**HOMELANDS – Director notes**

I set out to make a film about trauma and torture survivors - people who had survived a civil war and made their home in Australia. I decided to focus on the El Salvadorian community. Refugees had been arriving in Australia and were being resettled under the government humanitarian program. It was 1992 and a civil war had raged in the country for 11 years claiming 80,000 lives and forcing 20% of the population to flee the country. Human rights abuses were widespread.

As my research progressed and I started to 'audition' possible subjects, my ideas about the film began to change because the situation back in the former homeland was also changing. In El Salvador peace talks were in progress and a permanent settlement was in sight. Many families I met were torn by a practical need to stay, versus an emotional desire to return. The idea of ‘homeland’ meant different things to different families, and to different individuals within those families.

Maria and Carlos epitomised these tensions. They'd been going through a stormy and difficult period. Carlos had never really wanted to leave El Salvador and the struggle. Back there he had trained people as urban guerrillas - one of whom was his wife Maria who had been kidnapped and tortured. The horrors of what both of them had been through became reflected in stresses within their marriage. These tensions were heightened as a result of their different experiences in Australia. Carlos worked as a cleaner in a hospital while Maria had a professionally fulfilling job as a community worker. Their children were well settled into Australian schools. However, it rapidly became clear that Carlos wanted to return to EL Salvador as soon as the situation allowed. But for how long? Ans what about Maria and their children?

*Homelands* was a bit of a departure for me not only in terms of style but also in terms of content. And I felt very strongly I wanted to get back to issues around migration and ethnicity. Earlier in my life I had a relationship with my father which was slightly awkward. My break into film was sort of a break away from what he wanted me to do. Funny, because he became one of my greatest fans. He always came down to Sydney to the State Theatre to be there at the premiere of my films.

Embarking on *Homelands* was an implicit acknowledgment that what my father Jerzy Zubrzycki had been doing for the greater part of his public life was really important and significant in terms of getting multiculturalism on the map and accepted as part of the mainstream. It also became clear to me that there weren’t many documentaries made in this country about the experiences of migrant outsiders, especially refuges. Those stories were pretty much absent, though they’d been documented in shorter films, maybe in the occasional drama like *Silver City*, but hardly at all in documentary.

Meanwhile my colleagues like Dennis O’Rourke and Bob Connelly were making films in New Guinea, and David Bradbury was filming in Nicaragua and Chile. But I was here in Australia and I was wanting to tell Australian stories and I was particularly drawn to our multicultural reality, and particularly the migrant experience. Ironically, I’d worked on a series called *The Migrant Experience* for Film Australia. But it was very formulaic, driven by narration and archive, and I wanted to make something in a totally different style: a character driven observational narrative .

Now what story was it going to be? El Salvador was a place I didn’t know much about, however I knew there was a growing community of El Salvadorian refugees in Australia. The civil war there had just finished. I thought to myself well this is the sort of time where the Salvadorian diaspora would think of maybe reconnecting with their homeland and in some cases even migrating back. There would be families torn between remaining in their *new* homeland here in Australia and returning to their *former* homeland.

I had a friend of mine who was working as a social worker in an outer Melbourne suburb where there were a lot of El Salvadorian refugees, people who had recently settled. I went out there and made connections. I spoke to community leaders and other social workers, though I got the strong sense that they didn’t particularly want stories about people who were experiencing difficulty settling in Australia. They wanted to tell the positive stories and wanted me to focus on those instead. Finally through an academic acquaintance I actually did find a family which was genuinely experiencing these very dilemmas that I referred to earlier.

When I met Maria and Carlos I knew instantly that these were the people that were going to be my subjects. The first time I met them they were arguing. Carlos was in the kitchen pretty much invisible while Maria was chatting to me really interested in what I was proposing - the idea of documenting their story. Within the space of an hour she was saying to me: “Look we don’t have a perfect relationship…we have problems in our lives and we want to go back to El Salvador, but isn’t this the typical refugee story? I think this is important to get this across to other Australians.” Carlos went along with whatever Maria wanted, but I suspected he was uncomfortable about the whole thing.

I submitted the idea to SBS who quickly agreed to commission it, so we started shooting there and then. It was a long-distance film, the family were in Melbourne I was in Sydney, but that was an advantage of sorts, because I didn’t want to impose my crew (myself, a DoP and a sound recordist) every day or even every week. And I wanted also to introduce the camera slowly and to do it in a non-threatening manner.

The very first scene we shot was Maria’s daughter’s coming of age party. She was 15 about to turn 16. We filmed the party (I was still filming in 16mm at the time). I transferred it to VHS and presented it as a gift to Maria and Carlos. They thought it was great. As a filmmaker, I believe that this is a terrific way of sort of getting people to trust you. You’re giving them something back as a filmmaker.

After the party Carlos wasn’t around for very long. He was back at the hospital cleaning out large food bins. It was a hard and messy job. I didn’t really get a chance properly to get to know him. He was quiet, sullen and obviously unhappy with his life in Australia – even though he had 4 lovely daughters. Then all of a sudden he left for El Salvador. As the weeks went by he kept sending Maria letters and later allowed me to use some paragraphs of those letters in the film. In the film Maria reads from them, and I complement the text with shots of her in the environment, walking or travelling to work.

