

THE DIPLOMAT

BY JACKSON PELLOW

I first catch sight of Jose Ramus Horta one afternoon at the Sydney Film Festival Showtime Bar. He is dressed smartly in cinema black, his face lightly peppered with stubble. To his left and right, a score of middle-aged intellectuals (all women) are entranced by his distinguished humblings. Horta looks every bit the veteran movie star, the effortless entertainer, slouching with confidence and unconsciously absorbing the gaze and admiration of his sophisticated groupies.

Two hours later, **The Diplomat** - a documentary about Horta's life as a political exile and champion of his people's cause - receives a standing ovation from a near capacity crowd...

The story of how *The Diplomat* came to be made is remarkable, considering producer Sally Browning was forced to pitch the project to investors at the Amsterdam Documentary Forum on the strength of its containing a scene of Horta returning to his homeland after 24 years in exile. She needed this dramatic hook to pre-sell the film to overseas broadcasters, but it was a giant leap of faith because the odds of Horta actually revisiting East Timor were highly unlikely at the time.

Browning and Claire Jager, then SBS Commissioning Editor, decided that Horta would have to return to Timor for the film to get financed, even though they knew Horta would risk assassination by doing so. When asked whether he would consider going back, Horta agreed that it would happen, but that he didn't know when. It was most likely that, as a Nobel Peace laureate, he would only be able to return with some degree of safety as part of a UN delegation on a special visit. The film pre-sold to NRK Norway, with Film Australia investing the balance.

Then the dominos began to fall - first the collapse of the Indonesian economy, followed by the fall of President Soeharto's corrupt regime - and the time was ripe for East Timor and the rest of the world to apply pressure to a crippled Indonesia. When incoming president Habibie instigated moves for Timor to have a referendum on independence amidst mounting international pressure, the filmmakers had already begun filming Horta's life and had an amazing scoop.

The Diplomat follows two extraordinary years in Jose Ramos Horta's jet-lagged world, revealing his personal reactions to the historic East Timorese Independence vote and the subsequent bloody violence from the Indonesian-trained militia against his people.

After gaining an insight into his world and witnessing his impassioned speech to the festival audience, it was clear that Horta is much more than the sexy media star he might appear. In fact after seeing *The Diplomat*, it is difficult to refrain from referring to Jose Ramos Horta as a hero. In the course of the conflict he lost two brothers, one sister and a half brother. Living far from home, he got by with very little money, few intimate friends and with no permanent residence.

The Diplomat begins with film footage from 1974 showing a bearded Horta, then leader of the resistance, perched high in the Timorese mountains in army camouflage. Tensions continue to rise between Timor and its Portuguese rulers until Horta changes his military greens for a suit and boards a plane to the United States for an international summit. Before the plane has touched down in New York, the Indonesian army has invaded East Timor in a wave of violent raids and assumes control over the Timorese people. Fellow resistance leader Xanana Gusmao is taken political prisoner by the Indonesians. Horta, now in exile, is nominated by the resistance as the country's foreign minister.

For more than twenty years Horta assumes the role of international diplomat, fighting from afar to free his country. His life is 'a series of airports, taxis, and hotel rooms'. He proudly promotes his people's cause at the highest levels of diplomacy, but the absurdity of his life is clear: at one stage while working for the United Nations, his only possessions were a business suit, a knife, fork and a spoon.

Structurally, *The Diplomat* is flawless. Tension snowballs in the lead-up to the historic Timorese independence vote. Scenes from Horta's diplomatic life of meetings, suited functions, and pacing telephone conversations are powerfully intercut with episodes of bloody violence against the East Timorese. Upon hearing of one such attack, a private Horta curses the Indonesians with twenty-five years of bitter hatred - 'those fucking barbaric animals!' Such intimate moments are contrasted with controlled media appearances where Horta talks with the strength and conviction of a deeply concerned politician. Moments later he is on his mobile phone talking underground strategies with Timorese rebels. Tom Zubrycki's camera work and direction neatly captures Horta's three personalities: lonely and angry exile, inspirational political leader, and adviser to the resistance.

