

Going public with private turmoil

In his documentary *Homelands*, film-maker Tom Zubrycki explores intimate issues within a family of Salvadorean refugees.
SONYA VOUMARD reports.

VOYEURISM and the documentary film-maker: it's a touchy subject. First in an interview, and later by fax, prominent Australian director/producer Tom Zubrycki agonises over it. He is discussing *Homelands*, his latest documentary. It is a close-up portrait of the marriage and lives of Maria and Carlos Robles, refugees from war-torn El Salvador who, with their four daughters, have settled and become unsettled in Melbourne.

Voyeurism, says Zubrycki, is an aspect of documentary film-making that cannot be ignored, especially where the film-maker has privileged access to private lives.

"However, voyeurism to me is all about the abuse of power," Zubrycki says. "Who has it, and who doesn't, have it." He says *Homelands* is an example of a documentary where the power relationship was much more equal than most and Maria, the main subject, had the final say on its content. She also took control of the direction of filming towards the end, he says.

For 10 months, the film-maker and his camera went into Maria's world, where he saw the intimate details and problems of her family's life in suburban Australia, then in El Salvador and finally back in Australia. Originally Zubrycki, whose own parents were refugees from Poland, had intended to make a film about trauma and torture survivors (of

which Maria was one) and how they lived alongside third- and fifth-generation Australians. He began filming with four different families, including the Robles family. Soon the conflicts faced by Maria and Carlos — who had been resistance fighters within their relationship and in the war in El Salvador — both lives, were preoccupying Zubrycki. While Maria was reasonably satisfied with her job and the safe new life for her family in Australia, Carlos was unhappy and yearning for his homeland. He decided to return on his own. This traumatic and challenging time in the couple's relationship became the focus for *Homelands*, which was nominated for Best Documentary in the 1993 AFI awards.

Zubrycki, whose other much-acclaimed documentaries include *Bron Nue Doe* and *Friends and Enemies*, says that all documentaries are nightmares to make because of their inherent unpredictability. The maker can never be sure whether the subject may decide to abruptly terminate the relationship.

This was particularly so with *Homelands* because of its emphasis on intimate family issues, including domestic violence. "There were those very fine shifting layers that defined their relationship." Furthermore, Zubrycki says, although Carlos had agreed to the film, he had indicated he did not wish to be very involved in it. So obvious is this to viewers of the



Film-maker Tom Zubrycki in his studio... voyeurism cannot be ignored.

could barely tolerate me being around. It was partly his natural shyness, partly the language barrier, partly resentment; but mainly it was because his main passion was his work and everything else was irrelevant. This in turn made me uncomfortable about invading private space. It

was a very delicate situation." But did not wish to continue with the film. (He has since spoken about the positive effect he believes it will have in highlighting the plight of the Salvadorean people.)

Homelands is the first of films in which Zubrycki has made himself a palpable presence. At the beginning of it, he explains his own background as a migrant and the child of refugee. "Too many of these sorts of documentaries are made with the unseen presence of the film-maker. [Becoming involved] liberates you in very important ways. It's more than a

question of form. It's a question of social responsibility, to say I am not a fly on the wall."

Zubrycki wants to separate himself from the history of anthropological film-making, from being just there filming the process, standing back from what ever happens, not interfering.

"The more time you spend with someone, the more there is a relationship of trust and the relationship is fundamentally a deep one, the more you [as a film-maker] are going to affect what is being filmed and how the events unfold, and the more you have a responsibility to appear from behind the lens."

Zubrycki says that Maria, Carlos and he became involved in a complex three-way relationship in which his roles as film-maker, friend and counsellor tended to overlap or merge. Maria and he became close friends, during the making of the film, ringing each other every few days. They are still in contact. "There is a lot of trust involved and a fair bit of risk-taking on all sides," Zubrycki says. He believes the film intensified the process of Carlos and Maria resolving their relationship in some way. "It was almost like a psychodrama that they were playing out in front of the camera, which was an interested witness."

In one of its most extraordinary scenes, Maria shows her daughters, in the presence of their father, a video of a location in El Salvador where she tells them Carlos spent time with another woman. Carlos, who has returned to Australia to be with his family, sits quietly watching the footage in the family's western suburban Melbourne living room.

Zubrycki knew this was a rare moment that could have ended on the cutting room floor at the family's request. Remarkably, the only material Maria insisted should be removed was at the request of her daughters, who were concerned that they looked daggly in a couple of scenes. Towards the end, Maria told Zubrycki she wanted to say something important and that he should film it. She wanted to tell the Australian community what being a refugee does to your personal life.

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