*The Diplomat* happened out of the blue. It was a ‘cold call’ from producer Sally Browning who rang me one day when I was having lunch at SBS. I was working at SBS Independent as a part time commissioning editor, a job I got not long after completing *Billal*. Sally asked me ‘would I be interested in directing a film about Jose Ramos-Horta’. I jumped at the chance, and the same weekend I met a friend of Sally’s Wilson da Silva, who was a journalist who had quite close connection with Jose Ramos Horta. Wilson had known him for 9 years and had followed him to Sweden where he’d received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. Their friendship turned out to be very important factor in getting Jose’s initial co-operation.

Sally Browning quickly got the support of Sharon Connolly at Screen Australia, despite the fact that East Timor was at that time officially recognised by the government as being annexed to Indonesia. This was the case despite Portugul plus a range of smaller non-aligned nations having supported moves to open the way for elections and a referendum. What was happening in the territory was certainly never sanctioned under international law. It was an illegal occupation. This notion, however, was simply not something that the Australian government had ever countenanced. Good bi-lateral relations with Indonesia were the priority. But within six months everything had changed.

We started shooting at the beginning of 1999. We had a full crew for this, and during the year had a number of different D.O.Ps. There was Joel Peterson who started things off, and in the end it went down to me being the D.O.P shooting and recording sound because there was hardly anything left in the budget and we just had to keep on filming. Screen Australia realised the importance of the film and managed to give us extra funds when we needed them. Some of the material that exists in the middle section of the film was shot by people in Indonesia - SBS stringers, mainly. The film would have been all the poorer without this crucial material.

My relationship with José could be described as ‘tricky’. He was a hard person to know - difficult because he lived so much inside his public persona that he seldom revealed his more private side – even to his friends. 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 –Wilson had obtained José’s co-operation in the film

Also on the South Coast lived José’s very good friend James Dunn James had written the most authoritative account of Timor since the invasion. Horta too talked of settling down and writing a book. He even went so far to pursue this fantasy as to have us check out holiday places that were 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 a short one - 12 months from 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 one about the traumatic birth of a nation with Horta being the key protagonist.

Shooting began in April 1998 at the first ever 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 23 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 resigned, and for José victory was in sight. Yet there were many hurdles still to be overcome before a referendum on self-determination for E.Timor could take place. It was precisely these hurdles that would provide the key filmic events in the film.

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 solo trip to Korea and Norway to get the sense of what it was like being on the road – day after day, month after months. However, being in each others company solidly for 2 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 had the feeling 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 being performances. José said what he wanted to say – that is, what he felt was politically appropriate at that moment. Occasionally he would reprimand me: “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.

Jose’s not an easy person when it comes to anything that’s slightly private or away from politics. And when I got him into a room early in the shoot I made a mistake of asking him some questions about things that related to the topic but were tangential, and he went off for quite a while about them – like the politics of convincing Australian Government about the validity of their cause. This was interesting and relevant, but what I wanted to find out was in fact his private life and what was it like spending those many years on the beach, walking the streets of New York, speaking at the U.N. But also his married life too and his ambitions there. I wanted to get a bit more personal in the interview. But just as I was doing that and he was saying a few interesting things about his earlier relationships and also about his infidelity in New York the producer’s phone rang and rang very loudly. We had to stop filming. Jose checked his watch claiming he had a meeting in the city. The interview was over!

Natalina, Jose’s mother, was a fiesty woman in her late 60’s. 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 in the film. 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. What was consistent was her deep and unremitting hatred towards the Indonesian military. She remained consistently cyncial of their true intentions. Even on the morning of the referendum, while José talked about having reached, after 24 years, the summit of a very large mountain, 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.