Horta's conversations with colleague Xanana Gusmao from his Indonesian jail cell highlight his own helpless isolation. As Gusmao informs him of the details of the latest Indonesian atrocities towards women and children, you feel the pain of his entrapment - Horta, like the imprisoned Gusmao, is stuck in a world where time is horribly distorted. In the days it takes for decisions to be made at the political round table, hundreds of Timorese people are slaughtered. Life is surreal and moves slowly for the international diplomat, while life in Timor is cut short with the swish of a machete blade.

The power of this film lies also in the audience's prior knowledge of the outcome of the Timorese independence vote on 30 August 1999 and the resulting violence by armed Indonesian militias. The audience is looking back into history, into the hidden realms of Horta's private history as well, and you almost hope that by some miracle the beginning of East Timor's freedom will play itself out differently on film and somehow reach a



LEFT: Jose Ramos Horta, subject of *The Diplomat*.

ABOVE: East Timorese at an independence rally.

peaceful resolution. Of course this doesn't happen, and we are reminded of the irreversibility of events as we see the now infamous news footage of the militia's murderous rampage through the burning streets of Dili. These were the worst two weeks of Horta's life.

Horta originally agreed to get involved in the film after co-producer Wilson de Silva convinced him that the publicity from a long-form documentary would aid the cause of his people. The filmmakers initially agreed to spend one year with Horta, offering a 'warts and all' representation of his world. When it looked like Timor might be granted independence, the filmmakers convinced Jose that they must continue indefinitely because they were now recording history unfolding and it was too important to stop. They ended up filming Horta for another twelve months and captured all of his reactions in the lead-up to Timor's independence.

The scene of Horta returning to his wounded homeland did happen in a most unexpected way and is one of the film's best moments. After the vote, Gusmao is released from jail and Horta returned to Timor for an emotional reunion. His words are echoed from an earlier scene in the film: 'This is no small win, this is a fucking huge victory'. Horta and Gusmao begin plans to rebuild their devastated homeland and ask their people, in an act of strength, to forgive the past actions of Indonesia. 'Offering forgiveness will make us the better people,' says Horta.

THE FUTURE...

Despite Timor's independence, 100,000 people remain displaced in West Timor and parts of Indonesia and it's still not known when they'll return to their destroyed villages. The United Nations is currently assisting the massive rebuild operation. Thousands of people are still missing after the recent violence, while over the course of Timor's long struggle over 200,000 people were killed.

Jose Ramos Horta is pushing for a War Crimes Tribunal to investigate those involved in last September's murders. He is optimistic that under President Wahid's rule a trusting relationship can be developed between the two country's leaders. Horta has decided his skills are best used in assisting the development of East Timor rather than as foreign minister and has yet to decide if he will take a position on the country's political bench.

As for the future of the film, Browning says *The Diplomat* is set for a long life on the festival circuit. It screens at the Melbourne International Film Festival on the 5th and 6th of August with Horta introducing the film, then later in the year at the Brisbane International Film Festival. The film will also have a special screening for the UN Security Council in New York before screening on SBS-TV. The documentary has also been nominated for two AFI awards - Best Documentary and Best Direction (Tom Zubrycki).

Despite disliking any reference to himself as a hero, Horta genuinely loved the film. He commented to producer Sally Browning that it was 'the best film on Timor', firstly because it showed such an important chapter of his people's history and secondly because it acknowledged the role his jailed colleague Xanana Gusmao played in keeping the resistance going from behind bars.

