

Tom Zybrycki - A Retrospective

Reviewed by Jacqueline Aram & Rebecca Barry

One of Australia's leading independent film makers, Tom Zybrycki, revisited one of his old haunts, the University of New South Wales, to give an insightful look into his world of film-making. Revealing intimate details of himself as a film maker we were able to learn about the processes and methods with which he has produced such noted works as *Waterloo*, *Kemira* and the more recently shown on SBS, *Homelands*. We learned of the powerful and curious relationship between the film maker, "characters" and the camera, and of how these interactions are intrinsic and fundamental to the development of the journey and discovery represented by the final product.

Showing clips from his earlier films we were able to observe a transition involving an increase in the subjective content, focusing more on the relationships between the "characters" in his films, their interactions with social institutions and his own involvement in their lives.

Zybrycki discussed the curious power of the camera in its ability to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the characters which otherwise might not have been exposed. The camera inadvertently becomes a vehicle by which the characters can communicate intimate details about themselves as if the camera becomes a psychoanalyst, accompanying them on a journey of self-discovery. In Zybrycki's documentary *Homelands*, we saw how the characters are able to manipulate the camera for their own purpose. The camera, for Maria, became a tool for expression which might otherwise have gone unsaid and remained private. This mysterious intimacy which develops between the camera and the characters then filters through to the audience as we become the iris of the camera.

Zybrycki discussed with the group some of the problems that arise as a documentary film

maker. Having to deal with real characters who can be influenced and manipulated by the intrusion of a camera, is a dilemma that Zybrycki is very much aware of. Showing events through the eyes of people carries a responsibility with boundaries that are defined by the individuals themselves. His sensitivity to this influence and also to the invasion of privacy has meant that he has often had to take a step back from the camera and let events unfold.

This seems to be in keeping with the developmental progress in Zybrycki's films. For example, his film *Kemira* started off as dramatic footage taken at a rally of coal miners outside Parliament House. From this footage, together with a brief two page outline, he was able to get funding for the film. This enabled the film to develop a momentum of its own as if the film manifested its own message rather than being controlled by the film maker. His films show a journey of people and their relationship with the social institutions and events that happen around them. In this way the political events and influences are transformed into the story of the characters shown. The political and social institutions set up the framework of the film but it is the peoples story that becomes the focus.

We were able to observe several of Zybrycki's techniques of narration during the seminar. In *Kemira* we saw how the use of radio and typed text carried the narrative and how it became an informant of the events that were occurring simultaneously. Radio was also used to show the progression of time. In his later documentary film *Homelands*, Zybrycki took on the role of the narrator, personalising the events. Rather than the structured narration of *Kemira*, *Homelands* offers a more intimate account as Zybrycki himself



becomes a character through the role of narrator. This created a special relationship between the film maker and the family involved in the film making process. Another technique noted was the dramatic effect of the opening rally sequence, in *Kemira* which was aided by the frantic movement of the camera it became an integral part of the crowd.

An interesting observation that was made during the discussion was Zybrycki's tendency to focus on the female characters portrayed in his films. He believes that this unintentional occurrence in his films stems from the openness and willingness of women to share their stories. The talk was both informative and inspirational to all those present, challenging us to look beyond the basic elements of documentary film making. Tom Zybrycki provided us with an introspective look into the ways in which camera, film maker, "characters" and audience all interrelate with one another. The result: a dynamic medium.



1993

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-Hee; 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 Ho-Jae, Chung Soo-Yong, Shin Hyun-Joon, Lee Dae-Ro, Hwang Young-Jae, Huh Byung-Suh, Lim Chang-Dae, Kim Eun-Mi, Um Chung-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 audiences.

Helmer 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 slyly 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 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 audiences 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 Sako. Screenplay, Nanendra Sharma, Koichi Sasaki, Rani Burra, Hiroshi Onogi, Ram Mohan, Sako, based on the book by Valmiki and conception of Sako, 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 not-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 theosophical 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 backgrounds. 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-Yong production. (Intl. 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, O15B; production design, Cho Yung-Sam, Yu Jin-Sang; sound, Lee Byeong-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 trespiking 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 4C.N.C. (Paris)/Television Suisse/D.F.1. (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 Muzey. Reviewed at Festival of Festivals, Toronto, Sept. 12, 1993. Running time: 122 MIN.

