

Vincent Ward has made just three films yet this output offers an extraordinary vision of the character of our country: its isolation, toughness and strange yet often touching beauty. His first film was *A State Of Seige*, taken from the Janet Frame novel; his second, the documentary *In Spring One Plants Alone*, was a moving account of an old Maori woman and her retarded son coping with the rigours of life in the Ureweras. This month New Zealand has the opportunity to see Ward's first full-length feature, *Vigil*.

The young director has spent almost 12 months touring around the international festival circuit with *Vigil*, from New York and London to Cannes and Tunisia. He was given a retrospective at the small but prestigious Hof festival in Germany, an honour indeed to a film-maker not yet 30 and with only three films to his credit. Nevertheless, although Ward himself dislikes the term "auteur", his films do form a remarkably coherent body of work, both thematically and stylistically, a real rarity in this part of the world. I asked him how he felt they were linked:

"Above all, I'm interested in the way people perceive the world, rather than getting an objective or sociological or political view of the world. Often they see the world in an extreme light and tend to be characters who exist on the perimeters of our society."

For all this stressing of subjectivity, the films are still tempered with a strong sense of realism, especially so in the documentary presentation of *In Spring One Plants Alone*.

"I'm very interested in realism but I also try to bend that realism. Things are not quite what they seem. One of the things that appealed to me about Janet Frame's *A State Of Seige* was that its main character saw the world totally in terms of black and white, light and shadow. Toss, the 11-year-old tomboy in *Vigil*, is growing up and see-

VIGIL

interview with
director
**Vincent
Ward**



The hunter Etan (Frank Whitten) lifts Toss (Fiona Kay) to watch her grandfather's invention.

ing certain things going on around her, events which she isn't able to influence. But she doesn't see everything that goes on, just fragments which she pieces together. Because it's like a jigsaw puzzle with some of the pieces missing, it creates an odd sort of vision."

The mental piecing-together which Joss does provides an interesting parallel to the way in which Ward fashioned the script for the

film: "Scripting is a bit like detective work. You have to search out what's there. I start off with little bits and pieces, clusters of ideas. Often it's just an image. When I was in the Ureweras filming *Spring* I had this image of two men on horseback, mediaeval or even primaeval warriors. It was night. They were jousting, but one had a shovel and the other a possum trap. I had to ask myself if this was a film about the Middle Ages or set in New

Zealand. Then I realised it was a child's nightmare ... probably a boy. Eventually, in terms of other ideas I had, Toss turned out to be a tomboy. Constantly one works by this process of detective work."

Vigil is a demanding film, both in its tightly-knit web of symbolism and the complex blending of the visual images with the soundtrack, whether it be Jack Body's terse and pithy score or the immense range of natural sounds. It comes as no surprise that *Vigil* had a much longer sound editing phase than most other New Zealand films which didn't use Dolby sound.

The structure of *Vigil* is much more subtle than the pat, contrived symbolism of, say, Paul Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man* (Ward proffers "sledgehammer" as an appropriate description of Verhoeven's approach). *Vigil* is all the more effective for its elusiveness.

"Yes, *Vigil* is quite an elliptical film. It's about childhood and memory ... a collective remembered childhood. Often what people remember about their childhood is fragmented. It's like snapshots. The child's world in *Vigil* is presented like that and its Toss's imagination which makes it blossom. The audience has to make the links for itself, just as Toss does."

What of the other characters in the film? I found echoes of Malfred from *A State Of Seige* in Toss's mother, with her isolation, repression and memories/illusions, so beautifully caught in the ballet sequences of the film.

"I felt that each of the characters had his or her own story. When Graeme Tetley and I were writing the script, it was a battle in the early stages as to which character would emerge as the central one. Even though it turned out to be the child, all three (Toss, her mother and grandfather) had something in common: they were all going through a period of incredible change in their lives. This predator had come into their valley and became the catalyst fermenting that change. It was probably because of the mother that I had the film set in the mid-60s instead

of, say, the 30s, because the 60s was a time when women were undergoing all kinds of upheaval, social, political and sexual."

Vigil was shot in Taranaki. Isolation became a physical reality and the climate was, to say the least, unhelpful:

"Almost every step you took, you felt you were carrying your own weight around in mud. It may sound ridiculous but this sort of thing actually wears people out!" Yet, in many respects, there were distinct advantages: "All the sets were real. In fact, they were completely finished before we even started rehearsing. The actors actually lived in the buildings for short time."

One can sense the strong identification and involvement of Frank Whitten, Penelope Stewart, Bill Kerr and Fiona Kay with their roles in *Vigil*. The demands were prodigious:

"Frank, who plays the intruder, had to learn how to shear, how to become a fairly good horseman, and even to drive a car. At one point in the film he has to carry a body down a steep hill. This took some practise, as did Penelope Stewart's ballet movements."