The Diplomat is clearly one of the most important documentaries to come out of Australia in years. Not only is it a very personal story, but it will stand as an important social, political, and historical record in years to come. Viva East Timor! ■

Review | Arts

What started out as a labour of love became an international coup for film-maker Tom Zubrycki, who spent two years on Jose Ramos Horta's trail. Sian Powell reports

It was hot that day last December. Still and tropically steamy. We had been waiting on the Dili airport tarmac dispirited journalists and camera crews waiting for Jose Ramos Horta's plane to appear. It was an important event: the return of one of East Timor's best-known and hardest working sons, the man who had been exiled since the Indonesian invasion 24 years before, who had doggedly zigzagged the world to keep the tiny beleaguered province in the mind of the international community.

The plane finally emerged and touched down then, nothing. Australian peace-keepers kept the international press corps corralled far from the plane while an on-board film crew clambered out and set up for the money shot.

Loud grumbings were politely ignored. Australian film-maker Tom Zubrycki had been making a documentary about the Nobel prize-winning Ramos Horta for nearly two years and came first.

The result is *The Diplomat*, now finished and a filmic coup of the first order, from its shaky beginnings in 1996, when interest in East Timor was vaster than a



Man of the media: Tom Zubrycki says of *The Diplomat*'s subject, Jose Ramos Horta (left, on his triumphant return to Dili), 'He is such a quixotic person'

unfolding events managed to break their frangible and media-weary subject out of his shell. Ramos Horta has been criticised for his trendy stubble and designer glasses, and for his media whorishness and impatience with both opponents and those on his side.

The man of the media is the product of years of unrelenting publicity-seeking for the East Timorese cause. It is hardly surprising he has one eye on the cameras. 'Yet there are times when he hates journals, when he wants to be totally on his own,' Zubrycki says. 'Filming him, he really wants to cut off at times completely, understandably, but as a film-maker you want those moments of silence and reflection.'

The Ramos Horta impatience is stark, so is the fatigue of 24 years travelling the world, shaking hands, making speeches, schmoozing with politicians.

He is such a quixotic person', Zubrycki says. 'He can be unbelievably charming and on the other hand prey to severe depression.'

A master tactician, Ramos Horta can drive his fellow East Timorese to distraction, yet his strategies have been usually proved valid. The film makes it clear he would not budge on the demand for Xanana Gusmao's release in a meeting between East Timorese who wanted independence and those in favour of autonomy within Indonesia. Looking back, he was right not to move, but he provoked trenchant criticism at the time. The film-makers accompanied Ramos Horta to Auckland for the APEC meet-

A star is born as country torn

time after East Timor had been secured by the peacekeepers. Yet the emotion he attracted as he travelled through the burned-out streets that day demonstrated there was a much-loved prodigal son.

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The result is *The Diplomat*, now finished and a filmic coup of the first order from its shaky beginnings in 1996, when interest in East Timor was rarer than a benign miltarian to his triumphal finish late last year. It comprehensively documents an important slice of the birth of a nation — an unfolding drama of epic proportions that could not have been foreseen even 18 months ago.

The Diplomat follows Ramos Horta circling the globe and giving countless interviews, meeting innumerable politicians while his homeland shuddered under militia attacks, his people turned out in extraordinary numbers to vote, the UN dithered about leaving and the then-Indonesian president, B.J. Habibie, to everyone's heartfelt relief, invited in the peacekeepers.

It's a worm's-eye view of the international diplomacy that kept turning over while Dil burned.

Ramos Horta did not return for some

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The film-makers always hoped Ramos Horta would return to provide a dramatic climax but thought it would have to be under the eyes of the hostile Indonesian authorities. Then the Asian economic crisis swept across the region, Indonesia was financially crippled and president Suharto resigned. The ball that would finally crash East Timor loose of its shackles began to roll. And with it, the *Diplomat's* luck began to change.

Producer Sally Browning has experienced the spectrum of interest, from almost universal indifference to the excitement prompted by the worldwide page one headlines the crisis elicited. Browning had been interested in East Timor for some time, doing pro bono cinema commercials to keep the fires burning in the early 90s.

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world, shaking hands, making speeches, schmoozing with politicians.

"He is such a quixotic person," Zubrycki says. "He can be unbelievably charming and, on the other hand, prey to severe depression."

