

THE APPTS 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 whose 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 making openly on film, not about her rape but about other taboo subjects such as domestic violence.

Homebonds is a documentary portrait of Maria's story of marriage to Carlos Robles, and the struggles placed on it by as resistance fighters went through the public when film-makers like Tom Zubrycki approached them for the part.

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... Picture: MICHAEL AMENDOLA

if it (the film) will help the community understand what we've been through, it's another task the revolution has laid 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 cold - 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, her job and her relationship with Carlos and where she was going to live."

Homebonds 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 private moments and Carlos turned his back on the video-making process.

But Maria's confidence in the filmmaker 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 filmmaker who had developed a close bond with Maria, that married filmmaker, counsellor and friend Zubrycki felt very uncomfortable about invading private space, acutely aware of Carlos's suspicions.

"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 filmmaker and subject. Otherwise you wouldn't have got that intimacy in 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.

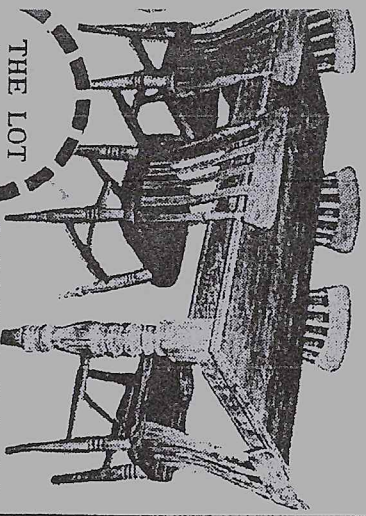
As for Maria, she wishes she could split herself in two. "I belong in both countries," she said. "I belong where my girls are happy. At the moment I belong in Australia, even though I wish to be there and enjoy very much the victory of the Salvadoran people."

Homebonds is screening at Sydney now and opens in Melbourne and Perth from November 11. Brisbane from November 25 and Adelaide in early December.

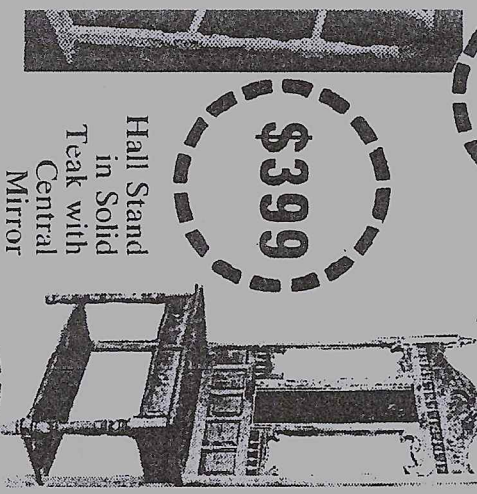
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Rites-of-passage drama impressive

Mima

Panorama, Fitzroy

PHILMENE Esposito's first feature, 'Mima', is a model of clarity and simplicity. It is equally impressive as a rites-of-passage drama, as a subtly unemphatic thriller and as a portrait of family life.

The 13-year-old title character (Virginie Ledoyen) and her sister, Annunziata (Laura Marletti), who is about eight, are the youngest members of a Calabrian extended family living in a French seaport. Tragedy strikes the family in the form of a Mafia execution. Mima has information about the crime that she is reluctant to reveal for fear it could lead to a vendetta and the deaths of other members of her family.

Esposito, as director and co-writer, creates considerable tension with Mima's dilemma and the question of whether she will be able to resolve it. But the point of this film is not to have us on the edge of our seats. There is no on-screen violence, and the scene in which a gangster frightens Mima into silence is quietly sinister rather than terrifying. Instead of making much of the thriller elements, Esposito concentrates on showing us all the generations of the family and Mima's emotional relationships with them as she clings on to her childhood, yet recognises that she is approaching physical maturity and adult responsibilities. This beautifully acted film is short.



New releases

NEIL JILLETT

(only 82 minutes), but it almost subliminally achieves great depth of setting (for instance, the way the Calabrians keep a distance from their French neighbors) and characterization (Patrick Bouchey's performance rates a special mention for the economy with which it defines the decency and intelligence of the investigating cop).

Homelands

Nova, Carlton

THE EXCELLENT craftsmanship of 'Homelands' is undercut by built-in evidence that this documentary should not have been made. 'Homelands' raises the question of how far people should be protected from themselves and the media.

Tom Zubrycki, the producer and director, gives us a fascinatingly voyeuristic portrait of a family—a man and woman, both revolutionaries, and their four daughters—who came to Melbourne as refugees from the war in El Salvador. (Their names are given



Virginie Ledoyen and Nino Manfredi in 'Mima': a subtle thriller.

en in the film, but I do not think it is proper to identify them here.) The wife has done well in Melbourne, making friends, getting a satisfying job as a social worker, achieving an independence of spirit and behavior that she was denied in her homeland. Her husband, much less adept at learning English, unable to find congenial work, knows that his wife has become the dominant partner in the marriage and that he has perhaps lost the respect of his daughters.

