

THE DIPLOMAT

The Diplomat follows East Timor freedom fighter and Nobel Peace Prize winner José Ramos Horta in the final tumultuous year of his campaign to secure independence for his country.

The former Portuguese colony was invaded by Indonesia in 1975. Exiled soon after, José Ramos Horta exchanged his gun for the suit and tie of a diplomat. He spent twenty-four years as a roving ambassador, fighting to ensure the world did not forget East Timor's desire for freedom. His is a life driven not by personal political ambition but by the debt of blood he owes to fellow Timorese who have died in the conflict, including two brothers and a sister.

The Diplomat takes up Ramos Horta's story in the final dramatic stages of his long journey – the fall of Indonesia's President Suharto, the referendum to determine East Timor's future, the overwhelming vote for independence, the devastating carnage that ensued, the intervention of United Nations peacekeepers, and Ramos Horta's final triumphant return to his homeland.

José Ramos Horta allowed the filmmakers extraordinary access to his public and personal life. The film reveals his strengths and weaknesses, his moments of doubt and frustration, his anger and disappointment, his elation and triumph, his charm and his dry humour. Ramos Horta emerges as a tenacious and beguiling character whose role as a diplomat and peacemaker was crucial to achieving independence for his country.

The Diplomat: Director's Notes By Tom Zubrycki

My First Meeting

José is a difficult person to know; he lives so much inside his public persona, he seldom reveals his more private side. I first met him months before filming started, in Bateman's Bay on the South Coast of NSW. He'd settle in a corner, intensely reading every available newspaper. There would be an occasional dry joke at our expense, but second-guessing the Indonesians next move was serious work. I was with Wilson da Silva, a journalist who'd known him for nine years and had followed him to Sweden where he'd received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. Wilson had obtained José's co-operation in the film and approached Sally Browning to produce it. I first became involved in mid-1997 when they approached me to direct it. I leapt at the chance.

José's very good friend, James Dunn, lived on the South Coast. James had written the most authoritative account of Timor since the invasion. Horta too talked of settling down and writing a book. He even pursued this fantasy so far as to have us check out holiday places for sale in the area. But, as I soon found out, he was not someone who could bear to stand still for very long.

At the outset, the film was always going to be about politics, because politics was the centre of José's life. The 'private' would emerge in time, as indeed it did. Originally the time-scale was going to be short – twelve months from the start of filming to completion. This doubled as events took over and the film quickly changed from being a film about Horta's erratic and lonely life as a diplomat, to being about the traumatic birth of a nation, with Horta as the key protagonist.

Shooting began in April 1998 at the first Timorese National Convention in Lisbon, Portugal. The event, bringing together East Timorese from right across the diaspora, had great historical significance. For the first time in twenty-three years the pro-independence forces were to bury their differences and form a united front: the National Council of Timorese Resistance. But even as the Convention was drawing to a close reports were coming in of students rioting in the streets of Jakarta. Within a month, Suharto had resigned and, for José, victory was in sight. Yet there were many hurdles still to be overcome before a referendum on self-determination for East Timor could take place. It was precisely these hurdles that I imagined would provide the key events in the film.

Being With José

The next few months were anti-climactic. Suharto had left the scene and everyone was waiting for something to happen. I decided to join José on a trip to Korea and Norway to get the sense of what it was like being on the road, day after day, month after month. Being in each other's company solidly for two weeks – piling on and off planes and taxis – proved as uncomfortable for him as it was for me. We skated around each other and I felt that he rejected me. I realised that making this film was going to be a lot harder than I'd originally imagined.



Filming with José was like looking for cracks between the private and the public. Interviews with him turned into performances. José said what he wanted to say – that is, what he felt was politically appropriate at that moment. Occasionally he would reprimand us: 'When will this film ever be finished?' As far as he was concerned, any film on East Timor had to be made quickly so it could be used as propaganda against the Indonesians. He now felt uncomfortable with the film being a personal profile, even though he'd agreed to this in the first place.

