



a film by Nettie Wild



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE



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On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army, made up of impoverished Mayan Indians from the state of Chiapas, took over five towns and 500 ranches in southern Mexico. The Government deployed its troops, and at least 145 people died in the ensuing battle. Fighting for indigenous Mexicans to regain control over their lives and the land, the Zapatista Army, led by the charismatic, guerilla poet Subcommandante Marcos, started sending their message to the world via the Internet. The result was what *The New York Times* called "the world's first post-modern revolution." Filmmaker Nettie Wild travelled to the jungle canyons of southern Mexico to film the elusive and fragile life of the uprising. Her camera effectively and movingly captures the human dimensions behind this war of symbols.



## SYNOPSIS

Subcomandante Marcos lights his pipe and says straight into the camera, "You've still got a lot of research to do. I don't know what you have been doing all this time. How long have you been in Chiapas?" "Five months," replies filmmaker Nettie Wild. "Hmm..." says the military commander of the Zapatista uprising, "...I've been here 12 years and I'm barely starting to understand."

Marcos is a pipe-smoking, charismatic contradiction. He's a "mestizo", a Mexican of mixed Spanish/Indian blood. He's an intellectual from the city who is the military leader and spokesman for an indigenous guerrilla army.

On January 1st, 1994, the Zapatista indigenous uprising took over five towns and 500 ranches in southern Mexico. Then they started communicating their message to the world on the internet. The Mayan Indians of Chiapas were in Cyberspace. At the keyboard was Subcomandante Marcos.

Since the first days of the uprising there has been a nervous ceasefire. Now, three years later, Nettie Wild and her Canadian/Mexican film crew travel to the jungle canyons of Chiapas to capture eight months in the elusive and fragile life of a revolution.

Marcos is using the media as a long range missile to hold off 30,000 Mexican army troops who encircle Zapatista territory. His internet communiqués challenge the Mexican government and taunt the international capitalist system. His poetry and rhetoric woo Mexicans with dreams of a new democracy. His stories tell of the Indians of Chiapas, who are so poor they are forced to try and change the world in order to survive it.

In the middle is Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia. The Mayan people call him "Tatic". It means grandfather. For 30 years the Bishop had worked for peaceful change in Chiapas. Then in 1994, village after village turned to the Zapatistas and went to war. Now, the indigenous people have turned back to the Bishop to mediate a fitful series of peace talks between the Zapatistas and the government.

In the north of Chiapas, Manuel Garcia lives outside of Zapatista-protected territory. He and 2000 other indigenous villagers share the Zapatista dream for change.. But now they are homeless and living in fear. They are refugees in their own country. Despite the ceasefire, they have been forced out of their villages by a government backed paramilitary group which ironically calls itself, "Paz y Justicia" or "Peace and Justice". The paramilitary group accuses anyone who opposes them of being Zapatista guerrillas.

On camera, the Peace and Justice accuse the Zapatistas of violence. Off camera, they threaten to kill the Mexican members of the film crew. Out of their homes for four months, the refugees are desperate. They turn to the Bishop and the Zapatistas for help. But Marcos and the comandantes' hands are tied by the peace talks. The guerrilla army can't defend the refugees or they will break the ceasefire. The Bishop is also afraid to make a move for fear Chiapas will collapse into civil war. The government denies the paramilitary groups exist. The refugees are left stranded, pawns in a ceasefire. They are fighting a war on their own.

Nettie Wild went to Chiapas to film an uprising. She ended up framing the entrapment of a revolution. It is a journey through fear and hope and illusion.

# **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

## **1910 MEXICAN REVOLUTION**

Today's Zapatistas take their name from Emiliano Zapata, the hero of Mexico's revolution. Zapata fought under the banner of "Tierra y Libertad" which translates literally into "Land and Liberty".