During the film, the wife makes some serious accusations about her husband. He apparently chooses not to answer them. When the war ends, he returns briefly to El Salvador, where he is again a person of some consequence. The film concludes with doubts about the survival of a marriage.

As the woman says, her discovery of the courage to expose her life to public scrutiny may help other people to adjust to life in an alien land. But my admiration for her is considerably less than my pity for her husband. He often seems to be a reluctant participant in a film that puts the shredding of his dignity on show.

In the publicity notes, Zubrycki writes that the couple saw the film and were satisfied that they could live with it. In his voice-over narration, he says several times that he was troubled by the man's uneasiness, so he decided to "keep my distance and see how events unfolded". It is hard to understand why he did not feel that events unfolded in a way that demanded he should abandon a project that publicises the private lives of six clearly identified people.

A long-winded bore fails to grow up

The Nostradamus Kid

Russell and Hoyts

THE main problem with Bob Ellis's 'The Nostradamus Kid' is not that the central character comes



move the film along or illuminate the characters. Erick Mitsak, as Kevin's gormless mate Wayland, makes the most of the script's best patches.

Among
THE BEST

● 'In the Line of Fire' (Hoyts): Entertainingly intelligent thriller about a plot to kill the US President. Fine performances from John Malkovich as the malevolent would-be assassin and Clint Eastwood as the

Going public with private turmoil

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

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

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

"However, voyeurism to me is all about the issue 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 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

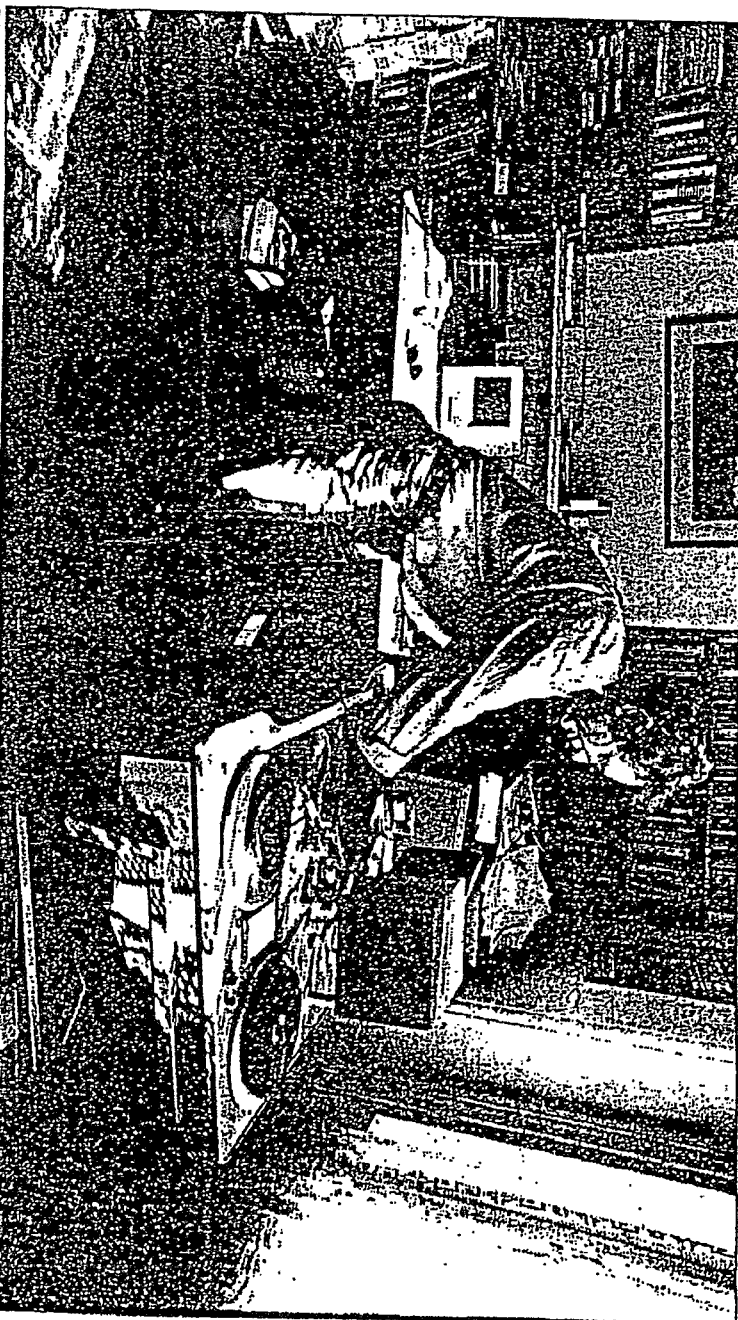
which Maria was one) and how they lived alongside third- and fifth-generation Australians.

He began filming with four different families, including the Robles family. Soon the conflicts faced by Maria and Carlos — who had been resistance fighters in the war in El Salvador — both within their relationship and in their efforts to adjust to their new 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 dramatic 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 *Don Nue Daz* and *Friends and Enemies*, says that all documentaries are nightmares to make because of their inherent undecidability. 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.

film, it is surprising that the apparently sullen and reticent Carlos allows himself to be filmed at all.

