

## FEATURE: Zubrycki's Homelands

# Home is where the heart is

*Homelands* is Tom Zubrycki's latest and most personal film, one which marks a significant change in his filmmaking style. Tom spent a year filming with a family of Salvadorean refugees, in Melbourne and back in El Salvador, capturing their physical and emotional upheavals as they work out where they want to live and where they ultimately belong. Filmmaker Robin Anderson, co-director of *Black Harvest*, talks to Tom about the film and the filmmaking process.

*Perhaps to start with, if you could just tell me how you got interested in the subject and when you did, how you went about choosing the people that you filmed.*

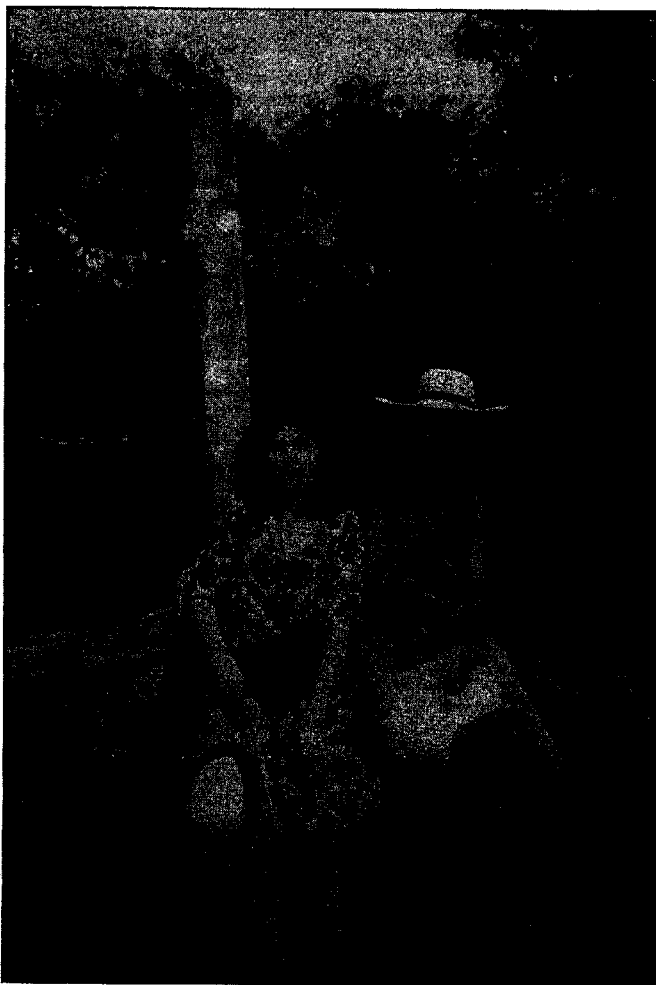
Tom Zubrycki: Two things interested me: an image, and an idea. I'll start with the idea. The idea was to try and discover something about the subjective experience of refugees who had just come from a war zone and were living in a community so totally alien to the one they had come from. In general terms, I wanted to discover how people would cope when they were forced to exchange history for "ethnicity"? So, okay, the image was drawn from a number of paintings done by a friend of mine in Melbourne - the artist Peter Kennedy. Peter worked for several months in the suburb of Coolaroo. His images were quite stark and emotive. His drawings were in the form of aerial "maps". Coolaroo resembled an island on the edge of the metropolis, joined by a single causeway. When I got to Coolaroo everywhere was just open space and rolling fields where the picket fences bordering the housing estate abruptly finished. I felt that in a sense the new refugee settlers were filling the vacuum around them with the horror of the lives they'd left behind. I began to conceive of a film that would bring the idea and image together. Through Peter's contacts I met a lot of people over a short space of time. This was two years ago - September '91. But other things were going on. In El Salvador, the civil war was coming to an end - much more rapidly than anybody really ever imagined. People were forced to confront the option of whether to uproot themselves once again and go back to their former homeland, or to stay in the new one. This dilemma was splitting whole families. Maria and Carlos epitomised that tension. The whole process of being pulled between two different homelands became the logical topic for the film.

*Right. So this was all happening right at the time when you were making a decision about who to try and choose.*

Yes, that's right.

*I know that you originally starting filming with four separate family groups. Can you tell me at that point what kind of film you thought it was going to be?*

I thought at one stage the film would be in four parts and each part would be the story of how each family resolved this dilemma in their own way. I'd applied to SBS already and got a presale from them, but on the basis of a different family. Negotiating the presale and then getting the rest of the money from the FFC just allowed me to do further research. After several months I found Maria and Carlos. For them this dilemma was going to be more painful complex and take longer to resolve. Carlos was about to



Maria and Carlos at the crossroads in El Salvador

go back for an indefinite time, so what would happen to Maria and the kids? Here there was a timeline upon which I could maybe impose a narrative structure, and film events as they unfolded.

