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MOVIE REVIEW

Haunted by Rwanda's horrors, a UN general relives his futility

By Ty Burr, Globe Staff |

Last winter's "Hotel Rwanda" was a tough but inspiring true story about one man who saved more than 1,000 people from certain death during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. "Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire" is the dark, unflinching negative to that film's positive. It gives us a man who could have stopped the carnage -- 800,000 murdered in 100 days -- but whose hands were bound at the highest level. He knows this, it haunts him, and if it doesn't shame you, it should.

"I take pills just to stay reasonable," says Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian general who was assigned to lead the United Nations forces in Rwanda in 1994 and who is returning to the country for the first time in 10 years when the film opens. Director Peter Raymont follows Dallaire and his wife as they travel to ceremonies marking the 10th anniversary of the catastrophe, meeting with average Rwandans and President Paul Kagame, and touring death sites marked by the neatly arranged skeletons of men, women, and children with their skull plates macheted open.

"This is where I significantly changed," Dallaire says on the soundtrack, and who wouldn't have? The UN peacekeeping force, consisting of a mere 800 soldiers at its largest, was powerless to stop the forces at work: the long-simmering rivalry between Hutu and Tutsi (a distinction both Dallaire and the film scorn as the bogus anthropological invention of the country's Belgian conquerors); a brokered peace agreement doomed to fail; a militia of angry young Hutu men stoked to kill Tutsi by malicious radio broadcasts. They had a death list, and they stockpiled machetes and other weapons at a Kigali arms depot that Dallaire begged higher-ups in New York to let him clean out.

The United Nations said no. "I literally felt chopped off at the knees," the general recalls.

It wasn't just the UN. When the massacres began and Italy, France, and Belgium sent in soldiers to airlift their expatriates out of the country, Dallaire notes that the genocide could have been stopped in three days if any of the 2,500 troops had been offered to him. The international community looked the other way; the United States was too drunk on the O.J. Simpson trial to care. "Why was there this incredible moral default?" UN envoy to Africa Stephen Lewis wonders in an interview. He answers his own question: "Africa had nothing to sell and nothing to buy. You just wrote off the whole continent."

Raymont interweaves these comments with 1994 news footage that, while comparatively discreet, is still impossible to watch (and thus demands that we do so). But "Shake Hands With the Devil" isn't a historical recap, and it's not even all that interested in why the genocide happened. At bottom, it's an account of what helplessness does to a man whose philosophy of life has been founded on decisive action.

Nick Nolte gave his fictionalized version of Dallaire in "Hotel Rwanda," a gruff and charismatic sense of failure, which, since he's an actor, is as it should be. The real Dallaire, stocky and earnest, looks poleaxed by events in the 1994 news footage and seems a dignified empty shell today. He talks of overcoming suicidal impulses, but in a sense his former self is already dead.

Dallaire still loves Rwanda, oddly enough, and he talks of retiring there. "God travels the world during the day but comes and rests in Rwanda at night," Dallaire says, quoting a local folk saying.

"Shake Hands With the Devil" finds a welcome peace, too, but also a sense of smoldering futility. You come out of it wondering what horrific, mournful documentary we'll be watching about Sudan in 10 years.

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