At one point in El Salvador, Zubrycki feels the need to enter his own film, explaining that Carlos does not seem happy with his presence. "Sometimes I felt he

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 she was irrelevant. This in turn made me uncomfortable about invading private space. It

was a very delicate situation." But at no stage did Carlos say that he 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 Salvadoran people.)

Homelands is the first of his 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 refugees. "Too many of these sorts of documentaries are made with the unseen presence of the film-maker, becoming involved liberally 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.

Zubrycki knew this was a rare moment that could have ended on the cutting room floor if the family's request. Remarkably, the only marital Maria insisted should be removed was that of the request of her daughters, who were concerned that they looked disfigured 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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HWA-OM-KYONG

(SOUTH KOREAN)

A Tae Hung Prod. Co. production, with Korean Films Associates (International sales: Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corp., Seoul. Produced by Lee Tae-Won. Directed, written by Jang Sun-Woo, based on the novel by Ko Eun. Camera (color), Yu Young-Gill; editor, Kim Hyun; music, Lee Chong-Ku; production design, Chun Yung-Haeng; costume design, Lee Eun-Kyung; sound, Kim Won-Yong; assistant director, Moon Myung-Hye; special effects, Kim Chul-Suk. Reviewed at the Vancouver Intl. Film Festival, Oct. 8, 1993. Running time: 110 MIN.

With: Oh Tae-Kyung, Kim Hye-Sun, Lee Hye-Jae, Chung Soo-Young, Shin Hyun-Joon, Lee Dae-Ro, Dogko Young-Jae, Huh Byung-Sub, Lim Chang-Dae, Kim Eun-Mi, Um Chun-Bae, Lee Hye-Young, Won Mi-Kyung.

This gorgeous, tender, and warmly funny update of a famous Buddhist tract manages the seemingly miraculous to translate religious literature to the modern screen, and in terms catholic enough to make true believers of selected arthouse auds.

Helmur Jang Sun-Woo moves Ko Eun's novel — already a retelling of the fifth century Avatamsaka Sutra — into the present by following one youngster on his Siddhartha-like journey. After Sonje (Oh Tae Kyung) loses his father, he wanders the craggy peaks and trash-strewn inlets of the Korean peninsula in search of the mother he never knew.

He meets a rascally monk, a saintly blind prostitute, a tough-talking doctor, a boy astronomer and a kind lighthouse-keeper. Sonje remains the same age as others grow old. The script doesn't push any particular dogma to explain this phenomenon, and is, in fact, awash with contradictory impulses (hence the surprising amount of humor); few films have presented human life as a kind of erotic Oedipal death dance.

But even those puzzled by this episodic storyline will go gaga over Yu Young-Gill's supernatural lensing, and all acting is entertainingly high gear. The only minus is that Lee Chong-Ku's stately string music eventually gives way to soapy, all-too-secular synthesizers.

Korean lingo will make pic a tough sell to distributors even if high quality begs a try. Tape will prove a rare boon to theology students, but it will take a marketing crusade to give general auds religion. —Ken Eisner

RAMAYANA: THE LEGEND OF PRINCE RAMA

(INDIAN-JAPANESE)

A Nippon Ramayana Films/Malati Tambay Vaidya and Assoc. (Bombay) production. (International sales: Carnegie Film Group, L.A.) Produced, directed by Yugo Sakai. Screenplay, Narendra Sharma, Koichi Sasaki, Rani Burra, Hiroshi Onogi, Ram Mohan, Sakai, based on the book by Valmiki and conception of Sakai, Vijay Nigam. Camera (color), T. Nishimura; music, Vanraj Bhatia. Reviewed at Vancouver Intl. Film Festival, Oct. 17, 1993. Running time: 120 MIN.

This is an animated retelling of the famous Indian saga, in which an earthly incarnation of Vishnu does battle with the forces of dark non-niceness. Re-

lentlessly paced, pic has no heart for general auds to cotton to, and is not even great to look at.

The classic "Ramayana," originated around 500 B.C. and usually credited to the poet Valmiki, was continuously censored and altered by touchy Brahmins, fearing even a secular retelling of the life of the privileged Prince Rama, who hit the theological big time as the Gautama Buddha. They needn't have bothered, if they'd known it would end up in the hands of these Japanese and Indian animators: picture Schwarzenegger as a well-armed cartoon Jesus ("Ah'll be back") and you've got some idea of the moral tone of this action-crammed epic.

It's like reducing "War and Peace" to a series of disjointed battle scenes, with most of the females jettisoned from the plot. With one violent confrontation after another, there's little of the reflection necessary to get even a hint of spiritual underpinning. Instead, traditional notions of masculinity, courage and filial piety are drummed home between noisy clashes of metal and wood.

The art itself places flatly drawn, rigidly moving central characters (in the "Clutch Cargo" style of mass-prod Japanese cartooning) against richly painted Indian back-grounds. One of the few times these elements are integrated is in a climactic sequence pitting hundreds of monkey-warriors against an awesome, sky-filling giant.

