

THE AGE – Review of THE DIPLOMAT

One of the most insightful remarks contained within Tom Zubrycki's new documentary THE DIPLOMAT is made by Jose Ramos Horta's former wife, Ana Pessoa, herself a member of the broader East Timorese leadership team. Reflecting on how in 1975 Ramos Horta was selected to represent his people at the United Nations and be based in New York, she says: "He was in a sense condemned to loneliness to advocate the cause."

It must have been an awful time, isolated from friends and family, lobbying at the UN all day and then - as his mother reveals - working as a security guard in a school at night.

That pace seems to have rarely let up, and Ramos Horta has paid a personal price.

"He doesn't have a personal life in either the common everyday sense of having a very close friendship or a relationship with a particular person, he finds it hard to be by himself, to be alone..... he's too busy really for good friends," says Zubrycki.

"The urge, I guess partly to combat the loneliness, is to always just pour himself into his work, and channel all his energy and his drive into his tasks. He is the coolest, calmest and most relaxed often when he has to face some incredibly difficult challenges."

Yet Ramos Horta retains a particular dignity, never appearing hurried. He is a dapper man, maintaining a neat appearance throughout his hectic schedule of international flights, meetings, summits and apparently ceaseless media demands.

Zubrycki agrees, adding that Horta has a very small wardrobe and travels extremely light, carrying just two small bags when he flies overseas.

"And he has a capacity for keeping a certain stubble going. It's always exactly the same with the exact same degree of growth."

The film was initially envisaged to be a profile of Horta as a man living out of his suitcase, a diplomat always circulating without making much of a dent. Until that is, events altered unexpectedly and dramatically when Indonesian President Suharto resigned, forcing Zubrycki's course to change.

"I knew at that point that I had the makings of a potentially great film following history in the making. Here we were right in the box seat of a classic unfolding human drama."

The documentary received more funding and its timespan increased from 50 to 80 minutes. Even then, as SBS film critic David Stratton noted in a glowing review of the film for *Variety* magazine, it is "a gripping documentary...almost too short for its powerful and involving subject matter".

With Ramos Horta as central figure, the film closely follows the major events that led to the Indonesian withdrawal from the tiny nation. It also reveals the bitter infighting that wracked the leadership of the independence movement, which has never before received much attention.

In contrast to the smooth, almost emotionless face of her son stands Natalina Ramos Horta. While he presented an optimistic face to the world about what would happen when the results of the independence referendum were announced, Natalina openly feared the worst. She sees the Indonesian military leaders as killers and liars and is not afraid to say so.

"She was able to probably convey in her reactions something that Jose wasn't able to, or maybe we find out from her reactions something about her son - she didn't have to be diplomatic," Zybrucki says.

"Even though she had a large family she couldn't take out of her mind the three children who died. It kind of haunted her all the time. She's a very strong woman and keeps the home fires burning for her son while he's overseas, but she's a very tragic individual.

"I used her in the film because she has an emotional edge that maybe Jose doesn't quite have, to compensate in some way for his reluctance to become emotional."

Even at the worst of times, when he was watching the televised images of the murderous rampages and massacres that followed the announcement of the referendum result (in which almost 75 per cent of East Timorese voted for independence), Ramos Horta's demeanor is utterly drained but calm.

Zubrycki says it was the same once the cameras were turned off: "He's got to be prepared for the next interview."

Zubrycki, an acclaimed maker of serious social documentaries, is frustrated by current industry trends. The proliferation of game shows masquerading as documentaries (exemplified by shows like *Survivor*) in particular. He is also troubled by the half-hour formats .many documentaries are being forced into, believing it makes for voyeurism rather than insight. But he is often heartened by the work of young film makers, singling out the documentary film *Chasing Buddha* as the best piece he's seen recently.

For himself there are hopes for the future, especially since *The Diplomat* won the best documentary prize at the API awards on Saturday.

The Diplomat has screened to much acclaim at several international film festivals, but for those who will see it for the first time when it debuts on television this week Zubrycki hopes: "to have an audience come away with the feeling that they've appreciated Horta's character as being fairly complex, certainly not singular, certainly not one-dimensional and also to appreciate that the issue itself has certainly got more than one dimension about it".

The Diplomat screens on Sunday on SBS at 8.30pm