Eventually, persistence paid off. One day, after we'd already recorded an hour of tape, he suddenly began to open up and divulge candid information about his first marriage and his many infidelities. It was a revealing moment which said a lot about his enforced lifestyle.

José's Mother, Natalina

To compensate for José's enigmatic personality, I chose to focus on his mother, Natalina, a feisty woman in her late sixties. Natalina was the driving force behind her son.

It was she who gave him the inspiration to keep going, an insight that is revealed by José himself in the final scene of the film, in which he talks to journalists off-frame:

The first letter I got from my mother, she didn't ask me how I was. She was stuck here in Timor; she was in the mountains with the guerillas. She was captured. The first thing she told me in a message was 'Don't give up. Your comrades are fighting in the mountains'. She didn't say anything else.

The more I saw of Natalina, the more I became convinced she had to become a major character in the film in her own right, not only because of her own personal story, but also to balance the film emotionally. Whilst José would often step into his media persona, there was no restraining Natalina. She would tell us straight how she felt and why, often with tears in her eyes. Her hatred of the Indonesian military was deep and unremitting. She remained cynical of their true intentions. Even on the morning of the referendum, while José talked about having reached the summit of a very large mountain after twenty-four years, Natalina tearfully warned us not to be complacent. Four days later, events proved her right. The militias and Indonesian army had razed Dili and much of East Timor to the ground.

Above: José Ramos Horta (L) and East Timorese leader, Xanana Gusmão (R).
Opposite page: José Ramos Horta at his brother's graveside in 1999. Photos Anastasia Vrachnos

Structuring The Shoot

One of the problems I had as director was deciding *when* to film. Events were often changing, not only by the week but by the day. Just what was important? Simply spending time with José was only a temporary answer. We had to film events *significant* to the unfolding story of Timor, but defining 'significance' was sometimes simply an educated hunch.

Suharto's fall did eventually trigger some shift in government policy over East Timor. In August 1998, President Habibie offered the territory 'limited autonomy', but this was immediately rejected by Horta as being at best a 'transition arrangement to a referendum on self-determination'. Months later a meeting in an Austrian castle with pro-Indonesian Timorese presented a perfect occasion for Horta and the exiled leadership to press home their point.

What I wanted to explore at the UN-sponsored Intra-Timorese Dialogue in Austria was not simply how José dealt with the Indonesian side, but also how he operated *inside* the Resistance.

The Krumbach castle was a fantastic visual back-drop to this tense and dramatic stand-off between the two opposing sides – one wanted

We also had access to Resistance strategy meetings where plans were hatched, as well as altercations in corridors, plus impromptu 'door-stops'.

As the Dialogue progressed I witnessed a side of José I'd never seen before. His sudden walk-out from the Conference was a complete shock, especially when the two sides were very close to agreeing on a joint document. He'd simply stuck to his guns – no agreement without Xanana's release! If nothing else, the Austrian failure drew attention to José's ambivalence about working within the confines of an organization. He was a man who made his own moves regardless of what other people might think. History may prove, in the end, that he was right to walk out, in spite of the fact that relations between the two sides further deteriorated in subsequent months.

Structuring The Film While Shooting

From very early on I knew the structure of the film was going to be a balancing act between the enigmatic life of José, the diplomat, and the quickly unfolding story of East Timor, the 'nation-in-waiting'. Finding the most economical way of conveying the

independence. By then we'd already burned through half our production budget and ninety hours of tape, but at least now there was a rough timetable towards a referendum, so we could plan for the year's filming. Sally [Browning, the producer] and I began negotiating with SBS and Film Australia to turn what was originally a fifty-two minute documentary into a feature length film. They eventually agreed. We had to re-think the crewing arrangements in order to maximize the number of trips abroad. Apart from the trip following José's return to Timor, I ended up taking over and doing the filming and sound recording myself on a small DV-CAM. By the close of 1999 we had over one hundred and forty hours of tape shot on two digital formats, DVC-PRO and DV-CAM.