During the extended shoot I really felt that our camera was like a confessional box for Maria. In the film she describes her time in El Salvador when she was roughed up and raped by soldiers. I knew about the incident, but it took three months into our friendship before she eventually felt prepared to talk about it on camera. This traumatic incident was the turning point when she decided to flee the country. In the edit we didn’t really have any pictures which would go with this confronting material, and we didn’t want to use the cliché of archive or re-enactment. My decision was to film close-up her riding in a tram as if she was recalling these events while looking out of the tram window.

The price one pays for having a subject-driven film is that you break the traditional filmmaker’s role of being an uninvolved observer. My relationship with Maria was a complex one. There was certainly trust on her side, and she was keen that my film would draw attention to the refugee experience. But she also set-up an emotional dependence. For me the roles of filmmaker, friend, and counsellor overlapped and merged. It all came to a head when Maria decided to leave Australia to track down her husband. When the two of us arrived in El Salvador Carlos turned a cold shoulder - in retrospect not at all surprising. It was something I realised later in the editing I needed to acknowledge, as my presence was obviously affecting the dynamics of the situation. I had never intended to write narration because this was always going to be a ‘fly on the wall documentary’, but after 4 months of editing I came to the conclusion my own voice as the filmmaker had to be clearly heard and identified. I thought it would add an important layer of meaning to the film.

Looking back, I believe that *Homelands* is one of my best works and that it was a real development in my filmmaking from the ones I’d made prior to that. I think it’s that level of intimacy I developed with my characters, particularly with Maria that took the film to another level. In fact it was this intimacy that possibly made Carlos a bit jealous, and affected my relationship with him. When I arrived in El Salvador with Maria I felt he was thinking that there might have been something between us, which there wasn’t - at least on my side.

Maria desire to return to El Salvador was a real turning point in the film. She hadn’t heard from Carlos for several months, and she suspected that something was up i.e. that he was seeing somebody else. She wanted to find who and to get to the truth. And she did that in rather dramatic circumstances.

We were in El Salvador for three weeks. In that time Carlos was keen to demonstrate to Maria what he’d been doing, and where he’d been working, setting up education programs in the rural areas. He felt very much that this was his vocation, and that he was needed there. Back in Australia he was a cleaner working in a kitchen hospital, but here he was making an important contribution to the country’s reconstruction following the civil war.

So we headed to the countryside, and stayed overnight in a small village. It was pitch black, we were all sleeping in tents, I don’t think I got much sleep. The cock crew at four o’clock in the morning, suddenly there was activity. And even before first light Maria said to me “look I’ve got to tell you something and I also want to tell it to my kids and I want you to film it on my camera”. It so happened that Maria had a small domestic video camera and she was making her own little private film inside mine. She’d already captured scenes in the guerrilla camp (which are in the film). And that morning she wanted to talk to the camera to send a message for her kids. So I said well OK , Maria. I told Joel Peterson, my cameraman, look we really need to film this.

This was a very dramatic moment because the reasons she wanted to tell the kids this story is because she’s discovered proof of Carlos’s infidelity. It had cut her up so much that she wanted to say it on camera straight away in order to embarrass Carlos, I have no doubt. We interviewed her later about what she’d discovered about Carlos’s infidelity, and then immediately spoke to Carlos about his reaction. Many years later and it still strikes me as odd that Carlos led us into this situation by taking us to this particular village. Surely he would have realised that Maria would make these discoveries.

At the end and after all the editing was done, the time arrived when I needed to showing the family the film. (I’d sent Carlos a video to El Salvador because he wasn’t in Australia at the time). So I brought down the rough cut and organised a screening at Melbourne’s Open Channel facility which had a 16mm Steenbeck machine. I laced up the film, and I must say that I felt more than a little nervous. Maria arrived with the kids. She saw the film and she was absolutely fine with it. The only person who had issues was young Helen who said: “oh don’t use that old photo of me, I look yucky”. She was the 16-year-old whom I’d filmed earlier at her coming-of age-party. Carlos didn’t necessarily mind his depiction either. He felt OK about it because I had filmed him doing what he liked best – helping to bring education to rural families living in poverty in El Salvador. This was more important for him than keeping his relationship with Maria going (plus her might have had ‘other plans’)

Maria did actually put something together to show the community in Melbourne. Nothing to do with her relationship, but other material that she’d shot herself or I had helped her shoot. In that way I thought I was really helping her out, while she was reciprocating by assisting me to make my film. Any relationship between a filmmaker and a subject is always fraught with ethical issues, but I felt that I’d resolved that to some extent through helping her out on her own project.

*Homelands* premiered at the Sydney Film Festival, and also screened later un the year at MIFF. Carlos had by that time returned from El Salvador. He and Maria came up to Sydney for the screening. They appeared on stage before an audience of over 1200 at the State Theatre for the Q&A after the film. Maria spoke with an incredible sense of assurance while Carlos came across very nervous.

The whole filming process, I feel certain, would have helped accelerate Maria and Carlos’s breakup. Maria remained in the same job, working amongst her community the El Salvador diaspora, in the western suburbs of Melbourne, while Carlos returned to EL Salvador for good.

How the film was regarded in the El Salvadorean community is something I’ve never really properly gleaned, though I do know that many people didn’t like Maria being so upfront about her relationship ,and being so disarming about her own life experiences. It’s a very Catholic and conservative culture where family tensions are seldom acknowledged publicly. But Maria saw herself as an outsider and in many ways it suited her to participate in the film. In fact it was even more than. She wanted the film to inform Australians of how difficult it can be settling into a new society and culture.

**Tom Zubrycki, November 1998**