

## THE ARTS ON FRIDAY

## Film captures revolutionary's haunted past

By ANNE LIM

FOR 10 years Maria Robles was so haunted by her torture and rape by government soldiers during the civil war in El Salvador that she was unable to speak of it to anyone.

She kept her experience hidden, embarrassed and guilty, just like the thousands of other Latin American women who were prized chastity and fidelity have been brutally taken from them in times of war.

But Maria was and remains a revolutionary. Having fought for her country in the popular resistance movement she is now fighting for other migrant women by talking openly on film, not only about her rape but about other taboo subjects such as domestic violence.

*Homelands* is a documentary portrait of Maria's story, marriage to Carlos Robles, and the problems placed on it by as resistance fighters and the wrenching dilemma of choosing between two homelands — the new and the old.

Maria and Carlos — and the old from right-wing death squads in El Salvador and settled in Melbourne with their four young daughters — never expected to expose their story to the public when film-maker Tom Zubrycki approached them to take part in a film about torture survivors.

But soon after he started his research the war in El Salvador ended and a crisis came that turned their marriage upside down and became the fascinating subject of the film.

The film has produced divisions in the Salvadoran community, with men criticising Maria for being too outspoken and Carlos for being too "soft".

"Australian women have taught me a lot. I have observed from them their strength, their courage to express and to fight for their rights, and without destroying my marriage I have learned to encourage my husband and myself to talk about issues that in other instances would be very embarrassing," Maria told *The Australian*.



Maria Robles with Tom Zubrycki... 'I learned to talk about issues that in other instances would be very embarrassing' — Picture MICHAEL AMENDOLIA

"If it (the film) will help the community understand what we've been through, it's another task the revolution has imposed on us."

When Zubrycki began filming, Carlos was about to return to El Salvador. Unlike Maria, who had successfully adapted to life in Australia, Carlos was in a permanent state of grieving for the homeland he left behind.

Six months later, when there was no sign of Carlos coming home, Zubrycki

accompanied Maria on her journey to find Carlos and confront her past.

There she found that the tables had turned. In Australia she had blossomed while Carlos vegetated. In El Salvador Carlos was fulfilling his dream by training ex-guerrillas to be teachers and had started an affair.

"For Maria I think everything was collapsing — her past was coming up from below and meeting the present and the future was coming in from the

heavens," Zubrycki said. "She had to make decisions about her life, too, and about her relationship with Carlos and where she was going to live."

*Homelands*, which has been nominated for an AFI award for Best Documentary, ends soon after Maria and Carlos return to Australia together, leaving unresolved the question of where they really belong.

The marriage drama as it unfolded in El Salvador is captured only partially on

film as Maria asked Zubrycki not to film many of their intimate moments and Carlos turned his back on the whole filming process.

But Maria's confidence in the filming grew so strong that she even took control of the video camera at times and once asked Zubrycki to film an emotional message to her girls, which is included in the film.

Understandably Carlos was suspicious of his wife's relationship with the film-maker, who had developed a close bond with Maria that "erred film-maker, counsellor and friend Zubrycki felt very uncomfortable about invading private space, acutely aware of Carlos's shyness, resentment and paranoia."

"With Carlos I was unable to strike up the same degree of intimacy because he left Australia soon after we started filming," Zubrycki said.

"It was important with Maria that it did go beyond the relationship of film-maker and subject. Otherwise we wouldn't have got that frankness we relation to the material — which was something you would only tell a close friend so it was important that she trusted me."

Zubrycki agreed that his film was an invasion of their marriage, but he believes it acted as a kind of psychodrama that accelerated the resolution of their problems.

"There was a three-way relationship and I believe the presence of the camera intensified the situation they were in," he said.

Concerned with the ethical questions of misrepresentation, Zubrycki gave the family veto rights over the film before it was released. The only cut requested was a small one by the girls, embarrassed over their appearance.

Both Maria and Carlos regard making the film as a political act — as a sacrifice for the greater good of informing the community of how typical their problems are.

And those problems remain fundamentally unchanged. Maria knows that for Carlos, returning to Australia was a compromise and he may well return again to El Salvador.

As for Maria, she wishes she could split herself in two.

"I belong in both countries," she said. "I belong where my girls are happy. At the moment I belong in Australia, even though I wish to be there and enjoy very much the victory of the Salvadorean people."

*Homelands* is screening in Sydney now and opens in Melbourne today. Seasons follow in Canberra and Perth from November 11, Brisbane from November 26 and Adelaide in early December.