The Mexican revolution was a complicated affair involving many armies. Emiliano Zapata led a largely campesino (peasant) army which was fighting primarily for land. Eventually Zapata joined forces with amongst others, Pancho Villa, and in 1914 rode victoriously into Mexico City. He didn't stay long. It was clear to Zapata that other forces within the newly-formed political alliances were playing for power, not to return land to the campesinos. In 1919 Zapata was tricked and assassinated by the government. By 1930, the government's ruling party was calling itself the Institutional Revolutionary Party. It has been in power ever since.

## **1994 ZAPATISTA UPRISING**

Who are the Zapatistas? Who is Marcos? On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) took over 5 towns and over 500 ranches in Chiapas, one of the poorest states in Mexico. The Zapatistas say they chose this date because it marked the first day of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which they claim "is a death sentence for the Indian peoples of Mexico."

The Zapatista demands stated they wanted control over their lives (indigenous rights, education, healthcare) and the land. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is a guerrilla army made up of largely indigenous Mayan people including Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Tojolabales and Choles. The leadership calls themselves the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CRII-CG). They say they represent over 1000 Zapatista communities.

The military leader and spokesman for the Zapatista Army is Subcomandante Marcos who is not a Mayan and not from Chiapas. The government says he is a professor of philosophy and communications from Mexico City. It appears that Marcos came to the jungle 12 years before the uprising. He brought with him a quest for social change and an unerring sense of how to fight a revolution through the media. His poems, political harangues and short stories flood newspapers, magazines, television news and the internet with stories of the Mexican southeast.. Together, Marcos and the Mayans of Chiapas, have created what the New York times calls "the world's first post modern revolution".

# A CHRONOLOGY OF THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING

**January 1, 1994:** The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) takes over 5 towns and more than 500 ranches in Chiapas, southern Mexico.

**January 6, 1994:** The Zapatistas retreat into the jungle. People die on both sides. Some say 150, some say 500.

**January 12, 1994:** The government declares a ceasefire. Most of the ranches remain in Zapatista hands.

**February 1994:** A "dialogue" between government negotiators and the Zapatistas takes place.

**June, 1994:** The Zapatistas announce that after consulting with their communities in the Lacandon jungle, they are rejecting the government's peace proposals.

**December 19, 1994:** The Zapatistas briefly seize towns and roadblocks throughout Chiapas.

**December 24, 1994:** The government accepts rebel demands for a church-led mediation commission (CONAI) to handle future peace talks. The CONAI is headed up by the Bishop of San Cristobal, Samuel Ruiz Garcia.

**February 9, 1995:** Federal judicial police claim they have discovered clandestine arms depots in Mexico City and Veracruz. They "unmask" Subcomandante's Marcos' identity and order his arrest. Thousands of soldiers move into rebel territory for the first time since the uprising to arrest rebel leaders. All they find is Marcos' pipe.

**April, 1995:** A new round of peace talks gets underway.

**February 1996:** A partial accord on indigenous rights is signed by the Zapatistas and the chief negotiator for the government.

**August 1996:** The Zapatistas withdraw from the peace talks. The Zapatistas say they will not return until conditions change, including government implementation of the signed accord and the end to escalating violence against Zapatista civilian communities in Chiapas.

**December 1997:** Paramilitary forces aligned with the ruling party massacre 45 villages accused of being Zapatistas. The dead include 10 men, 21 women and 14 children.

**June 7, 1998:** Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia withdraws as mediator of the peace talks, stating that his work has been undermined by a government campaign aimed at discrediting him. He headed up the National Mediation Commission (CONAI), which resigned hours later, alleging government intransigence and unwillingness to negotiate with the Zapatista guerillas.

**Oct 9, 1998:** US Senate and Congress introduce a "Sense of Congress Resolution" demanding increased human rights in Chiapas. Included in the many points, it urges the US government to: (1) take effective measures to ensure that United States assistance and exports of equipment to Mexican security forces (a) are used primarily for counter-narcotics purposes; and (b) do not contribute to human rights violations; (2) encourage the Government of Mexico to reduce political tension and violence in Chiapas by disarming paramilitary groups and decreasing its military presence there.