A master tactician, Ramos Horta can drive his fellow East Timorese to distraction, yet his strategies have been usually proved valid. The film makes it clear he would not budge on the demand for Xanana Gusmao's release in a meeting between East Timorese who wanted independence and those in favour of autonomy within Indonesia. Looking back, he was right not to move, but he provoked trenchant criticism at the time. The film-makers accompanied Ramos Horta to Auckland for the APEC meeting that ground on while East Timor was devastated by the militia. US President Bill Clinton was there and Ramos Horta had filled the ground in the US before the meeting, urging the press to get behind his demands for peacekeepers.

The press besieged the man who personified East Timor. He did interview after interview, almost failing asleep with the telephone in his hand. He was elated when Clinton condemned Indonesia, applying the pressure that led to Habibie's capitulation. He was in New York in the crucial days before APEC, pumping the media.

Zubrycki says, "This was his payola." Payola indeed. Peace for his homeland. *The Diplomat* screens at the Sydney Film Festival on Monday and Tuesday, then at the Melbourne Film Festival in July.

up," she says. "A lot of commissioning editors weren't even sure where East Timor was. SBS came to the party with a pre-sale and film Australia with some finance. Now it seems the film will be theatrically released in Australia, screened on SBS and perhaps shown to the UN Security Council on the East Timor ballot anniversary on August 30. International networks are interested. A far cry from those early days of slogging away despite lack of interest. Still, no one can complain in the face of such luck. Zubrycki says once the diffcult groundwork for the film had been navigated, everything moved beautifully. A few months to lay down some trust and empathy with the subject to get some footage of an East Timorese resistance conference held in Europe, then it was simply hanging on to the Ramos Horta coat-tails.

At the beginning I was hoping there was going to be enough material to span an hour," Zubrycki says. "I've got a lucky streak, we've been incredibly lucky." Lucky, too, that the emotion of the



Industry
Industry

TOM ZUBRYCKI - DIRECTOR OF THE DIPLOMAT

DIPLOMATIC DOCO

FILMINK's Barbara Karpinski talks to Tom Zubrycki, one of Australia's most revered documentary filmmakers.

The *Diplomat* follows East Timor's freedom fighter and Noble Peace Prize winner, Jose Ramos Horta, in the final bloody year of his campaign to secure independence for his country. The film reveals his charm and dry humour, his tenacity and vulnerability. It is neither a current affairs show nor an agit-documentary, but an intensely intimate portrait of Jose Ramos Horta, and therein lies its strength. *The Diplomat* is due

"I've filmed many documentaries and I've never had as much trouble cracking a private person as this man. Even in interview, it was hard to crack through the mask."



for release on SBS in November. It received the audience vote for Best Documentary at the Sydney International Film Festival as well as a standing ovation. The film has been nominated in the AFI Awards for the Best Documentary and Best Director awards.

Horta allows the filmmakers access to his public and per-

sonal life. From a coffee shop near director Tom Zubrycki's home in the deep heart of multi-cultural Leichardt, Australian-Italians cheer from car windows at their win in the Euro 2000. Zubrycki says: "My first impression of Jose was that he was a man who had elusive qualities, of someone who was incredibly serious but then would suddenly crack a joke.... He was a man who has been described by one of his colleagues in the resistance as a "freelancer", an independent agent - a man who made his own moves in spite of what other people might think. Yet he was elected as Vice-President of the National Commission of Timorese Resistance in 1998. The occasion was the first ever meeting of the Timorese resistance in 23 years, bringing together 250 delegates from around the diaspora. This is where the filming started - just before Suharto's resignation."

For Horta, a very private man, being followed by a man with a movie camera was an invasive, yet ultimately rewarding experience. "It was hard for me. There were times he turned his back on me. He was an impatient man. He knew we were making a film, which was not going to be released for a while. He wanted it to be a piece of propaganda against Indonesia. He didn't want a personal profile. The fact I was following with a camera was making him uncomfortable. No one followed him like I followed him."