*You had the money, really, before you even had met the people that you were going to look at?*

Yes, in fact we started spending the budget by filming on tape, mainly video 8, sometimes SP. I knew I could shoot quite a high ratio without worrying too much about the budget. At some point I would have to commit myself and switch to film but only when I felt comfortable I'd made the right decision. I spent many hours shooting with different families, and that sort of familiarisation was important for them as well as for me. Everything I filmed with the families I gave them back in the form of a VHS offline tape. It was a reciprocal exchange - like an informal contract. You did something for them. They did something for you.

*So why didn't you commit yourself to Maria and Carlos earlier?*

The reason I hesitated was the level of tension within the family. I noticed it from the very first meeting. I wasn't quite sure what it was due to. Eventually I discovered it had been there for a long time and was just being exacerbated by Carlos' imminent departure.

*You didn't want to commit yourself to a personal film?*

No, I did want to commit myself to a personal film, but I felt - just uneasy, perhaps a little bit embarrassed, when I walked into the middle of an argument. I

*You're at the stage now where Carlos has gone and you've become very friendly with Maria and you're trying to anticipate what's going to happen next, not knowing that she's going to go away. Did you at any point here consider going over to see Carlos on your own and see life in El Salvador from his point of view? Did you try and establish a similar kind of intimacy with him?*

It loomed as a very obvious possibility and I considered it seriously. But had it happened, would I have gone back with Maria? Would there have been enough left in the budget? Perhaps also, unconsciously, Maria was becoming my main character and the film was being told very much from her point of view. I also wondered whether I would be able to strike the same degree of intimacy with Carlos. Carlos spoke little English. He was also a very private person. He very much lived in his books. By the time I arrived with Maria in El Salvador it was too late. Carlos turned his back on me suspecting no doubt that something was happening between me and his wife. Plus of course he had other things that maybe he wanted to hide, which are uncovered later. Carlos was bad at articulating anything, even at the best of times, particularly about how he felt. And that's interesting and not necessarily just a Salvadorean trait. In the end I decided to tell Carlos' side of the story through his letters and analyse what impact they had on Maria through the conversations she was having with people like Emma. That's all the material I had available to me.

*Just going into his decision to come back. If I have any criticism - I think it's a wonderful film, these are minor criticisms - I felt that the film changed very quickly from a point where Maria's just found out about his affair and she's very upset and she's doing that videotape to her children and then they're at the beach, and then to my surprise he's made the decision to come back to Australia. I didn't really expect that to happen, that he would come back so willingly with her.*

Well, it was always her intention to bring him back. And I make that a point in the narration at the time where she's packing her bag. Really his return shouldn't come as too much of a surprise, given that Maria's really the dominant force in the relationship, and I think he was also made to feel a little bit guilty about her revelation of his infidelity.

*The farmhouse scene was fascinating and especially your role in it.*

Maria wanted to tell the girls via the medium of the camera about what she discovered Carlos had been doing. She used me and the camera to converse with the absent girls and to further dramatise to Carlos how hurt she felt. So in a sense she was using me as an ally against Carlos in that situation.

*Yes. I mean you can see that developing through the film, that she's gaining more confidence with you and the whole filming process too.*

To the point where she virtually takes over the camera... You see, we actually had a video camera with us in case the 16mm Aaton broke down, which it almost did. Maria decided she wanted to make her own movie for the girls so she borrowed it whenever she wanted.

*And you think that had been partly the influence of you filming that brought that about, because she looked extremely confident once she got to El Salvador, especially given that Carlos was the one that was sealed there. Obviously your presence would have helped that.*

I think the role of the camera is interesting. I actually believe the camera's presence

helped the two of them work out their relationship together, or simply intensified and accelerated the process. There's an element of psychodrama about it. The camera's almost like an audience. And this is partly a cultural thing too, because Salvadoreans traditionally live in large family units and nothing is ever sacred or private. Everything is out in the open, affairs, jealousy, any kind of family disturbance is immediately known to everybody else.

*Just to change the subject slightly, this film is very different from other films you've made, I think, in that it is more personal and really doesn't go much into the political background. Was that intentional or did you just get swept away by the strong personal story?*

It's certainly much more personal and subjective than all my other films. But I've always used individuals to express larger issues and ideas: Ngaira Wiltshire, the strikers wife in *Kemira: Diary Of A Strike* or Bernie Neville in *Friends & Enemies*. I think I've become more skilful. A lot of politics emerges but in a more subtle way. I wanted the film to have a fairly timeless quality and it made no sense to get bogged down in everyday issues. To me the key issues were to do with identity and belonging, which I actually believe are very political.

*To do the sort of film that involves character development, you've got to spend a lot of time with people. Can you just go into the timescale of the whole filming process and how you worked with the crew?*

The shooting period stretched over ten months and involved six trips to Melbourne and one to El Salvador. I paced myself, knowing the story would take at least that long to resolve. It was good basing myself in Sydney otherwise I would have been tempted to shoot a lot more than I did, and maybe run out of stock before the crucial

moments had arrived. The first shoot was just touching the surface. I had Joel Peterson, who's worked with me on the last four films. We had a camera assistant, Liz Hughes, who has made some brilliant short films out of Swinburne. She spoke some Spanish and quickly established a rapport with Emma.

