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TOM ZUBRYCKI - DIRECTOR OF THE DIPLOMAT

# DIPLOMATIC DOCO

FILMINK's Barbara Karpinski talks to Tom Zubrycki, one of Australia's most revered documentary filmmakers.

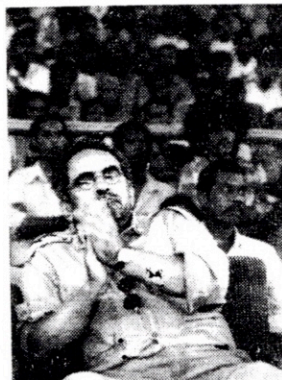
**T**he *Diplomat* follows East Timor's freedom fighter and Noble Peace Prizewinner, Jose Ramos Horta, in the final bloody year of his campaign to secure independence for his country. The film reveals his charm and dry humour, his tenacity and vulnerability. It is neither a current affairs show nor an agit-documentary, but an intensely intimate portrait of Jose Ramos Horta, and therein lies its strength. *The Diplomat* is due

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for release on SBS in November. It received the audience vote for Best Documentary at the Sydney International Film Festival as well as a standing ovation. The film has been nominated in the AFI Awards for the Best Documentary and Best Director awards. Horta allows the filmmakers access to his public and per-

sonal life. From a coffee shop near director Tom Zubrycki's home in the deep heart of multi-cultural Leichardt, Australian-Italians cheer from car windows at their win in the Euro 2000. Zubrycki says: "My first impression of Jose was that he was a man who had elusive qualities, of someone who was incredibly serious but then would suddenly crack a joke.... He was a man who has been described by one of his colleagues in the resistance as a "freelancer", an independent agent - a man who made his own moves in spite of what other people might think. Yet he was elected as Vice-President of the National Commission of Timorese Resistance in 1998. The occasion was the first ever meeting of the Timorese resistance in 23 years, bringing together 250 delegates from around the diaspora. This is where the filming started - just before Suharto's resignation." For Horta, a very private man, being followed by a man with a movie camera was an invasive, yet ultimately rewarding experience. "It was hard for me. There were times he turned his back on me. He was an impatient man. He knew we were making a film, which was not going to be released for a while. He wanted it to be a piece of propaganda against Indonesia. He didn't want a personal profile. The fact I was following with a camera was making him uncomfortable. No one followed him like I followed him." Zubrycki comments: "It was in September 1999 when Timor was in flames and Jose was at



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his lowest ebb, that he realized the importance of what I was doing. Before that, I was a distant last. His priorities were always to make a diplomatic intervention and get international leaders on side. I've filmed many documentaries and I've never had as much trouble cracking a private person as this man. Even in interview, it was hard to crack through the mask. I was surprised when he started to talk about his infidelity with his first wife." Despite the weighty subject matter, Zubrycki has added a quirky touch. There were moments when a foreign jour-

nalist stopped an interview to get the pet dog at the Bed and Breakfast in New Zealand, to stop noisily licking his bowl. "I wanted to lighten serious moments and times when Horta, for example, was talking about his fantasy love affair with Sharon Stone. The scene with the dog demonstrated how poorly financed the resistance was and how they had to operate out of a Bed and Breakfast. It was threadbare. He went off in an old car to see Clinton. They just sat in the Bed and Breakfast and the media came to him. There was animals and birds and planes overhead." Natalina, Jose's mother, was a key player in *The Diplomat*. She added heart and honesty, having lost three children already. Zubrycki comments: "She is actually the key to understanding Jose. Natalina was sincere and undiplomatic - the opposite of Jose. Natalina gave us an emotional connection, that he couldn't quite provide himself." In the last scene at Santa Cruz cemetery, Jose says: "In the first letter I got from my mother, she didn't ask me how I was. She was stuck here in Timor. She was in the mountains with the guerillas. She was captured. She was stuck in Dili. She said: "Don't give up. Your comrades are fighting in the mountains. She didn't say anything else." Zubrycki concludes: "The film was a balancing act between following the man, Horta, who was a very ephemeral and enigmatic personality, and at the same time telling the story of the birth of a nation." ♦



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