

"THE DIPLOMAT"

DIRECTOR'S NOTES - TOM ZUBRYCKI

My first meeting

José is a hard person to know - difficult because he lives so much inside his public persona that he seldom reveals his more private side - even to his friends. I first met him months before filming started - in Bateman's Bay on the South coast of NSW. He'd settle in a corner intensely reading every available newspaper. There would be an occasional dry joke at our expense, but second-guessing the Indonesians next move was serious work. I was with Wilson da Silva - a journalist who'd known him for 9 years and had followed him to Sweden where he'd received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. Wilson had obtained José's co-operation in the film and approached Sally Browning to produce it. I first got involved in mid 1997 when the two of them then approached me to direct it. I leapt at the chance.

It was here on the South Coast where José's very good friend James Dunn lived. James had written the most authoritative account of Timor since the invasion. Horta too talked of settling down and writing a book. He even went so far to pursue this fantasy as to have us check out holiday places that were for sale in the area. But, as I soon found out, he was not someone who could bear to stand still for very long.

At the outset the film was always going to be about politics because politics was the centre of José's life. The 'private' would emerge in time, as indeed it did. Originally the time-scale was going to be a short one - 12 months from start of filming to completion. This doubled as events took over and the film quickly changed from being a film about Horta's erratic and lonely life as a diplomat to one about the traumatic birth of a nation with Horta being the key protagonist.

Shooting began in April 1998 at the first ever Timorese National Convention in Lisbon, Portugal. 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 were to bury their differences and form 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. Within a month Suharto had resigned, and for José victory was in sight. Yet there were many hurdles still to be overcome before a referendum on self-determination for E.Timor could take place. It was precisely these hurdles that I imagined would provide the key filmic events in the film.

Being with José

The next few months were anti-climactic. Suharto had left the scene and everyone was waiting for something to happen. I decided to join José on a solo trip to Korea and Norway to get the sense of what it was like being on the road – day after day, month after months. However, being in each others company solidly for 2 weeks - piling on and off planes and taxis proved as uncomfortable for him as it was for me. We skated around each other and I had the feeling that he rejected me. I realised that making this film was going to be a lot harder than I'd originally imagined.

Filming with José was like looking for cracks between the private and the public. Interviews with him turned into being performances. José said what he wanted to say – that is, what he felt was politically appropriate at that moment. Occasionally he would reprimand us: “When will this film ever be finished? “. As far as he was concerned any film on East Timor had to be made quickly so it could be used as propaganda against the Indonesians. He now felt uncomfortable with the film being a personal profile even though he'd agreed to it being so in the first place.

Eventually persistence payed off. One day, after we'd already recorded an hour of tape, he suddenly began to open-up and divulge

candid information about his first marriage and his many infidelities. It was a revealing moment which said a lot about his enforced life-style.

José's mother - Natalina

To compensate for José's enigmatic personality I chose to focus on his mother Natalina, a fiesty woman in her late 60's. Natalina was the driving force behind her son. It was she who gave him the inspiration to keep going - an insight that is revealed by José himself in the final scene in the film. The more I saw of Natalina the more I became convinced she had to become a major character in the film in her own right, not only because of her own personal story, but also to balance the film emotionally. Whilst José would often step into his media persona, 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 of their true intentions. Even on the morning of the referendum, while José talked about having reached after 24 years the summit of a very large mountain, Natalina tearfully warned us not to be complacent. Four days later events proved her right. The militias and Indonesian army had razed Dili and much of East Timor to the ground.

Structuring the shoot

One of the problems I had as director was deciding *when* to film - given events were often changing not only by the week but by the day. Just what was important, and what not important to? Simply 'spending time' with José was only a temporary answer. We had to film events *significant* to the unfolding story of Timor, but what defined 'significance' was sometimes simply an educated hunch.

Suharto's fall did eventually trigger some shift in government policy over East Timor. In August 1998 President Habibie offered the territory 'limited autonomy', but this was immediately rejected by Horta as being at best a 'transition arrangement to a referendum on

self-determination'. Months later a meeting in an Austrian castle with pro-Indonesian Timorese presented a perfect occasion for him and the exiled leadership to press home their point.

What I wanted to explore at the UN-sponsored Intra-Timorese Dialogue in Austria was not simply how José dealt with the Indonesian side but also how he operated *inside* the Resistance. The Krumbach castle was a fantastic visual back-drop to this tense and dramatic stand-off between the 2 opposing sides – one of whom wanted the status quo, and the other who refused to countenance anything else but a referendum on self-determination.

Coverage of this event was not an easy process. We weren't allowed to shoot the meetings in the castle, but luckily we managed to smuggle small DAT recorders for audio of the debates and shoot exteriors of the castle at different time of day for different moods. The combination of the two seemed to work well later in editing. We also had access to Resistance strategy meetings where plans were hatched, as well as altercations in corridors, plus impromptu 'door-stops'.

As the Dialogue progressed I witnessed a side of José I'd never seen before. His sudden walk-out of the Conference was a complete shock, especially when the two sides were very close to agreeing on a joint document. He'd simply stuck to his guns – no agreement without Xanana's release! If nothing else the Austrian failure drew attention to José's ambivalence about working within the confines of an organisation. He was a man who made his own moves in spite of what other people might think. History may prove, in the end, that he was right to walk-out, in spite of the fact that relations between the two sides further deteriorated in subsequent months.

