

Vincent Ward and the witch of Wairarapa

by André Chumko



Experts have digitally restored award-winning film-maker Vincent Ward's earliest surviving work that was left to rot in a vault and forgotten about. By André Chumko.

On country roads at Morison Bush between Greytown and Martinborough, there once lived a woman with an affinity for animals who some local children had come to know as the town witch.

Rain or shine, the witch struggled away on her antique push bike, carting eggs for sale on tiered open pallets to the Greytown shops. She wore a brown coloured sou'wester oil coat and often travelled with a suitcase, and had an infectious laughter that seemed like a cackle. She had missing front teeth and a shock of white hair that sort of exploded out of her head. She lived alone but whenever she'd open the door to her cottage a bunch of chooks and cats would pop out.

She had three children who'd left home and was a widow, and did remarkably fine embroidery but could also confidently chop the head off a chicken.

It was the late 1970s, and a young Vincent Ward was on hiatus from Ilam arts school in Christchurch, a city that lacked inspiration. He'd kept an eye on the witch for years as a teen and thought she was extraordinary: she had small enough hands that were very strong to help his father with lambing on their family farm.

Ward remembers his father saying he'd never met anyone so good with animals. Pet sheep and cows would eat right out of her hand, and she had no qualms taking out eyes with conjunctivitis to save animals from death or permanent damage.

Her name was Mrs Olsen, or Ma Olsen, or just Evelyn.



Then 20 and now 68, Ward laughs thinking about how old she was at the time he approached her, asking if she was OK with being filmed.

His resulting 15-minute work, *Ma Olsen*, paints a portrait of Evelyn and the issues she faced in the late 70s - her worries about her animals because they were like dependants and her preferring their company to people, and how she'd rather not exist than part ways with them, wondering if she'd have to kill her sheep if she got too old, considering an offer to move into town with her family. As she aged, how would she survive on the outskirts of society?

Ma Olsen, one of Ward's first films, was shot on 16mm film, and was many decades ago slated for broadcast on TV1, but that never actually happened for unknown reasons. The film-maker's gone on to have an illustrious career, while Mrs Olsen herself died some time ago, her public memory mostly lost to the sands of time. Up until recently, Ward thought his portrait of her was forgotten, too.



That is, until, he found out that experts at the country's audiovisual archive had recently finished a full digital restoration of it, after an earlier request to retouch the work which had been sitting in a vault for decades. *Ma Olsen* is now due to screen at this week's Wairarapa Film Festival for the first time.

The process to restore *Ma Olsen* was extremely technical and involved specialists from Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision and Park Road Post Production. They did things like colour grading, scanning, removal of surface dust and scratches from the original film, stabilisation, and clarifying and digitising its sound to be in line with modern broadcast standards.

In an interview with *The Post*, Ward expressed gratitude for the film's restoration.

"When you restore a film and it's about an actual person, you're actually bringing the ghosts of the dead to life. ... It's more than a history, it's like a human being ... particularly for these people that aren't well known ... they suddenly stand up and they live again for those 15 minutes or however long that film is. They make up who we are. We are the products of our past ... the people that we know and we meet and that influence us," he said.



As if it needed further explanation, throughout her life Mrs Olsen always preferred animals. In one of the pair's conversations over the course of making the short film, she told Ward that when she was a teen growing up by the Whanganui River, and in the days of horse and cart, she was aghast to see a milkman whip his horse. Running over to him, the young girl took the whip from the milkman's hand and turned it on him instead.

Evelyn Olsen had no desire to be well known, and Ward supposes he managed to convince her to let him film her because he became her friend out of a family connection, and because they developed a genuine empathy for one another. He can't even remember if she even saw the finished product, but hopes people will come out of the woodwork with their own stories of her after seeing the short film this week.

Ward will travel from his chaotic and creative West Auckland haven for the festival, and is excited to reunite with childhood friends. In recent years, he spent time living in Ukraine's Kyiv pre-invasion while making a feature film, and has since helped crowdfund a military vehicle for that movie's lead actor, who's now fighting for Ukraine's sovereignty. Separately, Ward hopes to get financing for a TV series he's making that's set in WWII Germany. He's also been writing, and creating art and furniture.

Ward insists *Ma Olsen* is not a lost masterpiece and describes it as just a small film about an eccentric woman which he made as a student. But the seed work does give a glimpse to a day gone by, and help illuminate the director and writer's career-long fascination with capturing the lives of older women on camera. The skills Ward honed working with Olsen helped him when he went on to make *A State of Siege*, *In Spring One Plants Alone*, and later, *Rain of the Children* (all three works focus on women, and will also screen at the Wairarapa Film Festival).



He says: "You try to live out experiences that you don't necessarily have when you're younger. Both of my grandmothers died when I was relatively young, one probably before I was born. You kind of want the full series of relationships open to you as a human being.

"In a way, you can create them yourself by making films about those people. You can vicariously have a grandmother. You can vicariously experience what it's like for the lives of different women that you may not normally come into contact with. You get to explore other people's lives and therefore share in them. And so that's what each of those stories represents to me.

"... I have an interest in personal stories and people seeking out a living and in some cases, the stories that I like to tell [are of] people living on the edge, on the periphery, and how they survive. People with a strong individual spirit that go against the grain ... who choose to live their own way. I love those people. I love those people that stand up for who they are and find their own individual way of expressing it."