**The story continues...** Mexican federal police have identified 12 different paramilitary groups now operating in the state of Chiapas. Local villagers report that there are in fact more, but it is unclear as to how many. In 1998 and 1999 there have been at least 70 political killings in Chiapas and there are now more than 17,000 internal refugees.

**A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS was filmed over eight months from June 1996 to February 1997**

# FILMMAKERS BIOS



## NETTIE WILD

Producer, Director, Co-Writer and Co-Cinematographer

Canadian Nettie Wild is best known for her documentary feature films *A RUSTLING OF LEAVES:INSIDE THE PHILIPPINE REVOLUTION* (1989) and *BLOCKADE* (1993), both of which have won acclaim at film festivals around the world. Among other honors, *A RUSTLING OF LEAVES* was awarded The People's Choice Award at the Berlin Film Festival (Forum of New Cinema), the Prix du Public at the National Film Board's Salute to the Documentary and the Grand Prize at the Houston Film Festival. *BLOCKADE* shared honors as Most Popular Canadian Feature at the Vancouver International Film Festival, won the Red Ribbon at the American Film and Video Festival and the Silver Award at the Houston International Film Festival.

*A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS* had its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival, and national premieres at the Sydney Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and the AFI-Los Angeles Film Festival (where it won the Audience Award for Best Documentary). In 1999 *A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS* won the Genie Award for Best Canadian Feature Documentary.

# KIRK TOUGAS

Producer and Cinematographer

With over ninety productions to his credit, Kirk Tougas is one of Canada's foremost documentary cinematographers.

Working with independent producers, broadcasters, and the National Film Board, he has shot on location throughout Canada, the Arctic and the United States, as well as Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. His work has been broadcast by CBC, PBS, TVO, Global, Discovery, the History Channel, BBC, Channel Four, ITV, Australian and Finnish Broadcasting. These productions have received over 35 prizes at international festivals, including Berlin, Toronto, Nyon, Houston, New York and San Francisco, an Emmy Award, and in Canada, three Genie Awards and two Gemini nominations.

He has worked with George Ungar on THE CHAMPAGNE SAFARI, with Nettie Wild on BLOCKADE and A RUSTLING OF LEAVES: Inside the Philippine Revolution, with directors Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick on MANUFACTURING CONSENT: Noam Chomsky and the Media, and with filmmaker and anthropologist Hugh Brody on THE WASHING OF TEARS and TIME IMMEMORIAL. Working with director Gary Marcuse, the production THE MIND OF A CHILD received the Canada Award at the Gemini Awards. Most recently he completed GERRIE AND LOUISE with Sturla Gunnarson in South Africa, which received the 1997 EMMY Award for International Documentary.

In 1990, Kirk was awarded "Best Documentary Cinematographer" by the Canadian Society of Cinematographers, and in 1996, the Leo Award for Best Cinematography.

# BETSY CARSON

Producer and Production Manager

The challenge of organizing and facilitating complex film projects is an enjoyable one for Betsy Carson. Since 1989, as a production manager and/or co-producer, she has worked on many films, including A RUSTLING OF LEAVES: Inside the Philippine Revolution, BLOCKADE, TIME IMMEMORIAL, FIRST NATIONS: THE CIRCLE UNBROKEN, BOWL OF BONE: Tale of the Swuye and THE MIND OF A CHILD (1997 Gemini Award winner). As well, she is currently Associate Producer on CHAMPIONS OF THE WILD II, a 13-part nature series, and has recently co-directed a dance film, CAFÉ BOHEME.

Her specialty is documentary budgeting, with the result that one of her biggest challenges has been to learn the art of juggling numbers.

Betsy has come to film management after a 17-year career as a professional dancer with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and the Judith Marcuse Dance Co., where she was also associate artistic director.

# MANFRED BECKER

Editor and Co-Writer

Since 1985, Manfred Becker has edited some forty-five documentary films and educational videos, working with celebrated filmmakers such as Peter Watkins, Sturla Gunnarson, John Kramer and Barry Greenwald.

