

Director's Notes

Tom Zubrycki

We began filming in April 1998 at the first ever Timorese National Convention in Lisbon, Portugal and ended 20 months later on Horta's jubilant return to Timor after 24 years in exile.

Originally the time-scale for the project was 12 months following Jose' around the world observing his uphill battle trying to win support for East Timor on the world stage. The film was going to be a very personal 'fly on the wall'¹ profile of Horta's erratic and lonely life as a diplomat pushing an issue that the world had once again closed its eyes to. This all quickly changed into being a film about the birth of a nation with Horta as the key protagonist.

The decision to start filming the Convention was fortuitous. The event, bringing together East Timorese from right across the diaspora, had great historical significance. For the first time in 23 years the pro-independence forces buried their differences and formed a united front: the National Council of Timorese Resistance. But even as the Convention was drawing to a close reports were coming in of students rioting in the streets of Jakarta. Events quickly took over and within a month Suharto had resigned. Suddenly Jose' was celebrating the passing of a dictator and victory was in sight. But there were many hurdles still to be overcome before that moment arrived. 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.

One of the problems I had as director was deciding when to film, given that events were changing not only by the week but by the day. Horta was not in Sydney very often. He had made his base in Lisbon, from which he was making frequent trips to the UN and Geneva. We kept in touch with him through the East Timor solidarity network via the internet as well as the exiled leadership, many of whom were based in Sydney. We also relied heavily on news from Jose's mother, Natalina, a feisty woman in her late 60s who was a major driving force behind her son, an insight that is revealed by Jose' himself in the final scene in the film.

Natalina remains severely traumatised by the invasion of 1975. She lost three children in the fighting and the massacres that followed. Like the majority of the population she fled to the mountains to the safety of Falintil guerilla strongholds where she remained for four years before finally being captured.

The more I saw of Natalina the more I became convinced she herself had to become a major character in the film, not only because of her own personal story, but also to balance the film emotionally. Whilst Jose' would often step into his media persona and hold himself back

emotionally, there was no restraining Natalina. She would tell us straight how she felt and why, often with tears in her eyes. What was consistent was her deep and unremitting hatred towards the Indonesian military. She remained consistently cynical

about the Indonesians' true intentions. Even on the morning of the referendum while Jose' talked about having reached the summit of a very large mountain, Natalina warned us not to be complacent. Four days later she was proved right. The militias and Indonesian army had razed Dili and much of East Timor to the ground.

Sometimes I did the shooting myself, while at other times I worked with a cinematographer while I recorded sound. The choice to go it alone with Horta 50 per cent of the time was not made for budget reasons alone, but to enable me to strike up a relationship with him which would produce unique insights into the mind of a very complex man.

My relationship with Horta grew over time, but it was not an easy process. My very first trip with him was to Korea and Norway. What he was doing there was not especially significant to the story, but what was important for me was to get the sense of being on the road with him. Being around him solidly for two weeks, piling on and off planes and in and out of taxis was as uncomfortable for him as it was for me. We skated around each other. I had the feeling that I was being rejected and that making the film was going to be a lot harder than I'd imagined.

Horta is very media savvy. He is used to doing interviews, turning on and turning off at will. He's good at masking his true feelings and telling you what he thinks is appropriate for you to know at any given time. My strategy changed. I decided it was better to get off Jose's tail and instead select events that were significant to the unfolding story of Timor, and then observe him at work. We didn't have to wait too long for such occasions to happen. In July 1998, President Habibie offered the territory 'limited autonomy'. This was immediately rejected by the resistance leadership as being, at best, a transitional arrangement. Horta and the other exiles stood firmly by their position: East Timor had to be given the right to choose its own future! A few months later, a meeting in an Austrian castle with pro-Indonesian Timorese presented a perfect place to press home their point. It ended a shambles, and we were very fortunate to be there to witness the often unobvious power plays. It was a side of Jose' I'd never seen before.

Horta is unpredictable - I never expected him to suddenly walk out of the Austrian conference the way he did. Nor did I expect him to take a soft line on armed peacekeepers by supporting the cautious and conservative strategy pursued by Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer. Both moves placed him at odds with many of his colleagues. Horta clearly misread the seriousness of the situation on the ground in Timor. He soon changed his mind as the situation worsened and the

militia started to make their presence felt. The botched dialogue with the pro-Indonesian Timorese really highlighted Jose's ambivalence about working within the confines of an organisation. He seemed to me much more in command when he didn't have to refer decisions to others.

The Great Ponsonby Bed and Breakfast in downtown Auckland was where I found Jose' at his most stressed and fatigued. He was probably at his lowest point ever in the 23 years of fighting for his country. It was early September

1999. The referendum had returned a 75 per cent vote in favour of independence, mayhem had broken out - the army and militias displacing two thirds of the population to Indonesian West Timor. Jose' certainly had no time to worry about me tailing him with my camera. There were more important things to do - like pumping the media and staying in constant contact with the Falintil guerilla commander in the mountains and with East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao in Jakarta. Filming at close quarters over three days produced the most intimate moments in the film.

It was not always possible, however, to be at the right spot at the right time. I was unable to be at the Security Council in New York where the major breakthroughs were announced. Library footage and extensive use of SBS's own coverage of Timor were able to be woven into the finished film to cover these gaps in the story. In many ways it didn't matter that I was absent at these places. What was more important to me was to be wherever Jose' was, after all he was the film's central character and it would have been a mistake to stray too much away from him or his views.

Over a period of 20 months, 200 hours of videotape were shot using three different formats, four cinematographers and two sound recordists, and an editor for 20 weeks. It was a daunting challenge to synthesise so much material and not lose sight of the main goal.

Producer's Notes

Sally Browning

All films begin long before cameras are turned towards the main character. Late in 1996 the idea was first presented to me: an exciting opportunity to highlight the Timorese issue with direct connections to Jose through journalist Wilson da Silva who became my co-producer.

At first the financing of the film seemed to move very quickly. By mid 1997, SBS Independent had committed a presale and our search for a

director led to Tom Zubrycki whose dedication to the film was impeccable.

In November 1997 I found myself in Amsterdam at a documentary forum pitching the project to a gladiator ring of commissioning editors who mostly brushed the project aside with comments like 'Who cares about East Timor? Hasn't there already been a film about this?' Despite this, a Norwegian broadcaster put up his hand to be involved and the ball began rolling again. Further efforts to secure international sales fell flat and with the first shoot date looming, it seemed an impossible task.

At the eleventh hour Film Australia stepped in, taking on the risky prospect of a film about a subject that had been politically unpopular. Their decision to finance us was rewarded. After a month of filming, it became apparent we had a much bigger film on our hands.

Our efforts to second-guess the unfolding events also paid off, allowing us to hold off finishing the filming until after Jose's triumphant return to his homeland.

His trip back to East Timor was a collaborative effort by the CNRT, the UN and us, as filmmakers. Having taken on producing the film, I then found myself organising the finer details of a UN flight for Jose and the media guests to accompany him.

There were numerous highs and lows in the making of this film but no high as great as the final moments as the Hercules transport touched down in Dili. Watching Jose, I know we all felt the indescribable elation of justice being done, a return home for a man who had spent most of his life fighting for a nation the world had largely ignored.

Looking back, it's hard now to reconcile the international indifference of the world's broadcasters with the film we've made.