With: Sophie Aubry, Tina, 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 uniquely 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'éveille," 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 Jotz Prods. 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 Muncie. Camera (Technicolor), Steve Audeck; editor, Michael Waterhouse; production design, Donna Kaczmarek; costumes, Phillip Morshon; 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 Muncie

"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 Muncie'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.

Muncie'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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HIGH TH BLUE

(DOCU)

A Tara production. Lobbied, written by Buddy Sg Tedy Shim torian Mo Nov. 18, 19 With: B Mac Wise Scruggs, t Jesse McR San Bush, tion, the others.

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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 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 talking openly on film, not only about her rape but about other taboo subjects such as domestic violence.

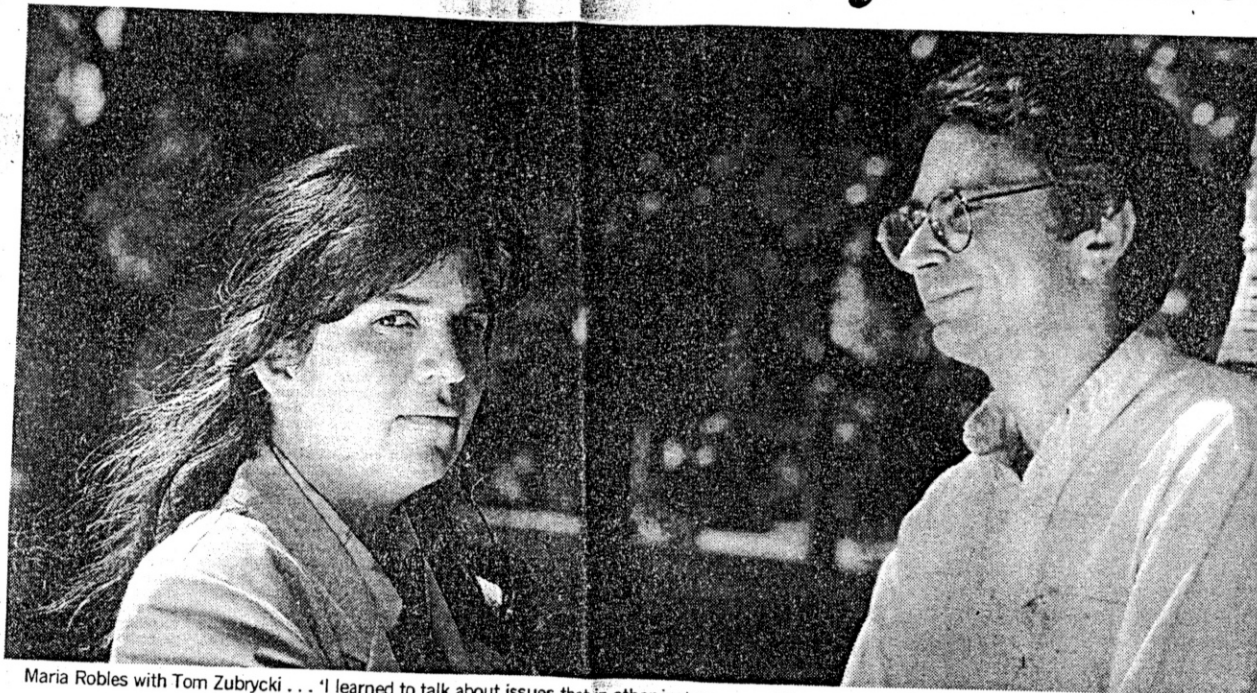
Homelands is a documentary portrait of Maria's stormy marriage to Carlos Robles, and the strains placed on it by the brutality of what they went through as resistance fighters and the wrenching dilemma of choosing between two homelands - the new and the old.