*So you had that first shoot and then Ray Thomas started doing some editing.*

It was really to try and discover what worked, and what didn't. Ray is someone who comes in very early in the process. He's someone I bounce ideas off at the very start. Operating solo as a producer/director is very difficult, and filmmaking is fundamentally a collaborative process. In this first "exploratory shoot" Ray helped me to define the main characters and the basic story line.

*What sort of film were you thinking of, was it going to be just a one hour television film, did you think, or did you hope that it might be what it ended up as?*

At that stage I wasn't sure but the more I got into the lives of Maria and Carlos, the more I knew it would take a longer screen period for it to work. And really no dramatic narrative can really sit comfortably within fifty-five minutes. Very few of them do. I think it makes perfect sense to have a feature, an acted feature of ninety minutes, so therefore it makes absolute sense for a documentary that uses similar narrative techniques to also be of that length.

*How long did you work with Ray at that point?*

About four weeks.

*Once you got into it, was it a matter of just keeping in touch with Maria on the phone and finding out what was happening and making a decision whether or not a particular event was worth filming, or did you go down there every month or every couple of months?*



Subject becomes filmmaker

I went down to film particular events that involved Maria and the girls, such as the family going to the Melbourne Show. I usually had several days with Maria first, and then when I worked out what to do, Joel came down with the camera for three or four days. It's interesting how Maria wanted to keep the filming and the friendship strictly separate. One time she told me how she was almost killed in Salvador trying to smuggle weapons from one part of the city to another. I actually had a video 8 camera in my bag. We were in the kitchen. I was saying, "Look Maria, can we get maybe some of this on tape?" She just said: "No, don't do it. We're not filming now. That can happen another time . . . I'm just telling you this because you're a friend and I want you to understand me better." That's part and parcel of the whole process of making a film like this.

The contrast between Australia and El

*Salvador couldn't be stronger visually; the bleakness of those urban landscapes of Australia and the vibrancy of life back in El Salvador was very striking.*

Well, I think the more documentaries I make, the more important it is to highlight mood and texture. It affects very much what you're trying to say overall in a film, so it's very important to make very deliberate decisions. In the old cinema verite days you would never contemplate asking your subject to wait until you had time to properly position the camera, but it happened a lot in this film. The films of the Maysles Brothers in the USA, and Joris Ivens and Ken Loach in Europe inspired me many years ago, and the influence of their distinctly different styles shows up in my work.

• continued next page

**A CHILD LOST. A YOUTH FOUND. ONE NAME. TWO MYSTERIES.**

**"MOMENTS INTO THIS HAUNTING AND MESMERISING THRILLER, you know you're in the hands of a BRILLIANT original DIRECTOR"**  
-Peter Travers, ROLLING STONE

**"ONE OF THE BEST FILMS OF 1993...A feat of storytelling virtuosity."**  
-Andrew Harris, NEW YORK OBSERVER

**"An EMOTIONALLY POWERFUL piece of work..."**  
-Kenneth Turan, L.A. TIMES

FROM THE ACCLAIMED DIRECTOR OF 'EUROPA', AGNIESZKA HOLLAND

**olivier OLIVIER** (M) 15+

Released by NEWVISION FILMS Written and Directed by AGNIESZKA HOLLAND  
FRANCOIS CLUZET BRIGITTE ROUAN JEAN FRANCOIS STEVENIN GREGOIRE COLIN MARINA GOLOVINE  
Music ZBIGNIEW PREISNER Editor ISABELLE LORENTE Produced by MARIE-LAURE REYRE

IN SYDNEY: **ACADEMY TWIN** (02) 953 4425 **WALKER** (02) 953 4425

**STARTS SEPTEMBER**

IN MELBOURNE: **NOVA** (03) 942 8231

IN ADELAIDE: **TRAK CINEMA** (08) 336 3311

**THE HIT OF THE MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY FILM FESTIVALS**

1991 Academy Award Nominee - BEST FOREIGN FILM  
1991 Venice film festival - BEST FILM

**"Mikhailkov's POWERFUL FILM achieves its grandeur with subtlety and humour!"**  
- SUNDAY TIMES

**"A REMARKABLE FILM! ...Consistently ravishing...visionary power"**  
- TIME OUT

**"ENTRANCING poetic comedy of friendship and social change"**  
- OBSERVER

AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD  
THERE'S A PLACE UNTOUCHED BY CIVILIZATION.  
THINGS ARE ABOUT TO CHANGE.

NIKITA MIKHALKOV'S  
**CLOSE TO EDEN**  
(URGA) PG

**KINO COMMENCES SEPTEMBER**

**Mandolin** 139 Elizabeth St. 267 1568