Even with English dialogue, the results won't find B.O. nirvana on the animation circuit. It will, however, play well with laserdisc-owning boys, unlikely to notice, or care, that the good guys have the lightest skins, or that Rama and his buddies speak in hushed Oxford tones, while the lesser beings have plain Indian accents. —Ken Eisner

KE-YEOJA, KE-NAMJA

(THAT WOMAN, THAT MAN)

(SOUTH KOREAN)

An Ik-Young production. (Int'l. sales: Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corp., Seoul). Produced by Park Sang-In. Directed by Kim Ui-Seok. Written by Park Heon-Su. Camera (color), Koo Chung-Mo; editor, Park Sun-Deok; music, O158; production design, Cho Yung-Sam. Yu Jin-Sang; sound, Lee Hyeong-Ha. Reviewed at Vancouver Intl. Film Festival, Oct. 11, 1993. Running time: 115 MIN.

With: Kang Soo-Yeon, Lee Kyeong-Young, Ha Yu-Mi, Kim Sung-Su.

Poignant, colorful and frequently hilarious, this romantic comedy of errors would be instant boffo B.O. in the U.S. if its mixed-up lovers spoke English. As it is, you can't get much more universal than this playfully convoluted tale of Kuppies (Korean urban professionals) who move into the same building, are instantly repelled, then hate each other more once they get involved.

In fact, a smart Hollywood producer could lift the Ben Hecht-like byplay of "That Woman, That Man" intact, with only the political references changed: The characters sing along with Puccini, hang trendy Matisse prints, fight over a Michael Bolton CD (talk about a loser's game) and kiss with Audrey Hepburn on the vidscreen, all while scrambling for position in their careers and beds.

"That Man" Chang (Kang Soo-

Yeon) is a self-centered TV journalist (he's in charge of editing obituaries on people who never die); "That Woman" Eun (Lee Kyeong-Young) is a maternity nurse without much interest in babies. When they "meet cute" in the apartment elevator, each is preoccupied with dumping a longtime b.f./g.f., and they don't connect for some time. When they finally do, more than sparks fly, as their temperaments are strictly chalk and kim-chi.

What raises the comic eventualities above the average TV pic is the ironic unpredictability of the script, which doesn't have a lot of sentimental attachment to which way the romance goes. Instead, with the aid of constantly percolating trespasing and snappy editing, it concentrates on the habituated foibles and petty resentments that keep these attractive urbanites apart and make them who they are.

Along the way, light-handed helmer Kim Ui-Seok ("Marriage Story") and clever lenser Koo Chung-Mo have immense fun with elaborate set-pieces showing the Seoul "Man" and "Woman" in side-by-side rooms, lost in their own high-rise worlds, banging on the walls or longing to be somewhere else. —Ken Eisner

UNE NOUVELLE VIE

(A NEW LIFE)

(FRENCH)

An Arena Films/La Sept Cinema/Lumiere co-production with the participation of Vega Film/Alia Film/Canal Plus/Cofimage 4/Investimage 4/C.N.C. (Paris) Television Suisse/D.F.I. (International sales: Pyramide Intl., Paris). Produced by Bruno Pesery. Directed, written by Olivier Assayas. Camera (color, Panavision widescreen), Denis Lenoir; editor, Luc Barnier; set design, Francois-Renaud Labarthe; costumes, Françoise Clavel; sound (Dolby), Francois Musy. Reviewed at Festival of Festivals, Toronto, Sept. 12, 1993. Running time: 122 MIN.

Tina Sophie Aubry
Lise Judith Godrèche
Constantin Bernard Giraudeau
Laurence Christine Boisson
Fred Philippe Torreton
Ludovic Bernard Verley
Nadine Nelly Borgeaud
With: Antoine Basler, Roger Dumas.

Writer-director Olivier Assayas impressively sustains a highly controlled mood for more than two hours in "Une Nouvelle Vie," but what a mood. This tale of a disenfranchised young woman trying to piece together the jigsaw puzzle that is her personal life is loaded with uniformly sullen characters morosely expressing nothing but ugly emotions. Well-made picture is too slow and temperamentally off-putting for offshore success.

Tina (Sophie Aubry) is a typically pouty French 20-year-old whose blank expression remains the same whether she's having sex or working at her job in a supermarket warehouse. Living desultorily with her pathetic mother and going out with a loser b.f., Tina decides to break a lifelong taboo by seeking out her father, about whom she knows nothing.

Search initially leads to her half-sister Lise (Judith Godrèche), a strange girl who's involved in a weird S&M relationship with their father's lawyer Constantin (Bernard Giraudeau).

Pic's strongest scene is an initial confrontation between Tina and her powerful, piggish father (Bernard

Verley), a collision of raw emotion in which he tells her she'll never see him or Lise again, upon which she draws blood hitting him.

In the protracted course of things, matters become infinitely more complicated, as Tina's mother dies; Constantin, who's been dumped by both Lise and his wife, takes up with Tina and informs her he once slept with her mother; Laurence (Christine Boisson), Constantin's lovely wife, unaccountably lets Tina's old b.f. have his way with her, and Tina and Lise decide to work out their complicated relationship.

Basically, everyone seems to dislike everyone else, but they have a strange compulsion to automatically want to sleep with one another regardless. The characters ooze poisonous emotions, expressed in hushed, ultra-serious monotonous that do not allow for the variety of moods found in real life.