The documentary medium mocks the very notion of accurate prediction. Few people, not even José, foresaw the devastation that followed the referendum. On the 30th of August, 1999, we filmed what seemed like a victory party after a 90% turnout at the ballot. José left for New York and when the results were announced four days later, Natalina and the Horta clan gathered for a party. It didn't last long. Within a few hours of the announcement of the ballot, the militia played their final deadly card. People were incredulous. The images were shocking: smoke rising over the roofs of Dili; journalists besieged in their hotels by rampaging militias. José appeared in occasional news flashes appealing to the world community for intervention. I was desperate to fly to the States and be with him, but I also knew that APEC was about to start in Auckland. U.S. President Clinton was to attend and José would have to be there as well. I imagined this would be where the final chapter of the story would be played out – for better or for worse. I was right.

I turned up with my little DV-CAM at the Great Ponsonby Bed and Breakfast in downtown Auckland. I found José surprisingly calm, though very fatigued. The next three days I spent holed-up with him, shooting tape after tape – a mini-documentary in itself. I was witness to the full gamut of emotions – resignation, anger, distress, confidence, elation. Journalists paraded through the B&B every ten minutes, while mayhem raged on the streets of Dili. Falantil guerilla commanders were calling José via satellite phone, conveying stories of entire towns surrounded by Indonesian troops. There was even a rumour of the UN pulling out. It was José's and Timor's darkest hour, the lowest point he'd reached in twenty-three years of fighting for his country's independence. He



the status quo, while the other refused to countenance anything but a referendum on self-determination.

Covering this event was not easy. We weren't allowed to shoot the meetings in the castle, but luckily we managed to smuggle small DAT recorders for audio of the debates and shoot exteriors of the castle at different times of day for different moods. The combination of the two seemed to work well later in editing.

essence of a very complex story was the real challenge. By the end of 1998, editor Ray Thomas and I had already spent two bursts of three weeks editing a rough cut. I'd done this on most of my previous films, starting the edit well before shooting was scheduled to stop.

At the start of 1999, Habibie made his all-important announcement clearing the way for East Timorese to be consulted on

didn't care that I was there with the camera – history was being made (or broken). In retrospect, had I been there with just one other person (say a sound recordist) my presence may not have been tolerated.

The Post-Production

The final editing took place between January and April this year (2000), and was an around-the-clock process – fourteen hours a day, six or seven days a week. Keeping ahead of Ray was not easy at times. It wasn't like the old 16mm days with the Steenbeck where I had time to think between cuts. By mid-February the film was down from one hundred and sixty hours to one hundred and thirty-six minutes. Two weeks later, it was down to eighty-nine. From previous films, I know it's at this point that the hard work really starts. Things that don't work become obvious. Screenings with the investors and film-maker colleagues help clarify difficult areas. Elements can be nuanced and teased out. I remember the historical sequence was too long and had to be cut back because it interrupted the unfolding of the present day story. We also decided to give Natalina more screen time than we had originally planned. The importance of her character grew as the editing progressed.

Inter-titles were an essential aspect of the construction of the film and their design was largely the work of title artist, Janet Merewether. The raw source for the inter-titles was news footage shot in Jakarta, Timor and the UN. The decision was made to drain colour from the shots to suggest the images were coming from a place distant to our own film-making viewpoint. Some images, like those of the militia, were spot-colourised and rendered shadowy and grainy so as to enhance the feeling of menace. Their identity and substance became iconographic. Janet's idea of the double image of Alatas was a brilliant metaphor for his double-speak on Timor at the time.