After receiving a university degree in film and journalism in Germany (1983), Manfred began his Canadian career as a production assistant for Schulz Productions, Toronto, and within a year was their in-house sound editor. Since 1991 he has been the principal editor at Barna-Alper Productions. His impressive list of projects include GERRIE AND LOUISE (1997 International Emmy), THE TENURE OF DR. FABRIKANT, MENDING BROKEN HEARTS, WHISPERS IN THE AIR, CHAMPAGNE SAFARI (1996 Genie Award), and THE JOURNEY -Peter Watkin's 7 hour global peace film..

Manfred is a versatile editor, working on such diverse systems as 16mm and 35mm film, linear and non-linear video. His background in journalism has led him to be at the forefront of editing social and political documentaries.

## ROBIN LUPITA BAIN

Camera Assistant Extraordinaire

Robin Bain is one of the rarest and most valuable people in the documentary business - a versatile, skilled camera assistant who can also shoot, record sound AND drive any kind of truck. A fine technician, she is also completely selfless when it comes to pitching in and working hard to make dreams come true. Robin worked with Nettie Wild on A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS from the first day of photography to the last, giving up her life in Montreal to venture into the unknown, and was indispensable to the production.

Robin is also a graphics designer and an animator, and has worked for many years in several capacities with the National Film Board of Canada. Her many production credits since 1981 include: BEYOND BORDERS, NEIGHBOURS, EYES OPEN, LESSONS, BOB'S BIRTHDAY, DRAGON BONES, CHAMPAGNE SAFARI, TIBETAN LIFELINE, FORBIDDEN LOVE, MANUFACTURING CONSENT: NOAM CHOMSKY AND THE MEDIA, and A RUSTLING OF LEAVES: INSIDE THE PHILIPPINE REVOLUTION.

Another talent Robin is developing is her painting and drawing skills - a body of work has begun to emerge from the time she spent in Mexico in 1996 / 97, and she is enjoying working in both oils and charcoal.

## VELCROW RIPPER

Sound Designer

Velcrow Ripper is one of those precious few filmmakers who doesn't take himself seriously but in fact is a dedicated social activist and creative artist. He moves easily from documentary to new narrative drama to multimedia, to projects he categorizes as "absurd". Velcrow is best known for the feature documentary Bones of the Forest which he co-directed with Heather Frise and which won the Genie Award for Canada's top documentary in 1996. He is a "hands on" video/filmmaker and multimedia and performance artist who writes, directs, produces, photographs, and edits. Happily for A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS, Velcrow also designs sound with the magic touch of someone who knows the difference between a sound track and a soundscape. For Velcrow, any sound from the bugs of the Mexican jungle to the squawks of the Internet is music to his ears. Velcrow Ripper's creative and loopy filmography lives up to his name.

## JESÚS SÁNCHEZ PADILLA

Sound Recordist

Jesús Sanchez has great ears. He is one of Mexico's leading documentary sound recordists and provided the rich on location sound for A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS. Our eight month shoot was particularly grueling for Jesús. While filming in the north of Chiapas, right wing paramilitary groups targeted the Mexican members of our crew, warning them not to continue or their lives would be in danger. Through it all, Jesús kept his Nagra tape recorder running, delivering an incredibly rich on location sound track for A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS.

Jesús has been a teacher of sound recording, a post production sound engineer, and has done field sound for more than 45 film productions and 80 video productions. His credits include many hours of television series in Mexico, and a wide range of international documentary and dramatic films.





Director/Producer/Writer/ Co-Camera: Nettie Wild  
Cinematographer/Producer: Kirk Tougas and Nettie Wild  
Producer/Production Manager: Betsy Carson  
Editor/ Co-Writer: Manfred Becker  
Sound Designer: Velcrow Ripper  
Location Sound: Jesús Sánchez Padilla  
Camera Assistant: Robin Lupita Bain  
Music: Joseph Pepe Danza  
Salvador Ferreras  
Celso Machado  
Laurence Mollerup

### a Canada Wild Production

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Canada • 1998 • Color • 93 minutes  
35mm (blown up from 16mm)  
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