Zubrycki comments: "It was in September 1999 when Timor was in flames and Jose was at



"The film was a balancing act between following the man, Horta, who was a very ephemeral and enigmatic personality, and at the same time telling the story of the birth of a nation."

his lowest ebb, that he realized the importance of what I was doing. Before that, I was a distant last. His priorities were always to make a diplomatic intervention and get international leaders on side. I've filmed many documentaries and I've never had as much trouble cracking a private person as this man. Even in interview, it was hard to crack through the mask. I was surprised when he started to talk about his infidelity with his first wife."

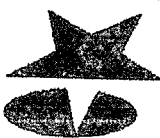
Despite the weighty subject matter, Zubrycki has added a quirky touch. There were moments when a foreign jour-

nalist stopped an interview to get the pet dog at the Bed and Breakfast in New Zealand, to stop noisily licking his bowl. "I wanted to lighten serious moments and times when Horta, for example, was talking about his fantasy love affair with Sharon Stone. The scene with the dog demonstrated how poorly financed the resistance was and how they had to operate out of a Bed and Breakfast. It was threadbare. He went off in an old car to see Clinton. They just sat in the Bed and Breakfast and the media came to him. There was animals and birds and planes overhead."

Natalina, Jose's mother, was a key player in *The Diplomat*. She added heart and honesty, having lost three children already. Zubrycki comments: "She is actually the key to understanding Jose. Natalina was sincere and undiplomatic - the opposite of Jose. Natalina gave us an emotional connection, that he couldn't quite provide himself."

In the last scene at Santa Cruz cemetery, Jose says: "In 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. She was stuck in Dili. She said: "Don't give up. Your comrades are fighting in the mountains. She didn't say anything else."

Zubrycki concludes: "The film was a balancing act between following the man, Horta, who was a very ephemeral and enigmatic personality, and at the same time telling the story of the birth of a nation." ◆



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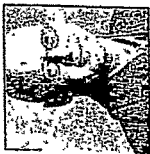
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Glimpse behind the mask of diplomacy



THE DIPLOMAT

Reviewed by Paul Byrnes

Directed by Tom Zubrycki
 Rated M
 Chauvel, Paddington and
 Valhalla, Glebe

Timing is everything. The veteran Australian documentary maker Tom Zubrycki set out two years ago to make a film about Jose Ramos Horta, the enigmatic, beset international ambassador for the East Timorese independence movement, but history swamped that idea.