In the end, I am happy with the film. Overall, I felt that I succeeded in presenting the man in relation to the issue in such a way that showed the many contradictory sides to his personality – often charming, at other times ruthless and ego-driven, but in the end, completely moral in his motives to achieve his goal. In his final words of the film he says:

I'm not an ideological person, contrary to some writers in the past who claim that I was a Marxist. I was never a Marxist. I was a Social Democrat

– liberal, conservative sometimes. So I didn't fight for some ideological purity. For me, the only thing that mattered was justice for the people. And justice prevailed.

It's hard to know where to go after you've made a film that has been a personal obsession and consumed two years of your life. I have other films to make, but I very much want to continue to be involved in East Timor in some capacity. My personal aim is to assist a film-maker colleague, Gil Scrine, to realise a project (currently in the planning stages) to train young Timorese to acquire the skills needed to record their own history and to become the first generation of local indigenous film-makers. It is now time to pass the baton to the Timorese themselves. Only when that happens will I be content with the knowledge that the process of making *The Diplomat* is truly complete.

The Diplomat: Producer's Notes By Sally Browning

The rocky road to making a documentary film begins long before a camera is turned on. It was early in 1997 when journalist Wilson da Silva walked into my office with the idea for



The Diplomat – a film following José Ramos Horta around the globe, observing another year in his long quest for the independence of East Timor from its occupier, Indonesia.

José had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize a few months before, along with East Timor's Catholic bishop, Carlos Belo. It was on this prestigious award that we initially pegged the outline of our film. Being a Nobel Peace laureate had afforded José extra leverage in opening political doors, and we planned to get our foot in, with a camera.

So in April 1997 we set out to find the money and to secure the other vital component: a director we felt could handle the complex nature of the film's protagonist as well as the thorny political issue, a director who would rise above mere hagiography. SBS Independent's commissioning editor at the time, Claire Jager, quickly committed to a pre-sale agreement. And our search for a director led to Tom Zubrycki. After a long meeting in a Glebe café one night, we asked Tom to come aboard. 'Just a year's shoot, and then a reasonable edit', we told him. 'Sure', he said. Armed with a complete creative team, including editor Ray Thomas, I set off again to find the remaining budget – all 75% of it.

When we started hitting brick walls with financing, Wilson – now an exasperated co-producer and writer on the project – would ask 'How hard can it be?' To which I'd explain the difficulty of financing films, particularly those with any kind of political or worthy bent: 'Every broadcaster I've approached so far has said no to the film. Apart from that, everything is *fine*'. And so it would be that these exchanges would see us through several years of *The Diplomat*.

In November 1997, we had two chances to pitch to international commissioning editors. The first was at the Brisbane International Documentary Conference. It was a dismal day. Tom and Wilson pitched to a fairly non-responsive audience of buyers. 'Fairly' is generous. It was a complete failure. One buyer, who shall remain nameless, said: 'That's a very interesting proposal you have there. But you know, there have been two films made about East Timor, and I think that's probably enough'.

At the debrief, we decided we had to approach it differently. Ray cut a two-minute trailer to give some background on José and we felt confident this would stop that banal question at pitches: 'Who is this José guy?' It was clear that the Nobel Peace Prize hook was not enough. In the same month, I travelled to a documentary forum in Amsterdam with Claire Jager and the tape, pitching the project to a gladiator ring of international commissioning editors. Like those at Brisbane, they mostly felt their audiences would not know where East Timor was; wouldn't care; and hadn't there already been a film about East Timor in the 1980s? Ironically, they ignored the issue of East Timor in the same way governments the world over had long done. Here, we took a leaf out of the Timorese resistance book; their motto is: 'To resist is to win'. I am happy to

say that, like the Timorese, we decided not to give up.

With time running out in Amsterdam and in an effort to boost interest in the project, Claire and I concocted the idea that José would, during the course of our filming, return to East Timor. This is a man who had been in exile, and under threat of death by the Indonesians, for more than twenty years. We figured that the United Nations could sponsor a 'security visit' with exiled Timorese leaders as had been suggested in the past. We had nothing to lose. We rang Wilson at 4 am Sydney time and he said, 'How hard can it be?' He rang José immediately to tell him the news of his impending return!