Worse, all humor is banished, to the point where its rigorous exclusion seems ridiculous. Assayas' method is most apparent in a moment in which someone tells the two sisters something that makes them laugh. However, the scene is covered from outside a window, so as to not let the viewer in on the joke.

Two of the former critic's previous pictures, "Desordre" and "Paris s'veille," were good, gritty looks at fringe youth in contempo France. This outing sees him too immersed in an unpleasant, negative mood to communicate much for an audience to grab onto. Perhaps it's time for him to move on to a subject he can handle more objectively.

Widescreen lensing, deliberately drained of color, creates a determinedly drab environment in which the characters play out their sad, nasty-spirited games. —Todd McCarthy

HOMELANDS

(AUSTRALIAN — DOCU)

A Jutz Pwils production, with the participation of the Australian Film Finance Corp., in association with the Special Broadcasting Service. Produced, directed by Tom Zubrycki. Camera (color), Joel Peterson; associate producer/editor, Ray Thomas; music, Jan Preston; sound, Gary O'Grady. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival, June 13, 1993. Running time: 79 MIN.

Tom Zubrycki, one of Australia's top docu directors, has come up with a candid and moving portrait of a married couple who relocated to Australia from El Salvador at the height of that country's civil war. Result is not only a study of displaced people, but a portrait of a marriage that is profoundly affected by the changes in circumstances. It's a gripping docu.

Zubrycki, himself the son of Polish refugees in Australia, is extremely sympathetic to both his protagonists, Maria and Carlos Robles. Film commences on Feb. 1, 1992, in Melbourne, as the Robles and their four daughters celebrate the end of the war in their far-off homeland. It's revealed that both Maria and Carlos had participated in the struggle for freedom, and that Maria had been tortured and raped by the military.

Carlos immediately decides to return home. Maria, left alone in Australia with her children, speaks English far better than her husband, is aware that her daughters have become completely Australianized,

and is torn between her new home and her native land.

Eventually she returns to El Salvador to find that her husband has been involved with another woman. Still, she acknowledges he's been doing great work in a poor village, and she's prepared to forgive him if he returns to his family.

Even if Carlos comes out second best, both display courage, especially Maria, who bares her soul to the camera with startling candor.

Zubrycki and editor Ray Thomas have shaped the material into a seamless drama, and result is an accessible and moving documentary. Technical credits are all first-rate. —David Stratton

THE PROS AND CONS OF BREATHING

A Chi-Boy production. Produced by Steve Hart. Directed, written by Robert Munic. Camera (Technicolor), Steve Atebeck; editor, Michael Waterhouse; production design, Donna Kazemzade; costumes, Phillip Mershon; sound (Ultra Stereo), David Aron; assistant director, Joan Bostwick. Reviewed at Chicago Film Festival, Oct. 17, 1993. (Running Time: 89 MINS.)
Shirley Joey Lauren Adams
Tippy Phillip Brock
Tony Joey Dedeo
Bradley Ira Heiden
Troy Phillip Tanzini
Ira Barry Sobel
Cambi Noelle Parker
Homeless Vet Robert Munic

"The Pros and Cons of Breathing" is the latest incarnation of the several-guys-sitting-around-talking subgenre. It is neither the worst nor the best of the breed. Rather, it shows first-time writer-director Robert Munic's technical prowess and his need for some remedial storytelling classes. The imbalance does not bode well for the venture's commercial life. Limited theatrical prospects could muster modest interest in ancillary areas.

The basic focus is on four twenty-something young men who hang out at a subdued Los Angeles club. The entertainment equivalent of the multiethnic platoon in war movies, the group is comprised of an actor (Joey Dedeo), an agent (Ira Heiden), a standup comic (Phillip Brock) and a director (Phillip Tanzini).

Essential to this type of endeavor is a crisp script, brimming with wit and etched with vivid characterization. It should be noted that this element falls into the "Cons" section of the title.

Munic's narrative vision is almost uniformly bleak, in sharp contrast to the slick, sharp images of the club and its surroundings. It is fraught with lost jobs, lost roles and financial catastrophe. Coupled with characters dogged by self-doubts, the overall mood is not exactly something to snuggle up with on a chilly night. Worse, the tale provides little insight into the human condition under pressure circumstances.

Curiously, the story is narrated by someone outside the group — Shirley (Joey Lauren Adams), a waitress at the club and onetime girlfriend of one of the members of the quartet. If the four men appear callow, the young woman is downright grating as she reports the mundane details of individual fortunes as if reading a news report. A bit more irony would have sweetened the recipe.

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Displaced persons

Refugees Maria and Carlos fled the war in El Salvador in 1987 to face the trials and tribulations of relocating to suburban Melbourne, writes **PAUL POTTINGER**

TODAY it's Rwanda and a few years ago it was Sudan and Ethiopia.

Since Tom Zubrycki made *Homelands* — about the tribulations of the Robles family, El Salvadoran political refugees who escaped that country's savage civil war in 1987 and fled to Australia — the documentary has acquired even greater resonance.