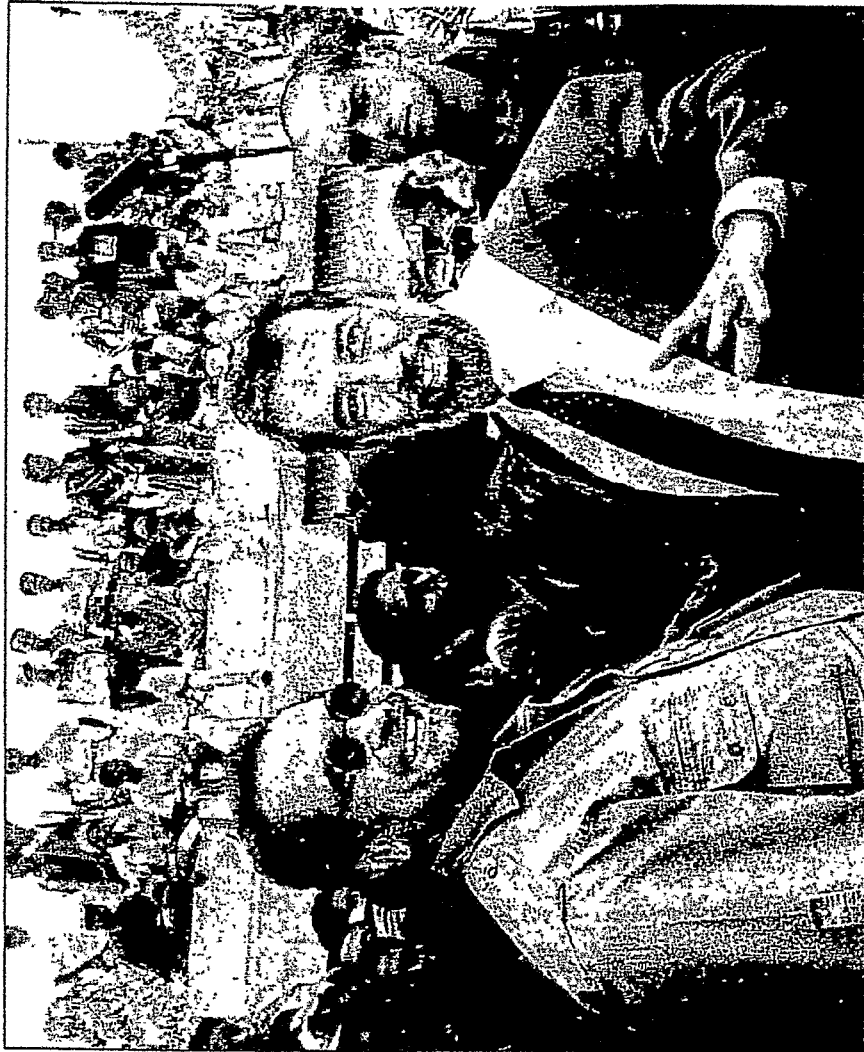
Indonesia cracked open with the demise of the dictator Soeharto, and his successor offered the Timorese a free vote on their future. Xanana Gusmao was close to being released from prison in Jakarta. In their way, these events were as surprising as the fall of the Berlin Wall 10 years earlier, even if the bloodbath which followed was distressingly predictable. They also made a film about Ramos Horta alone impossible. The cataclysm and rebirth of East Timor were now the story and Ramos Horta was just the midwife. Being next to him gave Zubrycki a privileged position, but he must have wondered if it was the right place to be. Like Ramos Horta himself, he was exiled from the locus of events in Timor.

In the end, Zubrycki uses this tension in the film. All of the major East Timorese independence leaders were in exile (or prison) during these events, some since 1975, when the Indonesian Army overran the place. The sense of remoteness is one of the few things they all had in common; it gives much of the first half of the film a melancholy air.

We follow Ramos Horta from April 1998, as he attends the first-ever Timorese National Convention in Lisbon. The independence factionalism of Timorese politics is very obvious, although not Ramos Horta's own part in it, partly because Ramos Horta won't open himself to Zubrycki's camera. He has spent 23 years in front of cameras by this stage. Media is something he uses, not the other way round. He's not so much guarded as professionally impenetrable. The true diplomat never reveals his feelings, unless it's to his advantage: the mask is one of the tools of the trade, but it's a film-maker's nightmare.

If Ramos Horta never completely reveals himself, Zubrycki still shows us more of him than we've seen before. In the odd flash of anger, that he's entitled to feel but unable to show. In an interview with his ex-wife, Anna Pessoa, we learn that during the years he spent at the UN in New York, he worked at night as a security guard at a school. Ramos Horta himself tells us his marriage foundered during this time because he was unfaithful. The toll of his years alone is strongly suggested,

The waiting's over... Jose Ramos Horta and Xanana Gusmao enjoy the success of their lonely struggle.



but not made specific. Ramos Horta's mother Natalina lives in western Sydney and she becomes the film's true emotional fulcrum. Three of her children are dead because of the Indonesian Army and her face is the opposite of her famous son's: we can see every bit of her sorrow and her hatred of the men who did this to her and her country. Ramos Horta visits her

often and it's a real pity that we do not see more interaction between her and Jose (pronounced Je-zay). It may be that Zubrycki was not given access to their private moments, but he certainly gets plenty of access to Natalina herself. Without her, and without the apocalyptic events of last year, the film might have failed. With these, and with Zubrycki's pains-

We see how hard it has been to control the rage.

taking assembly of dramatic moments behind the scenes, the film succeeds well.