One of the problems I had as director was deciding *when* to film - given events were often changing not only by the week but by the day. Just what was important, and what was not important? Simply ‘spending time’ with José was only a temporary answer. We had to film events *significant* to the unfolding story, but what defined ‘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 him 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 Timorese factions - one of them were pro-integrationists, allowing East Timor to have its own autonomy, but essentially being part of Indonesia…. and the other anti-integrationist, represented by CNRT. Horta quickly became bored with the meetings. He thought it was a waster of time trying to make any concessions to the side, so he spent a lot of time in his room. I came knocking on the door one day and said let’s have a chat about the Dialogue and you can express your frustrations to us. So in the interview he starts telling us about his fantasies and one of his fantasies was lying on a beach with Sharon Stone. “Not too close”.” he said, “not too close for comfort”. But honestly he said that, at the same he said “well I’d much prefer doing that than being in this bloody castle with some of the people on my team”. Internal differences in CNRT were starting to become exposed!

Coverage of the Dialogue was not an easy process. 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 time of day for different moods. The combination of the two seemed to work well later in editing. 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 of 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 organisation. He was a man who made his own moves in spite 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.

By the time the Dialogue started, Jose and I had worked out our relationship, however in previous months the inability to get close to him was giving me a lot of anxiety.

I remember 3 month earlier when I followed him on an overseas trip to Korea, Norway and Portugal. He was beating the drum for Timor and raise awareness amongst the group of people who were uninformed but obviously had sympathetic views. I remember a media briefing in Soeul when he retired to his room and then locked the door. I knocked an hour later and he gruffly asked what I was doing, and I said: “well I wouldn’t mind just doing a bit of an interview with you”. “Oh go away, come back in an hour”, he said. I did so, and he was still pretty gruff. He gave me the interview but I wasn’t happy with it, and he wasn’t happy with it, either.

During that trip I became increasingly frustrated. All I was filming was Jose doing his usual performance at media conferences. I just wanted to sit him down: “give me something personal Jose, you know, reflective”. He was very, very difficult. One morning we had an encounter over breakfast in a 3-star Norway hotel. It was particularly insipid. You could feel that he wasn’t happy with what he’d selected and the sausage was particularly hard and he almost broke his knife on it trying to cut it. I was filming all of this. In the film he jabs a fork into the sausage and points it straight at me and says to me “if this was a bullet I’d be aiming it straight at you”. He was joking of course, but he was certainly not comfortable with being filmed in his off moments. Jose was used to answering questions from reporters, but when the reporters left the scene was when I became interested in him. However he still saw me as one of them.

It took Jose a long time to make the distinction between a reporter who was doing something for news that night and me making a documentary of his life. Eventually we worked out a good relationship when I stopped trying to stalk him. Some of the best moments I captured was when he was on the phone, or simply in action at important gatherings, which I did pretty much at the conference in Austria, or in the car going from one venue to the next. Often when the camera was on, we’d make some off the cuff comments – a few of which ended up in the film.

By mid 99, things started collapsing in Indonesia and independence was tantalisingly within reach, the whole campaign really picked up momentum, and Jose really wanted me to be there because he knew this was really important time when history was being made. He would integrate his busy schedule with also talking to me, as long as I didn’t get in the way and interrupt him.

At the start of 1999 Habibe made his all-important announcement clearing the way for East Timorese to be consulted on independence. By then we’d already burned through half our production budget and 90 hours of tape, but at least now there was a rough timetable towards a referendum, so that we could plan for the year’s filming. Little did we know that there would be a lot more story beyond the referendum. Sally and I began negotiating with SBS and Film Australia to turn what was originally a 52 minute doc film into one of feature length. They eventually agreed. However we had to re-think the crewing arrangements given that we had to maximize the number of trips abroad. Apart for the trip following Jose’s return to Timor, I ended-up taking over and doing the filming and sound recording myself on a small DV-CAM camera. By the close of 1999 we ended up with over 140 hours of tape shot two digital formats DVC-PRO and DV-CAM.