Structuring the film while shooting

From very early on I knew the structure of the film was going to be a balancing act between the enigmatic life of José – the diplomat and quickly unfolding story of East Timor the 'nation-in-waiting'. However, finding the most economic way of conveying the essence of

what was a very complex story was the real challenge. By the end of 1998 editor Ray Thomas and I had already spent 2 bursts of 3 weeks each editing a rough cut. It was a practise I'd done on most of my previous films - to start the edit well before shooting was scheduled to stop.

At the start of 1999 Habibe made his all-important announcement clearing the way for East Timorese to be consulted on independence. By then we'd already burned through half our production budget and 90 hours of tape, but at least now there was a rough timetable towards a referendum, so that we could plan for the year's filming. Sally and I began negotiating with SBS and Film Australia to turn what was originally a 52 minute doc film into one of feature length. They eventually agreed. However we had to re-think the crewing arrangements given that we had to maximize the number of trips abroad. Apart for the trip following Jose's return to Timor, I ended-up taking over and doing the filming and sound recording myself on a small DV-CAM. By the close of 1999 we ended up with over 140 hours of tape shot two digital formats DVC-PRO and DV-CAM.

It's the intrinsic nature of the documentary medium that mocks accurate prediction. Few people, not even José, foresaw the devastation that followed the referendum. On August 30, 1999, we filmed what seemed like a victory party after 90% turnout at the ballot. José left for New York and when the results were announced 4 days later, Natalina and the Horta clan gathered for the party. It didn't them long. Within a few hours of the announcement of the ballot, the militia played their final deadly card. People were incredulous. The images were shocking: smoke rising over the roofs of Dili; Journalists besieged in their hotels by rampaging militias. José appeared in occasional news flashes appealing to the world community for intervention. I was desperate to fly to the States and be with him but I also knew that APEC was about to start in Auckland. Clinton was to attend and *José would have to be there as well.* This is where the final chapter of the story would be played out - for better or for worse. I was right.

I turned up with my little DV-CAM at the The Great Ponsonby 'Bed and Breakfast' in Downtown Auckland . I found José surprisingly calm, though very fatigued. The next three days I spent holed-up with him shooting tape after tape - a mini-doco in itself. I was witness to the full gamut of emotions - resignation, anger, distress, confidence, elation. Journalists paraded through the "B&B" every 10 mins, while mayhem raged on the streets of Dili. Falantil guerilla commanders were calling José via Satellite phone conveying stories of how whole towns were being surrounded by Indonesian troops. There was even a rumour of the UN doing a *total pull-out*. It was José and Timor's darkest hour- -the lowest point he'd reached in the 23 years of fighting for his country's independence. He didn't care that I was there with the camera - history was being made (or broken). In retrospect, had I been there even with one other person (say a sound recordist) my presence would not have been tolerated.

The post-production

The final editing took place between January and April this year, and was a 'round-the-clock' process - 14 hours a day, 6 or 7 day weeks. Keeping ahead of Ray was not easy at times. It wasn't like the old 16mm days with the Steenbeck where I had time to think between the cuts. By mid-February the film was down from 160 hours to 136 minutes. Two weeks later it was down to 89. From previous films, I know its at this point that the hard work really starts. Things that don't work become obvious. Screenings with the investors and film maker colleagues help clarify difficult areas. Elements can be nuanced and teased out. I remember the historical sequence was too long and has to be cut back because it interrupted the unfolding of the story that was being told in the present. We also decided to give Natalina more screen-time than we had originally planned. The importance of her character grew the longer the editing progressed.

Inter-titles were an essential aspect of the construction of the film and their design was largely the work of title artist Janet Merewether. The raw source for the inter-titles was news footage shot in Jakarta,

Timor and the UN. The decision was made to drain colour from the shots to suggest the images were coming from a place distant to our own filmmaking viewpoint. Some images, like those of the militia, were spot-colourised and rendered shadowy and grainy so as to enhance the feeling of menace. Their identity and substance became iconographic. Janet's idea of the double image of Alatas was a brilliant metaphor for his double-speak on Timor at the time.

In the end I am happy with the film. Naturally it could have been longer. Perhaps 90 rather than 81, but every director says that about their film. I'm the first to admit that what might work fine in the cinema may not hold an audience on television. Overall I felt in the end that I succeeded in presenting 'the man' in relation to 'the issue' in such a way that showed the many contradictory sides to his personality- often charming, at other times ruthless and ego-driven, but in the end completely moral in his motives to achieve his goal.

It's hard to know where to go from here after you've made a film that has been a personal obsession and consumed two years of your life. I have other films to make, but I want very much to continue to be involved in East Timor in some on-going capacity. My personal aim is to assist a film maker colleague Gil Scrine to realise a project (currently in the planning stages) to train young Timorese to acquire the skills needed to record their own history and to become the first generation of local indigenous film makers. It is now time to pass the baton to the Timorese themselves. Only when that starts to happen will I be content with the knowledge that the process of making **The Diplomat** is truly complete.