It's not an expose of Australia's own role. It is a powerful film about exile, capped by the climactic return of Ramos Horta and many others to their home. At the recent Sydney Film Festival, the audience voted it best documentary of those shown at the State Theatre.

Television

Ten

- 6:00 Sports Tonight (Rpt) 617125
- 6:00 (Nthn) Meditation Medication 6:30 Danoz
- 7:00 The Magic School Bus 275038
- 7:30 Beakman's World 278125
- 8:00 Totally Wild! (Rpt) Children's Environmental program 279854
- 8:30 The Silver Brumby (Rpt) 618729
- 8:55 (Nthn) Victor Paul
- 9:00 Video Hits 3035293
- 9:30 (Nthn) Video Hits
- 11:30 High Flyers 632309
- 12:00 Bright Ideas Hosted by Warwick Moss 859403
- 2:00 Movie: To Catch A Thief (1955 Rpt) Stars Cary Grant, Grace Kelly, Jessie Royce Landis. A notorious cat burglar catches a thief who is imitating his former style. 462903
- 4:00 Totally Australia - A Stately Gift (Rpt) 879903
- 5:00 Ten News All the latest news and weather. 437816
- 5:30 Sports Tonight Sporting news and highlights. 430903
- 6:00 Inside Sport Magazine-style program covering the world of sport. 431632
- 6:30 The Simpsons (Rpt) Bart's practical jokes go too far after he fools the town into thinking there is a boy trapped in a well. Bart answers Mrs. Krabappel's personal ad after she gives him a month's detention. 890496
- 7:30 Relic Hunter (PG) Soccer superstar Roberto Giannini sweet-talks Sydney into launching a hands-on search for Casanova's Book of Love. 255274
- 8:30 Movie: Never Say Never Again (1983, Mvs, Rpt) Stars Sean Connery, Klaus Maria Brandauer, Max von Sydow. James Bond is sent in when terrorists infiltrate a US air force base and hold NATO to ransom. 6366580
- 11:15 Ten News 4013309
- 11:45 Sports Tonight Highlights of the day in sport. 9397019
- 12:15 Turks (M) 6220268
- 1:10 V.I.P. (M) 2339220
- 2:00 Victor Paul Shopping 6962510
- 3:00 Danoz 8973626
- 4:00 Randy Morrison Ministries Religion. 4320607
- 4:30 Key Of David 1669292
- 5:00 Hour Of Power 2152688

SBS

- 6:00 Cantonese News 5527019
- 6:25 Mandarin News 26441106
- 6:55 Telegiornale 75393309
- 7:30 Das Journal 1308318
- 8:00 Ta Nea Ton Ennea 9533670
- 9:00 Le Journal 8731125
- 9:30 Sevodnia 3625361
- 10:10 Telediarlo 92503583
- 11:00 Slaran Berita 8711361
- 11:30 The Journal 8721748
- 12:00 Business Report 8722477
- 12:30 Opera: The Crownbride (PG, Rpt, Sweden) 72420380
- 2:35 Cheryomushki - Another Bite Of The Cherry (Rpt, UK). The story of Dimitri Shostakovich's only musical, which takes its name from the high-rise estates established with much fanfare, but now run down. 19490458
- 3:30 Soccer European Champions League. Highlights 5778749
- 4:30 World Soccer (CC) 5881699
- 5:30 Soccer (Rpt) English Premier League. Highlights 5781212
- 6:30 World Sports (CC) 5881699
- 7:00 World Sports 7630922
- 7:30 As It Happened: Tracking The First Americans (PG, UK). Examines the theory that Australian Aborigines may have been the first inhabitants of the Americas after the discovery of pre-8000 BC skulls in Brazil that research suggested were Australoid in origin. 4653485
- 8:30 Gary Larson's Tales From The Far Side (Return) (PG, Rpt, US) 6831090
- 9:05 Goku - Midnight Eye (Part 1, M/Vs, Japan) New two-part series. In the year 2014, a Tokyo cop fired from the force for renegade behavior is now a highly-paid private investigator. 78421670
- 10:00 Movie: Akira (1989, Mv, Rpt, Japan) After World War III, two bikers stumble upon a secret government project to develop human telekinetics for military purposes. 28265683
- 12:10 Eat Carpet 66618404
- 1:15 Movie: The Holy Mountain (1974, M/Vs, Rpt, Mexico) Stars Jose Antonio Alcaraz. A Christ-like figure meets a guide who introduces him to six individuals, each representing a planet in the solar system. 85166539
- 3:10 Temporary Close
- 5:00 Weather Watch 9886887