It’s the intrinsic nature of the documentary medium that mocks accurate prediction. Few people, not even José, foresaw the devastation that followed the referendum. On August 30, 1999, we filmed what seemed like a victory party after 90% turnout at the ballot. José left for New York and when the results were declared 4 days later announcing a vast majority wanting independence, Natalina and the Horta clan gathered for the party. Euphoria didn’t them long. Within a few hours of the announcement of the ballot, the militia played their final deadly card. People crowding the lounge room were incredulous. The images on the television were shocking: smoke rising over the roofs of Dili; Journalists being besieged in their hotels by rampaging militias. I suspected that the Indonesians wouldn’t take a kind of a democratic vote as a fate accompli, they’d always come back and try re-assert their authority, which they tried to do 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. Clinton was to attend and José would have to be there as well.This is 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 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-doco in itself. I was witness to the full gamut of emotions – resignation, anger, distress, confidence, elation. Journalists paraded through the “B&B”every 10 mins, while mayhem raged on the streets of Dili. Falantil guerilla commanders in the mountains were calling José via Satellite phone conveying stories of how whole towns were been surrounded by Indonesian troops. There was even a rumour of the UN doing a *total pull-out.* It was José and Timor’s darkest hour- -the lowest point he’d reached in the 23 years of fighting for his country’s independence. He didn’t care that I was there with the camera – history was being made (or broken). In retrospect, had I been there even with one other person (say a sound recordist) my presence would not have been tolerated.

Some of the moments I captured when he was having significant conversations with Jose Carascalao, somebody from a Timorese faction whom he’d never seen eye to eye with - but now they were actually working together for the first time. It was all terribly significant for me, for the film, for him, to be conveying the impression that differences within the Resistance needed to be buried for the interests of creating the groundwork for the new independent nation. I could film anything I liked. It was as if the camera wasn’t there.

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 quickly unfolding story of East Timor the ‘nation-in-waiting’. However when it came to the edit, finding the most economic way of conveying the essence of what was a very complex story was the real challenge. By the end of 1998 editor Ray Thomas and I had already spent 2 bursts of 4 weeks each editing a rough cut. It was a practise I’d done on most of my previous films – to start the edit well before shooting was scheduled to stop.

The final editing took place between January and April 2000,, and was a ‘round-the-clock’ process – 14 hours a day, 6 or 7 day weeks. Keeping ahead of Ray was not easy at times. It wasn’t like the old 16mm days with the 16mm Steenbeck where I had time to think between the cuts. By mid-February the film was down from 160 hours to 136 minutes. Two weeks later it was down to 89. From previous films, I know at this point that the hard work really starts. Things that don’t work in the edit become obvious. Screenings with the investors and film maker colleagues help clarify difficult areas. Elements were nuanced and teased out. I remember the historical sequence was too long and has to be cut back because it interrupted the unfolding of the story that was being told in the present. We also decided to give Natalina more screen-time than we had originally planned. The importance of her character grew the longer the editing progressed.

Intertitles 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 filmmaking 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 foreign minister Alatas was a brilliant metaphor for his double-speak on Timor at the time.

In the end I was happy with the film. Naturally it could have been longer. Perhaps 90 rather than 81, but every director says that about their film. I’m the first to admit that what might work fine in the cinema may not hold an audience on television. Overall I felt in the end 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.

By the time I’s started on the DIPLOMAT I’d built up a fair bit of experience. I had a ‘process’ that I’d evolved from film to film to film - both in terms of my relating to people, when I chose to film and how I’d build up the story in the process of filming. What was special about THE DIPLOMAT was that it liberated me to have the confidence to shoot myself. I’d never felt comfortable shooting with 16mm. I never really attempted to shoot 16mm. The idea of a ten-minute magazine freaked me out and I just wanted to focus on what was happening in front of the camera. But with video I wasn’t limited by that and I could focus on what was happening in front of the camera knowing that I it didn’t all have to stop in ten minutes.

The first time I shot solo was at the bed and breakfast place in Auckland where the resistance was holed-up. All I had was an early generation small HD camera. Fortunately I had a good directional mike which meant that I could capture dialogue, even in whispers in some cases. I thought I was really getting nice intimate material and I was confident I was actually getting reasonably good pictures. I had the camera on auto the whole time because the lens was quite wide, and it worked!