While too many eyes begin to glaze over at the world's latest evening news horror show, Zubrycki's modest documentary (which screened at the Valhalla Cinema last year and comes to SBS on Sunday at 8.30 pm) brings home to us the trauma of war and cultural displacement.

Instead of grasping at the incomprehensibly vast numbers of slaughtered and starving, the consequences of the conflict are seen through the eyes of one family.

Maria Robles and her husband Carlos were both captured and tortured by government soldiers in El Salvador. They, like one-fifth of their countrymen, eventually fled.

For Zubrycki, the son of Polish refugees, the film was a personal project. Acutely aware of the con-

licts raised by dual national identity and dislocation, he sought to emphasise that these are not marginal to Australian life.

"Initially, I was looking to make a film more about cultural aspects than the psychological aspects, although I was also looking to make a film about the survivors of trauma and torture.

What happened in the very early stages of the filming process was a party marking the beginning of democracy and the end of 12 years of civil war in El Salvador.

"At that stage, I suddenly realised what the film was about. It wasn't so much about charting individual survivors, although that could still be a component of the film. The wider issue was families that had been thrown into chaos through wanting or not wanting to move back.

"They fundamentally had to reassess their situation in Australia. It was a good thing to have settled here as refugees, but should they go back to a place where their hearts really lay?"

Australia saw Maria flourish. Freed from a society ruled by machismo, the mother of four daughters became a teacher and community worker. Finding a new sense of self-worth.



Ongoing conflict seen through one family's eyes

The traditional role was reversed for Carlos. Deprived of his former status as a teacher and finding English difficult, he found only menial work.

Finally, driven both by patriotism and alienation (his very Australian-sounding daughters mock his Che Guevara-like appearance), Carlos returned home, midway through filming, to join the reconstruction.

Maria stayed in Melbourne, a place she and the children call "home". When Maria visited Carlos in their homeland, the film crew went along, witnessing their uneasy reunion and Maria's visit to her grandmother's village.

Her volatile manner is a polar contrast to his brooding demeanor. She tells the camera all, where he is

Maria and Carlos Robles in *Homelands*

circumspect and suspicious. Perhaps this is understandable when Maria's quick to make use of the film crew's presence to push her side of the argument.

"You begin to wonder the extent to which Zubrycki is being used by one party as a means to coerce and even shame the other into acquiescence. The director says that while Carlos and Maria provided the impetus for the film, a relationship formed between the three of them.

"[Maria] was so forward that I feel she was beginning to make her own film within mine," he says. "She wanted me to point the camera at things she felt were important for the Salvadoran community and I helped her make her home movie."

But as a director, I felt that at the time we left for El Salvador, their relationship was the driving force. It supplied the narrative, that's what I wanted to explore when we went over."

Carlos eventually accompanied Maria back to Melbourne where Zubrycki says, he has become more of less resigned to his new role. Ironically, he says, it is now Maria who sounds more like the traditional Latin father.

The eldest daughter has wanted to leave home altogether, he says. "Maria rang me several months ago to say, 'You wouldn't believe the problems I have with her. She doesn't want to marry a nice El Salvadoran man. Homelands' screens on SBS *Sunday night at 8.30pm*."



Tom Zubrycki's "Homelands"

invitation. Indeed, part of the overall tension of *Man Bites Dog* derives from the fact that the audience is waiting for Ben to eventually turn on the film crew. This becomes the central metaphor and ethical dilemma of the film: to accept Ben as subject is to condone his actions as object. The ambivalent echo of the 1960s mantra, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem", reverberates onto the post-realist '90s.

The other telling sequence involves a running gag, perhaps inspired by Spinal Tap's spontaneously combusting drummers, which concerns the mortality rate of sound recordists working on the crew. As the director offers a direct camera elegy lamenting the accidental death of one of his soundmen during a shoot-out, he says, "Right before he died I told him, 'Come on, I've got enough footage.' And he said, 'We'll never have enough ...'" To say this attitude is understated in the film would be a gross understatement. Never was there a neater analogy for the media's insatiable and unrelenting desire for news at any cost.

Man Bites Dog concludes with a devastatingly clear and simple metaphor: killing is the same as documentary filmmaking. In pursuit of 'truth' – the holy grail of documentary theory – the end will always justify the means. Anything can be justified. And you can get away with murder, either literally in the case of Ben or figuratively regarding the crew's respect for 'truth'. Even Eisenstein and Vertov, during Stalin's aesthetic pogrom, sensed too late (to their chagrin) that the ethics of realist veracity are inevitably as in thrall to the political agendas of the dominant culture as Narcissus was to his reflection.

Man Bites Dog's persistent exploitation of 'cannibalism' as a formal metaphor is not, however, solely restricted to the 'other' as voyeuristic object. By inverting Vertov, Bonzel's camera acts as a metonymy for the sadistic gaze which eventually turns its destructive *kino-glaz* back on itself. At a particularly tense moment in the film, the crew of *Man Bites Dog* enters into a shoot-out with a television video crew that is simultaneously documenting another serial killer trying to kill Ben. In a very black and literal pun on the theorists' position regarding the superiority of film to video, our film crew, inspired by Ben's killing of his rival, proceeds in turn to slaughter the surprised video crew. The expression "shooting a video" takes on an entirely new resonance in this film.

