

Undiplomatic hero of Timor



Phillip Adams

ANANA Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta were the Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of East Timor. With Quixote in jail, Sancho was all alone, tilting at windmills. Living out of a small suitcase, in and out of cheap hotels, with his burning eyes and designer stubble, Ramos Horta seemed on a hiding to nothing. To see him, or to interview him, was to be convinced that his was a hopeless cause, and I wondered how he could maintain his rage and momentum. He'd respond by telling me of some minor victory at the UN or of a meeting in Lisbon that seemed, to him, charged with hope and significance.

In his efforts to keep East Timor on the radar screen of international concern, Ramos Horta seemed self-deluded and lonely. You admired him, of course, and wished him well. But given Australia's diplomatic duplicities, Jakarta's bastardries, Portugal's hypocrisies and the UN's hollow pieties, there was no prospect of a happy ending.

The Dili massacre clearly energised Ramos Horta, who believed that the world could no longer avert its gaze. Talking with him on radio, I disagreed, reminding him of the media's short attention span, that

headlines fade and TV reports are quickly forgotten. But he, more dogged and determined, simply headed for another airport, another city, another meeting, another cheap hotel.

Tom Zubrycki's fine documentary on Ramos Horta's 24-year fight for East Timor's freedom is called *The Diplomat*. It has, quite properly, won a host of awards for its portrait of a bloke whose refusal to surrender was, and remains, astonishing. The term diplomat often conjures the image of the glib-tongued, the spin doctor, the professional charm of an Ali Alatas. Ramos Horta was never like that. Though the grim face sometimes gave way to a smile, albeit a cautious or suspicious one, he was never seductive or smarmy. The style was abrasive, impatient, challenging, about as undiplomatic as a diplomat could be.

Zubrycki gets it all on the screen, in an account that gets whisker-close to its subject. Zubrycki followed Ramos Horta from April 1998 to his triumphant return to Timor 20 months later, recording his private life, such as it was, such as circumstances allowed it to be, as well as his endless meetings and tense, terse negotiations with allies and enemies. In the peripheral vision of Zubrycki's camera we meet some of the people who share his life — principally Natalina, his courageous mother, who lost three children in the invasion of 1975 and the massacres that followed. Natalina had fled to the mountains, seeking some safety with Falintil guerillas, until she was captured four years later.

Zubrycki is one of Australia's best film-makers. He has produced 16 significant documents on our political and cultural lives, a body of work that dwarfs the better-known contributions of most feature film-

makers. Zubrycki's work is unashamedly committed. You know where he stands. But he has never been a hagiographer or a propagandist. His view of the world can be as tough as his protagonists' and he retains his scepticism. He is, in the best sense, an independent filmmaker.

Nonetheless, his respect and sympathy for Ramos Horta shine through. Here is a man who has lived on the edge for more than 20 years, demonised by powerful enemies, marginalised by Australian diplomacy. We see Ramos Horta exhausted, embittered, on the ropes. But then we watch him rally his resources to try again. And, finally, to win.

The Diplomat, SBS at 8.30pm, Sunday.