Maria and Carlos - refugees who fled from right-wing death squads in El Salvador and settled in Melbourne with their four young daughters - never expected to expose their emotional life 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 Salvadorean 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 colliding - 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 film-making 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 merged 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 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 Salvadorean people."

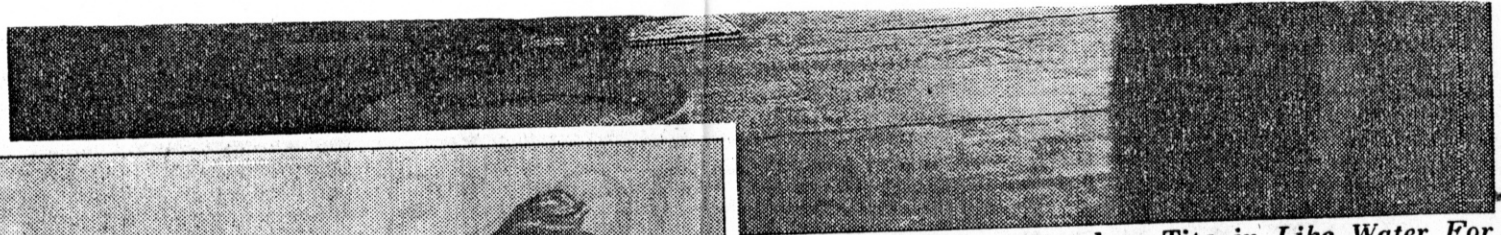
Homelands is screening in Sydney now and opens in Melbourne today. Seasons follow in Canberra and Perth from November 11, Brisbane from November 26 and Adelaide in early December.

PERFORMANCE

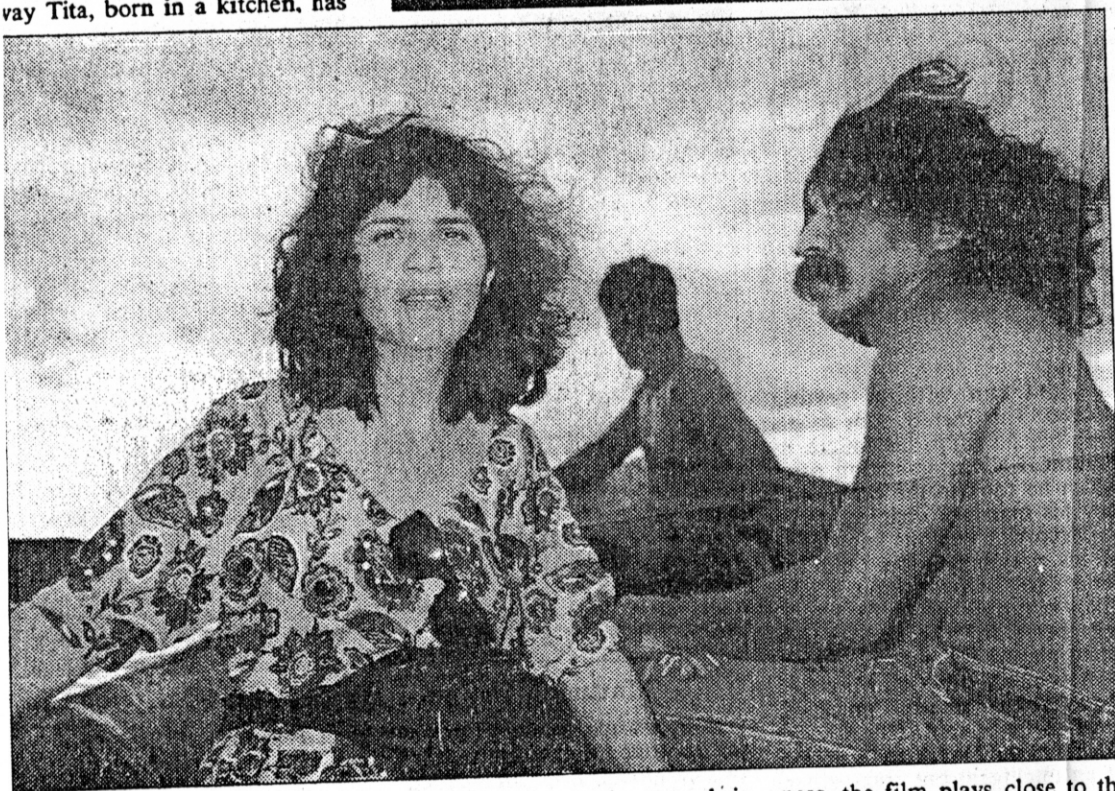
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tradition of contemporary Latin American fiction, it treats the magical as matter of fact.