Jean Renoir, in sympathetic defence of the compassion he felt for his characters, once claimed that "disasters occur because everyone has their own reasons". Ironically, Belvaux, Bonzel and Poelvoorde are not so far removed from Renoir's philosophy of relative humanism themselves. For instance, witness the following exchange between the crew and the killer's childhood friend, Valerie:

Crew: Do you know Ben's trade?

Valerie: Some trade!

Crew: Doesn't it bother you?

Valerie: I don't pry into his work. Everyone's got to eat.

As would be expected in a 'documentary' essentially structured around a single self-reflexive conceit, *Man Bites Dog* deliberately allows itself to be hoisted by its own petard, and finishes in the only way it knows how. By the end of the film, a long anticipated Old Testament morality comes into play: those who live by the sword, die by the sword.

The moral majority's conditioned panic is, once again ironically, with or without some justification. They should quite rightly finger this film for censorship, but not because unbalanced individuals may become sociopathic after seeing it, but because they might want to become documentarists.

The comprehension of any given R-rated film is inversely proportional to the amount of time actually spent viewing it. This is an antipodean derivation of Whitehouse's Axiom: Those who do not see know the most.

The documentary films of Tom Zubrycki have always been provocative and controversial. Some, such as *Kemira – Diary of a Strike* (1984) and *Friends and Enemies* (1987), have created new boundaries for independent political films. Zubrycki's Broome-based films, *Lord of the Bush* (1990) and *Bran Nue Dae* (1991), were not so memorable, but now with the release of *Homelands* Zubrycki has become a major contributor to an understanding of our national psyche.

Zubrycki's film is a portrait of a marriage, an exploration of psychological and cultural displacement, and a depiction of fringe dwelling which some Australians are forced to call home. Zubrycki also briefly appears in the film to reveal that his parents were also refugees. From the start, we learn that this is a personal film, and a journey of discovery for the filmmaker.

The complex world of brutal régimes, and the tragic aftermath on the minds and bodies of refugees sets the context. Maria and Carlos Robles escaped from El Salvador eight years ago to a new world in Melbourne, Australia, where they try to maintain their culture and sense of family.

MARIA ROBLES AND CHILD. TOM ZUBRYCKI'S *HOMELANDS*.



Zubrycki uses the cinematic device of having Carlos talk in voice-over about Maria's adaptation, while Maria describes Carlos' difficulties to dramatize their problems not only as refugees, but also as a couple. Maria is a community-development officer in a centre for South Americans, teaching them how to survive in Australia. In El Salvador, it was Carlos who worked as a teacher and guerilla warfare instructor. In Australia, he can only get work as a cleaner. The contrasting images of Maria's and Carlos' workplaces are poignant and revealing.

Zubrycki introduces us to their family at a party for the eldest daughter's coming-of-age, where a complex ritual ensues that delights Maria and embarrasses Carlos. Around the walls of the hall the 'multi-cultural' crowd look on, trying to give encouragement. But Carlos is uncomfortable, preparing for his journey back to El Salvador, which he feels compelled to undertake.

Carlos' departure allows Maria to tell her own story, and to use the camera as a form of therapy. She talks about her memories of El Salvador, the rape and the violence she experienced as a prisoner, and about her own fear of domestic violence in her relationship with Carlos in Melbourne. But unlike Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1992), Zubrycki does not sensationalize his material, which makes it poignant and extremely sensitive.

The film makes a major turning point when Carlos does not return after six months in El Salvador. Maria impulsively decides to set out to see him and she invites the film crew along. Here again Zubrycki must decide how much to intrude as a filmmaker into their reunion, how much to be a *voyageur*.

It soon becomes obvious that, though Carlos had been uncomfortable with the film crew's presence, Maria is using them for her own home movie. But when they reach the region where Carlos is now conducting education and survival programmes for ex-guerrillas, he also uses the camera to bear witness to his new life and sense of purpose.

Zubrycki's own voice-over adds a further dimension, and the layers build to an extremely intimate and sensitive documentary, which has all the power and nuance we have come to expect from fictional feature films. *Homelands* even has a subplot in its depiction



of an older South American couple, and their willingness to play for the camera introduces a new, lighter tone. Their placement in the barren landscape on the fringes of Melbourne becomes almost lyrical through the eyes of this film.

Homelands was voted the second most popular documentary at the Sydney Film Festival and is having a theatrical release through the Valhalla in October. It deserves to be seen on the big screen, because of its compelling images, empathetic characters, multi-layered storyline and sheer force of its narrative. In this year's AFI Awards, *Homelands* is competing with *Exile and the Kingdom* and *Kangaroos - Faces in the Mob*, which makes the best documentary for 1993 a difficult choice.

INTERVIEW WITH TOM ZUBRYCKI

In *Homelands*, you are mainly dealing with the subterranean world of people's emotions. Why did you make that decision?

