume for the moment that it's 1974 again and that Vincent Ward, then 18, is directing his first movie. It's a typical first-year-at-art-school topic, something about Plato and the nature of reality, and Ward has planned a key scene that requires an actor to strip and jump into a pond.



Are you kidding? HIS cast, all volunteers, mutiny on the spot. So the director has to do it himself. Twice. On his first plunge Ward hits mud and rock just a few inches below the surface. Unfazed, he picks up his clothes and walks off to find a deeper pond, the cameraman trailing behind him.

It should have been clear even then that there's something almost obsessive in the energy that Vincent Ward gives to making movies.

Ward was raised on a farm near Greytown, in the Wairarapa, and he's currently at the editing stage on his sixth film. His fifth, *State of Siege*, won the Golden Hugo award at Chicago last year, beating out 140 other student films from around the world. It has been sold to television in Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark and Finland, and according to its producer, Timothy White, deals have almost been clinched with Sweden, Australia, the BBC, Norway and a Public Broadcasting System channel in New York. In mid-October *State of Siege* will be screened by TVI.

As Ward tells the story, he and White decided to take on Janet Frame's novel more or less by chance after reading a synopsis of the *Siege*. And finally there's the old Maori woman who is the subject of Ward's current documentary, which carries the working title *In Spring One Plants Alone*. The obvious question arises: why is someone barely into his 20s so involved with this zone of experience?

"None of these women," Ward explains, "have been affected by modern . . . by the things that tend to even people out. They're not part of a television age. None of them have a husband, or any focus that takes them out of themselves into the world. So because of that they are what they are very strongly . . ." He respects that kind of integrity. "I

book in a Christchurch library. At the time they were simply looking for a New Zealand literary work that would be difficult to film, that would offer a real challenge. In fact the book offered just the kind of damfool challenge that only a pair of enthusiastic amateurs would take on. And bring off.

But the attraction to the novel ran deeper than that. Leaving aside his early student efforts, Ward's last three films have been about the inner worlds of elderly women. First he made *Ma Olsen*, a short documentary about a Greytown woman living out her old age outside the kind of antiseptic surroundings that society prepares for those in their "twilight years". Then came the story of Malfred Signal, the retired art teacher played by Anne Flannery in *State of Siege*. And finally there's the old Maori woman who is the subject of Ward's current documentary, which carries the working title *In Spring One Plants Alone*. The obvious question arises: why is someone barely into his 20s so involved with this zone of experience?

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a woman couldn't have written something like *Man Alone*. That's about the clearest way I can put it . . ."

Originally, when Ward went to art school, he wanted to be a sculptor. About the time that he realised he wasn't ever going to learn much there about the kind of sculpture he liked, the idea for his first film hit him. All that's left of his sculpture ambitions is the memory of a short painful period when he tried to do an imitation of some Scandinavian deathmasks. With typical singlemindedness he made his versions by getting his friends to push his face into mounds of wet clay over a week or so.

But despite this background, he was drawn to the story of the art teacher in *State of Siege* for other reasons:

"Look, you've got to remember that Malfred was part of a whole generation that never really had an adolescence. Her man got killed in the war, and she had to look after her mother . . . so when her mother dies finally Malfred does this very brave thing. She leaves everything behind, the art classes, the women's institute and so on, and she goes off to live. But then there's this very important line in the book about 'the room two inches behind the eyes'. She finds that she is caught up in her memories and her imagination, and the house becomes like a kind of membrane protecting her . . . I'm spelling this out partly, too, to give you an idea of the way the story has been condensed. You have to do this when you make a film of a book. We simplified the structure of the book. I mean, you had to. But what you have going for you with a film as compared to a book is the richness of the visual images. That's what we are doing, really. That's what it's about. You just have to get the right images and set them to work . . ."

Janet Frame's own reaction, as communicated to Timothy White, was that the film was "a beautiful poem". She also pointed out to White that the music he and John Cousins had chosen for the film was by the favourite composer — Chopin — of the woman she'd based the novel on.

The making of the film as it emerges from the accounts of Ward and White is mainly a story of dogged persistence. The house, for instance, was located only after Ward had knocked on doors up and down both coasts of the southern part of the North Island, while White did the same thing in the South Island. When the right house was found in Plimmerton there followed a round of delicate negotiations to gain rights to use it, and the owners finally gave their consent only because "Vincent was so determined".