Undiplomatic hero of Timor



Phillip Adams

XANANA: Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta were the Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of East Timor. With Quixote in jail, Sancho was all alone, tilting at windmills. Living out of a small suitcase, in and out of cheap hotels, with his burning eyes and designer stubble, Ramos Horta seemed on a hiding to nothing. To see him, or to interview him, was to be convinced that his was a hopeless cause, and I wondered how he could maintain his rage and momentum. He'd respond by telling me of some minor victory at the UN or of a meeting in Lisbon that seemed, to him, charged with hope and significance.

In his efforts to keep East Timor on the radar screen of international concern, Ramos Horta seemed self-deluded and lonely. You admired him, of course, and wished him well. But given Australia's diplomatic duplicities, Jakarta's bastardries, Portugal's hypocrisies and the UN's hollow pieties, there was no prospect of a happy ending.

The Dili massacre clearly enragged Ramos Horta, who believed that the world could no longer avert its gaze. Talking with him on radio, I disagreed, reminding him of the media's short attention span, that headlines fade and TV reports are quickly forgotten. But he, more dogged and determined, simply headed for another airport, another city, another meeting, another cheap hotel.

Tom Zubrycki's fine documentary on Ramos Horta's 24-year fight for East Timor's freedom is called *The Diplomat*. It has, quite properly, won a host of awards for its portrait of a bloke whose refusal to surrender was, and remains, astonishing. The term diplomat often conjures the image of the glib-tongued, the spin doctor, the professional charm of an Ali Alatas. Ramos Horta was never like that. Though the grim face sometimes gave way to a smile, albeit a cautious or suspicious one, he was never seductive or smarmy. The style was abrasive, impatient, challenging, about as undiplomatic as a diplomat could be.

Zubrycki gets it all on the screen, in an account that gets whisker-close to its subject. Zubrycki followed Ramos Horta from April 1998 to his triumphant return to Timor 20 months later, recording his private life, such as it was, such as circumstances allowed it to be, as well as his endless meetings and tense, terse negotiations with allies and enemies. In the peripheral vision of Zubrycki's camera we meet some of the people who share his life — principally Natalina, his courageous mother, who lost three children in the invasion of 1975, and the massacres that followed. Natalina had fled to the mountains, seeking some safety with Falintil guerrillas, until she was captured four years later.

Zubrycki is one of Australia's best film-makers. He has produced 16 significant documents on our political and cultural lives, a body of work that dwarfs the better-known contributions of most feature film-makers. Zubrycki's work is unashamedly committed. You know where he stands. But he has never been a hagiographer or a propagandist. His view of the world can be as tough as his protagonists' and he retains his scepticism. He is, in the best sense, an independent film-maker.

Nonetheless, his respect and sympathy for Ramos Horta shine through. Here is a man who has lived on the edge for more than 20 years, demonised by powerful enemies, marginalised by Australian diplomacy. We see Ramos Horta exhausted, embittered, on the ropes. But then we watch him rally his resources to try again. And finally, to win.

The Diplomat, SBS at 8.30pm, Sunday.

Television

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