We resumed pitching the project with our 'return to Timor' hook. A Norwegian broadcaster immediately put up his hand to be involved and many others expressed interest in receiving further information. But by March 1998, our efforts to secure one more vital international sale to trigger FFC financing fell flat. With the first shoot date looming and my two credit cards unable to take on any more weight, it seemed an impossible task. But apart from that, everything was just *fine*.

I had begun preliminary talks with an executive producer at Film Australia before Christmas 1997, as a kind of safety net for the film's financing. At the eleventh hour, Film Australia stepped in with the balance of financing, taking a risk with a politically unpopular subject. Their decision to finance us was rewarded. After a month of filming, the economic crisis that had hit Indonesia finally toppled President Suharto, the man who had ordered the Indonesian invasion in 1975. It was the production equivalent for us of winning the lottery. Nothing would be the same again. For the first time, the Timorese leadership saw a window of opportunity to change the status quo, and we were planning to be right behind them.

As 1998 drew to a close, we had already far exceeded our shooting allocation with trips to far-flung destinations on José's coat tails. Keeping tabs on José's schedule was exhausting, and getting a crew onto flights with a day's notice almost impossible. But it had to be done all the same; things were changing so fast. By May 1999, the commissioning editors who had declined to be involved were asking about the film's status. East Timor saturated the media. After several rounds of negotiation, Film Australia and SBS green-lighted more investment to keep shooting. Everything really was *fine*.

I'm relieved to say that José's return to East Timor did happen as we had so rashly predicted in 1997. But it was not one made under Indonesian rule as we had anticipated – it was a triumphant return to a free homeland. His trip was a collaborative effort by the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT), the United Nations and us, as producers. We offered to organize the finer details of a UN-sponsored flight for José and the worldwide media who wanted to accompany him. I have fond memories of 1 am phone calls to UN representatives pleading for a Hercules transport they couldn't confirm,



sending faxes and faxes to the UN compound in Dili via mysterious numbers routed through New York, and lengthy, expensive satellite phone calls to media adviser Margherita Tracanelli, who was up in the mountains with the Falintil guerillas. We couldn't have done it without Margherita. We are also grateful for the commitment of activist Rupert Posner, who expertly wrangled the media, as well as the work of the CNRT's Ines Almeida, who ensured José received the proper welcome with the proper security at the other end.

Just before dusk on the 1st of December, 1999, a fully loaded Hercules transport touched down in Dili. Like most of the people on that plane, I was watching José's reaction. I know we all felt that justice had been done for a man who had spent half his life fighting for this moment.

Looking back now, it's hard to believe how widespread the international indifference to East Timor's plight had been. After such a long, committed struggle, fate finally intervened for the people of East Timor. And it gave us, as

film-makers, an extraordinary opportunity to record history as it unfolded.

The Diplomat premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2000 and won the audience vote for most popular documentary. It has been nominated for two AFI awards – Best Documentary and Best Achievement in Direction. It has screened at the Melbourne International Film Festival and the Brisbane International Film Festival and is due for theatrical release around Australia. It will screen to the United Nations General Assembly on the 12th of October, where the guest of honour will be the UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan.

The Diplomat is a Film Australia National Interest programme, produced in association with Emerald Films and SBS Independent, and developed with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission and the NSW Film and Television Office.

Director: Tom Zubrycki

Producer: Sally Browning

Co-Producer: Wilson da Silva

Editor: Ray Thomas

Writers: Wilson da Silva & Tom Zubrycki

Cinematography: Robert Humphreys, Tom Zubrycki, Jo Parker & Joel Peterson

Composer: Jan Preston

Executive Producers: Stefan Moore and Megan McMurchy

Commissioning Editor, SBS Independent: John Hughes

Above: East Timorese girls celebrate the liberation of East Timor. Photo Anastasia Vrachnos