

# Faith steers film's villagers through plague

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Welcome to a 14th-century Scottish mining village, where life is harsh but far more pleasant than in the "outside" world, where the bubonic plague is taking its enormous toll on the people of Europe.

Plague and its challenge to villagers' Christian faith creates the dramatic suspense in Vincent Ward's *The Navigator* which opened this week at Rochester's Little Theatre, 240 East Ave.

A winner of six Australian film awards comparable to the Oscar, including Best Feature Film of Australia, *The Navigator* begins with the tormented visions and dreams of a 9-year-old boy named Griffin. When his older brother, Connor, returns from a journey through cities gripped by the Black Death, Griffin concludes that he and Connor must find the cathedral he keeps seeing in his dreams and — before the sun rises — place a copper cross atop its steeple as an offering to God.

This effort will save the village from plague, Connor remarks, believing that the plague advances with each full moon. A full moon is just around the corner, note the frightened villagers.

With no time to spare, Griffin, Connor and three compatriots embark on a journey through the center of the earth. Using an engine, the motley group pounds its way through time and the earth's core, arriving magically at a sewer wall beneath "The City of God" — a modern-day metropolis in New Zealand.

By the film's end, the tragedy of the Black Death is turned into triumph, even though choppy editing and a confusing series of final scenes leave the viewer somewhat unsatisfied. Still, *The Navigator* is involving, although film buffs may find themselves wondering if it is *The Wizard of Oz* circa 1988, complete with the villager Ulf as a Cowardly Lion.

Unlike so many films dealing with religious themes, Ward's piece is devoid of the plodding seriousness that seems to betray many filmmakers' obsession with tortured spirituality. Humor permeates the



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Trying to cross a modern-day highway is just one of the perils the medieval band of time-travelers encounter during their quest in Vincent Ward's "The Navigator."

film, though God Himself is a distant, invisible and silent figure whose benevolence seems arbitrary.

The Christ-like Griffin is the band's spiritual leader, serving as the group's eyes and heart, pushing them on despite their fears and bewilderment. At one point, though, even he is overwhelmed by the wonders of the modern world. Leading the band towards the cathedral, Griffin loses his sense of direction. "I've seen too much," he cries, as cars screech around him. "Blindfold me, that I may see again."

One can't help but admire these miners, whose adventure is an example of "blind faith" in its most literal form. Armed with no map of the city, they nevertheless arrive at their goal, relying on Griffin's visions just as many devout Christians throughout history have relied on Christ's vision of a Kingdom of God to map their way through the doubt-crowded streets of life.

Blindness and sight, dreams and reality, all compete for the viewer's attention throughout the movie. In a room filled with video screens simultaneously broadcasting news and documentary footage, a frightened Griffin spins round and round while the anchorman talks about "50,000 dead so far," a reference to AIDS, the "plague" of the modern world.

Some critics have chided Ward for going too far with this analogy, while others have remarked that he didn't go far enough. Given how briefly AIDS is brought up in *The Navigator*, however, the innocent filmgoer may wonder what the devil the critics were arguing about.

Indeed, for all its potential to be a serious commentary on the battle between faith and doubt during any deadly crisis, *The Navigator* emerges as little more than a mature version of the average action-adventure film. On the other hand, one might argue that the Bible itself is filled

with graphic stories of heroes grappling with both physical and spiritual enemies.

The film's adventurous tone is accentuated in the early scenes of rugged life and simple faith in the medieval village which are filmed in black and white. This technique effectively juxtaposes the villagers' gray lives against the confusing myriad of colors to which the anxious pilgrims emerge in modern-day New Zealand. Suddenly, life becomes more complicated and confusing, as the multitude of options presented by the modern world mean that fewer and fewer people will share the same values.

Again and again, the movie contrasts the medieval Scots' naivete with the worldliness of their descendants who now inhabit cities of which the miners could only dream. When three modern-day foundry workers happen upon some of the band, the foundrymen remark that a city cathedral tried to replace its old cross with a new copper one, but a lack of funds caused the parish to cancel its contract.

The villagers are baffled by the church's budget problems. "A church in need of money?" one of them asks, to which a foundry worker replies: "It's like any other business when they don't want what you're selling."

When the band of miners set off on their journey, the cathedral of which Griffin dreamed had been renowned as the highest in the world. And although Connor remarks that it should be easy to find their objective, since the church is always the highest building in a city, the cathedral in this alleged "City of God" is dwarfed both figuratively and literally. Standing only a few stories high, it is pathetically small compared to the corporate skyscrapers that encircle it.

The supposed divine nature of the city itself also is called into question by every siren that rings out in its streets as the unsophisticated miners gaze upon the city's thousands of lights.

Technology is depicted as generally dangerous throughout the movie, yet

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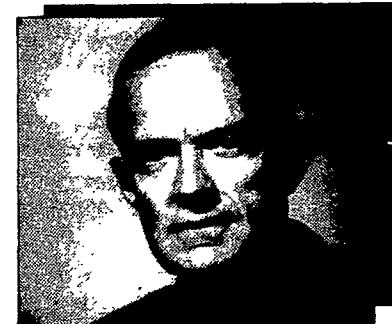
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