A central element concerns the way Tita, born in a kitchen, has



Above: Lumi Cavazos plays Tita in *Like Water For Chocolate*. Left: Maria and Carlos Robles, refugees from El Salvador, in *Homelands*.



Others may find that while tasting sweet, it leaves them wanting to fill up with something more substantial.

Hard road back home

HOMELANDS

Directed by Tom Zubrycki
Valhalla. Rated PG

TOM Zubrycki's absorbing documentary about a pair of Central American political refugees might be characterised as the thinking person's answer to *Sylvia Waters*, in that it gets close to a real family but abandons the lurid voyeurism for a more genuinely thoughtful approach.

Maria Robles and her husband, Carlos, left El Salvador and arrived in suburban Melbourne in the '80s to escape right-wing death-squads.

Australia, so often caricatured as a chauvinistic backwater, proved the soil in which Maria was able to flourish. Getting involved in community development work, she was able to find a new sense of herself.

Meanwhile Carlos, deprived of his former status as a teacher and able to find work only as a cleaner, found it harder going.

Zubrycki was fortunate in his choice of a couple. Halfway through filming, Carlos decided to return to El Salvador, where he quickly found a role in the country's reconstruction, while Maria stayed behind with their four daughters.

When Maria visited him in their homeland, the film crew came along, witnessing her undergoing a difficult reunion with her husband and visiting her grandmother's village to re-establish her roots.

Despite Carlos's general suspicion of the film crew (not so surprising when the voluble Maria accuses him of being a wife-beater), the film is candid, moving and warm.

For Zubrycki, the son of Polish refugees, the film was a personal project. Its insights into national identity and the migrant experience should spark chords of recognition with a wide audience, since far from being marginal to Australian culture, as it might initially appear, they go right to its heart.

Going public with private turmoil: page 22

acquired the power to affect the emotions of others with her cuisine. Preparing her sister's wedding cake, she cries over the mixture, causing the guests to later start unaccountably weeping.

In a similarly crowd-pleasing scene, a meal of quail in rose petal sauce transmits Tita's sexual feelings for Pedro to all who consume it. One sister is so overcome with lust she rushes to the shower, running the wooden building to

spontaneously combust, and is immediately whisked away naked on horseback by a revolutionary soldier.

As the above indicates, *Like Water For Chocolate* offers an imaginative and humorous treatment of sensuality. Although there are times when it drags and others when too much material seems to have been crammed in, the storytelling is usually economical.

Yet for all its wild inventive-

ness, the film plays close to the surface. Scenes of grief or death are never moving or disturbing; the acting, for all the intense emotion traversed, is curiously passionless.

I hate to revive that over-worked term, the "feel-good" movie, but here it's hard to avoid. *Like Water* - whose title comes from a Mexican idiom meaning to be ready for love-making - will probably delight many viewers.

Tom Zubrycki's "Homelands"

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*.



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 inhospitable to the political agendas of the dominant culture as Narcissus was to his reflection.

Man Bites Dog's persistent exploitation of 'cannibalism' as a normal 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 purists' position regarding the superiority of film to video, our film crew, inspired by Ben's killing of his rival, proceeds in turn to laugh at 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, not 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.

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-guerillas, 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 introduce a new, lighter tone. Their placement in the barren landscape on the fringes of Melbourne becomes almost lyrical through the eyes of the 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 the 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 towards 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 the moment 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 the 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 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 I found problematic. I liked the fact that the main 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 is 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*.