

River Queen

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor (Originally written for New Zealand, Methodist Touchstone, April 2006. Reprinted with their permission.)

River Queen is the latest offering from New Zealand director, Vincent Ward. Sarah (Samantha Morton) is a young Irish settler woman, raising a child, fathered by a young Maori man, on the banks of the Whanganui River. The child, Boy (Rawiri Pene), is kidnapped by his Maori tribe. The film follows Sarah's search for her child, a search set against the backdrop of the viscous fighting between Maori and Pakeha that is part of the history of the Whanganui River.

Director Vincent Ward is known for his unique cinematic vision of New Zealand. In 1984, Ward filmed *Vigil*. Set in Taranaki, Pakeha in New Zealand perch uneasily upon an isolated, mist covered and alien land. *Vigil* was a landmark in the history of New Zealand film. It was the 1st New Zealand produced film to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival and drew the following acerbic comment from *The Times*. "New Zealand is a great place to grow mad, twisted and bitter." (*The Times*, 1994)

Ironically, the production of *River Queen* became in itself a series of bitter twists and turns. Vincent Ward was fired and then re-hired. Samantha Morton fell ill and required hospitalization. Cliff Curtis crashed his car while driving to the movie set on a twisting, turning, country road.

In the twenty-two years between *Vigil* and *River Queen*, Vincent Ward has flown to Hollywood and covered diverse terrain that included directing Robin Williams in *What Dreams May Come* and Tom Hanks in *The Last Samurai*. With *River Queen*, Ward returns to filming New Zealand. He moves a few hundred kilometers downstream, from Taranaki to Whanganui, and over a hundred years back in time, to the 1860's.

But the landscape is still isolated and Pakeha are still alien. The momentum of *River Queen* is sustained by a voice over technique, as Sarah tells her story. Yet Sarah has grown up Irish and so we face the irony of a New Zealand story narrated by an alien Irish accent.

River Queen teeters between art house and populist. The film offers us international movie stars (Samantha Morton and Kiefer Sunderland). Block buster action, in the form of battle scenes and pioneer sexual encounters, are interspersed with the more artistic use of montage, dream sequences and symbolism. At times these artistic forays threaten to derail the movie. Yet a patient viewer is rewarded by a smoothly integrated conclusion, and the acting of Samantha Morton, Cliff Curtis and Rawiri Pene, which brings depth and fluency.

In both *River Queen* and *Vigil*, Ward turns the landscape into a character. Through the twists and turns of the Whanganui, a River speaks, reminding us that our New Zealand history is complex. Maori and settler jockeyed in uneasy partnership. Stupidity and arrogance walked hand in hand with cultural love and ignorance. Maori tribal allegiances were fluid. Warfare was both primitive and marked by Maori tactical brilliance. *River Queen* refuses a simple history and in doing so, offers both Maori and Pakeha a compelling insight into the twists and turns that remain our shared story.

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