The crazy energy that sometimes fired the project is epitomised by a scene that didn't even make the final edit. Late in the story, Ward wanted to show Malfred Signal lying still while large flies crawled over her face. In order to attract the flies he laid out some rotting meat. Then he bought a drug to slow the flies down. They still went too fast. So he got some airplane glue and glued their wings together. Great. As Anne Flannery, like a real trouper, held her breath, the treated flies walked down her face, up her nose and into her mouth. "It was a great shot," Ward laughs. "I mean she really looked like meat. But we had to cut it out. It was really over the top."

According to Robert Altman, a good film director has to be part visionary and part social worker. What makes the Ward/White team work as a unit is that they seem to have split the roles. If Ward is the committed film-maker, White by general consent is the socially adept



partner who moves in to smoothen any feathers that might have been ruffled by Ward in midflight.

Alun Bollinger, the veteran cameraman who has worked on both of Ward's last two projects, sees it this way: "The thing about Vincent is that he hasn't got any pretentious ambition. He just wants to make movies. I mean a director has to rely on a certain amount of ego to get him through, we all do, to get through a working day. But Vincent isn't out to make sales, or to impress him or him or him. He just wants to make movies and make them right. According to his plan. And I respect that . . ."

As for Ward's talents as a director Bollinger singles out "his ability to see light. That's one of the tricks of the trade. You're not just getting shapes and objects into the shot. You're dealing in light patterns. And he has got an excellent eye for light . . ."

To clarify his ideas of what he wanted, while making *State of Siege*, Ward used sketches by Edvard Munch. For a reference point on the light patterns. Another reference point is stuck to the door in his Wellington flat: German art, in the form of a print from Werner Herzog's version of the classic vampire film *Nosferatu*. That print links the two great eras of German film-making. Ward's own mother fled from Germany in the early 30s, and the line back to that art was, he admits, a return to roots at one time. "It got so bad I used to tell myself I couldn't live without German expressionism. But I'd be kidding myself to think that now . . ."

After all, as Alun Bollinger said in his genial way, "I'm sure all that philosophy of art stuff is very important to him. Really. And very helpful. But for all the thought behind; it you only see what's in the frame. So I'd tell him, OK, that's enough bullshit, you've had your rave. Let's go out and do it."

Ward can look back now at *State of Siege* and see the errors. He cracks up at the corny speech by the bus-driver. The last shot of the film was ruined; it should have been much longer. A rock that appears seemingly from nowhere, near the end, also figured in a classroom shot at the beginning, but the connection is not made strongly enough.

But he doesn't dwell on these things. After the documentary he thinks he might try another drama with a cast of, say, four or six. A commercial film? The word has little meaning to him: "Every good film has a potential audience. The problem isn't in the film but in delivering the target audience to it . . ."

The pressure on him to make films other people want him to make will probably increase. For one thing, his overseas success would qualify him to spearhead the New Zealand Film Commission's marketing drives. And talking of his refusal to compromise on *In Spring One Plants Alone*, he gives the impression that he might never be allowed such a luxury again.

But it's doubtful whether he'll bend all that much. He says: "There are two real buzzes in doing this. To get them you have to peel things away. You have to peel away going to the pub, peel away a lot of things. You end up living on celluloid. And what makes it worthwhile is the moment when you look down a viewfinder and you've got it. The other time is when you're in a theatre and you can feel the audience responding. But the first one is the real one . . . I don't know, it may be different in a few years, but all I need right now is money for film and cigarettes."

STATE OF SIEGE, TV1, Sunday, October 14.

EARLY WARD

Also among the entries in the *Scene* series this year is *Ma Olsen*, a short film directed by Vincent Ward, who also directed the acclaimed *State of Siege*, which is about to begin a repeat season in Auckland. *Ma Olsen* deals sympathetically



Director Vincent Ward.

with an elderly Wairarapa woman determined to live out her old age outside institutions. The documentary was originally intended for last year's *Scene* line-up, and pre-dates *State of Siege* in Ward's career.

GOOD TO SEE YOU BACK

Among the worthwhile repeats this week are Sunday's *We Live Ourselves* documentary made by Hafafi Hayes, about the self-sufficient Vos family on the West Coast, and the locally made documentary about Fleetwood Mac that is the *Spot On Special* this Friday.

GORDON CAMPBELL