The supporting roles found Ward using local talent — and finding it in the most unexpected places: "For the father's funeral, I wanted a really wiry Catholic priest, sort of Taranaki Gothic. The farmer across the way was perfect. He mimed the whole ceremony on a wet and miserable day and we dubbed the Latin in later. I had great problems casting Toss's father, who gets killed quite early on in the film. Finally, a local shopkeeper, Gordon Shields, seemed made for the part. He was even a jockey and able to do his own riding for the jousting scene I mentioned earlier. Only later did we find that Gordon had postponed a hernia operation to make the film, and that he had done all this aggressive stunt work suffering quite a bit of pain."

Ward himself travelled around New Zealand for thousands of miles before he found the right location for *Vigil* and casting Fiona Kay as the young Toss involved almost as arduous a search: "After travelling

around schools looking at about 18,000 girls, we ended up with 150, ran workshops with them for about three months and then chose Fiona. She's incredibly determined, almost like a kid from another planet ... highly imaginative, although in a completely different way to the character in the film and, above all, wonderfully expressive."

There is one other character that you won't find listed in the final credits. Its presence is conveyed through Alun Bollinger's richly evocative camera-work. It's the Taranaki landscape.

"The New Zealand landscape has a real power about it that is quite specific to this country. If you spend any time at all in it, you can't leave without a sense of awe, or at the very least, a sense of respect. There have been rapid changes — the colonial tradition of chopping down everything that lives and shooting everything that moves is still a strong impulse — but you can't help feeling the land is going to catch up with you some time. It's looking over your shoulder ...

"Perhaps I'm a Romantic, but for me this land has a real, living presence. You can see it in the Maori names — mountains are named after real people. We were filming in Uretu and the nearest town was Urenui — one means 'big penis', the other means 'little penis'. Urewera, where we shot *Spring*, means 'bird's penis'."

Whether it be through the animistic power of the New Zealand landscape or the psychological intensity of Ward's vision, *Vigil* is already making a big impact on both sides of the Atlantic. Critical acclaim such as "Strange and haunting," from *Time Out*, "A real masterpiece," from *Midi Libre* is reassuring to a young director, but it is more important that *Vigil* has run for three months in one Munich theatre and that, by June, there will be 60 prints of the film circulating in West Germany. I suspect that, by the end of 1985, the rugged Taranaki terrain may even supercede the geysers of Rotorua as many Europeans' image of New Zealand.

William Dart

SOUNDS UNLIMITED

PO BOX 9555 • 10 REMUERA RD • NEWMARKET • 542-667

HARDCORE, NEW AND CLASSIC

Butthole Surfers : Another Mans Sac

Husker Du : New Day Rising

: Metal Circus

: Zen Arcade, 2LP

: Land Speed Record

Human Suffrage : Thank You Mother Dear

Avengers : Avengers

Flipper : Love Canal/Ha Ha Ha, 7"

: Sex Bomb/Brainwash, 7"

: Get Away/The Old Lady Who Swallowed The Fly, 7"

: Album Generic

: Gone Fishin'

D.O.A. : Positively D.O.A.

: War On 45

Circle Jerks : Group Sex

Youth Brigade : Sound and Fury

Dead Kennedys : Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables

SIXTIES PSYCHEDELICS

Zombies : Live On BBC 1965-67

Nuggets : Vol 1, The Hits

: Vol 2, Punk

: Vol 3, Pop

: Vol 4, Pop Part 2

Music Machine : Turn On

: Best Of

Paul Revere & The Raiders : Kicks

Love : Dacapo

Trashmen : Surfin' Bird

Kingsmen : Quarter To Three

Moving Sidewalks : 99th Floor

ENGLISH PUNK

Vice Squad : Shot Away

The 4 Skins : From Chaos To Live 1984

Exploited : Let's Start A War

STRANGE FACES AT THE OASIS

Killing Joke : Love Like Blood, 12"

Suicide : Alan Vega & Martin Rev

Martin Rev : Clouds of Glory

R E M : Chronic Town, 12"

Current 93 : Bar Maldoror : Dogs Blood Rising

Fall : Slates, 10"

Birthday Party : Singles Compilation

Red Guitars : Slow To Fade

Nomads : Where The Wolf Bane Blooms

: Temptation Pays Double

SEX PISTOLS : THE MINI ALBUM

Previously unreleased versions of 'Submission',

'Seventeen', 'Satellite', 'I Wanna Be Me',

'No Feeling', 'Anarchy In The UK'.

LIMITED EDITIONS PRESENTS

Psychic TV : A Pagan Day, pic disc

: New York Scum Haters

ON THE HORIZON, UPCOMING IMPORTS

Birds : These Birds Are Dangerous, UK 60s

Bushido : Sands Of Nakajima, Industrial

Konstruktivists : Black December, Industrial

Hula : Cut From The Inside, (like Cabaret Voltaire)

: Murmer : Fever Car, 12"

Portion Control : Step Forward

Possession : Thin White Arms, (like Throbbing Gristle)

Eric Random & The Bedlamites : Time Splice

Test Department : Shoulder To Shoulder

Screamin' Sirens : Fiesta (all girl country-sleaze

maniac quintet)

D.O.A. : Don't Turn Yer Back On Desperate Times

Severed Heads : Goodbye Tonsils, 12"

Ranking Roger & Blue Riddum : Nancy Reagan Re-Election

Remix

DOING MORE FOR VINYL JUNKIES!!