I really felt I had reached a point in my work where I wanted to explore the complexities of social life, including the psychological as opposed to the political, layers. I've been drawn more toward individuals. I've always had individuals epitomizing the kinds of issues that my films are about. But *Homelands* depended so much on building a relationship with a family, and one individual in particular.

I wanted to unravel all the complexities of a basic issue: that of being pulled between two different homelands. It's an issue that is so fundamental to the migration process. I thought the way to explore it was not doing a whole range of interviews, but to take one's time and try to explore the issues through one family and the events the family is drawn into.

How did you set about constructing the narrative?

I could plot the storyline almost from the beginning. I knew there was a significant point when Carlos left. What I didn't anticipate was Maria actually making the decision to go back to El Salvador. We'd actually constructed the rough-cut when she decided to go. The fact that we went with her somehow brought the whole process to a catharsis. There was a psychodrama happening. The camera, I believe, helped Maria and Carlos to actually work out their relationship. Their marital conflict seemed to be played out in front of the 'camera-as-witness'.

Did you consciously seek out dramatic images?

Yes. I consciously wanted the images to work emotionally and poetically to heighten the main narrative. Early on, I began to see the film as a classic narrative with main characters, a subplot and two turning points. I also quite liked the use of images in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, although there were other elements of the film that found problematic. I liked the fact that the key subject was able to talk for long periods of time uninterrupted and uncut. Similarly in *Homelands*, Maria's monologue about her experience of being tortured, and later about her husband's infidelity are also very compelling because they're long. It's also an implicit statement against the grotesque packaged voyeurism you usually get in the cover

ABOVE: DIRECTOR TOM ZUBRYCKI.

LEFT: MARIA AND CARLOS ROBLES. *HOMELANDS*.



of similar issues on commercial television. There is no way that a story like Maria's could be contained in a magazine report, or even a standard-length documentary; for that matter.

How did your relationship with Maria and Carlos develop?

My relationship with them wasn't fantastic to begin with. There was a lot of tension and friction in their relationship and I needed to read carefully. When Carlos left for El Salvador, my relationship with Maria developed quite quickly. We needed each other, I suppose. With a film like this, your rôle as a filmmaker becomes complicated and confused, because you're not just a filmmaker, you're a counsellor and a friend. When that happens you lose a level of detachment, and your social and ethical responsibility as a filmmaker increases.

During the filming, I sent them the rushes so they could see what we had shot. That meant they were getting something and we were getting something.

At the end, they saw the fine-cut because I felt the material was private, personal and revealing that Maria and Carlos had to see to make sure they were comfortable with what we had done, that there wasn't any misrepresentation or distortion. I was extremely nervous, but they were fine. It was my ethical and social responsibility as a filmmaker. Making these kinds of films is a two-way, reciprocal process.

Did you always intend to have a counterpoint to the main storyline?

Yes, I always did. The counterpoint of the two older people makes the film more universal. It implies that, while some relationships integrate when you move to another country, others form.

There were other reasons: to emotionally lighten the film, to add some humour. Plus, there's no rule against having a subplot in a documentary. It can only add complexity and depth to the film. Finally, it allowed me to use the barren, outer-suburban landscapes, which contrast so much with El Salvador and say so much about the migrant experience. It's these stark images of the fringe area of an Australian city that partly inspired me to make this film. It accentuated and dramatized for me the psychological adjustments that had to be made by people who'd just arrived from a harrowing experience of being in a war zone.

Why does Thomas have an associate producer credit. Is that because you like to work with your editors in a collaborative way?

It's someone I can bounce ideas off at the very start. I don't have an associate producer. I'm a producer-director. Ray helped me early to make a decision between three different families. Barbara Mariotti, SBS' executive producer, was also fantastic, both at the rushes and rough-cut stages.

Could the film have been made without an SBS pre-sale?

SBS is willing to tackle the tougher, more difficult documentaries, and take risks with filmmakers with a track record like myself. The ABC is very ratings-driven at the moment. Also, taking the film from 60 minutes to 79 minutes was not a problem for SBS. They also gave me a theatrical window, which is harder to negotiate with the ABC.

How did *Homelands* open up filmmaking for you?

Yes, a lot, because I inserted myself into the film, and I had never done that before. Setting up a relationship with someone in your film and not acknowledging that worries me now.

In the beginning of *Homelands*, I reveal my own background. My parents were refugees, but from a different time and a different place. It freed me up incredibly, stylistically. There was certain information I could also impart, and it made the links work better.

My next film will, I'm sure, revolve around the product of a long relationship with whomever the character or subject is, because I think it creates the best documentaries.

"One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin"



JEWISH-GERMAN PHILOSOPHER WALTER BENJAMIN. PHOTO: GERMAINE KRULL, PARIS, 1927.

And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depths of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as 'thought fragments', as something 'rich and strange' ...

– Hannah Arendt¹

Writer-producer-director John Hughes' *One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin* is a loving evocation of the work and life of Walter Benjamin. Hughes began working on *One Way Street* in 1989. It was funded for development by the Australian Film Commission, with an ABC TV pre-sale agreement. The television release was 1992 – the centenary year of Walter Benjamin's birth – but is now having a cinema release as well.