

THE GUARDIAN - FILM REVIEW

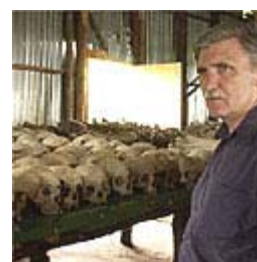
Shake Hands With the Devil

★★★★★ No cert

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[The Guardian](#)

Africa is the scar on our conscience, said Mr Blair, but this outstanding documentary exposes the subtle evasions built into that metaphor. Africa is not a scar, but a fresh and livid wound. The one inflicted in Rwanda is not healing as quickly as we might have hoped.

The 10th anniversary of the genocidal slaughter there of almost a million people, mainly ethnic Tutsis, and some Hutus, has yielded its most powerful and moving film so far on the subject. It is certainly the best new film of the week - although, at present, available only on a limited release. This is a documentary that is not in the fashionable vein of ironic dysfunction, but one that unapologetically seeks to comprehend a subject of global importance, in this case by focusing on one man. This is the anguished figure of Roméo Dallaire, the last public figure of the 20th century to feel the true and dishonourable weight of the white man's burden.



Shedding light: Shake Hands with the Devil

Dallaire was the Canadian army officer given the grotesque job of commanding the UN blue-beret "peacekeepers" in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, and this film follows him on a tense mission 10 years later to tour the country, promoting his self-exculpatory autobiography. Peter Raymont's movie recounts the terrible story of how Dallaire found himself in the middle of a bloodbath which he could do nothing to stop. And in fact, it hints at an awful possibility that raised its head in Bosnia: that the toothless blue-berets might simply have made things worse with their non-interventionist presence, because the belligerents suspected that this UN force would ultimately come to police and indeed legitimise whatever bloody gains they could make on the ground.

Frantically, Dallaire petitioned his international masters for more troops, more cash and a clearer mandate. But they appeared quite indifferent, with Kofi Annan insisting on a supposed impartiality. The authorities in Washington, New York, Paris and London were evidently unmoved by the plight of a country of no strategic importance and which bought and sold nothing. The international media shed its tears only for Kurt Cobain. Should Dallaire have resigned, in an attempt to shame the world into action? Or would that have meant selling Rwanda even further down the river?

He and his men stayed on, able to save some lives, but mostly they were impotent in the face of a tidal wave of blood. It was a soul-corroding experience for a man forced to experience and perhaps even preside over a spectacle of pure hell. For years after the genocide, the transparently decent Dallaire battled with drink and depression, and although it may seem obtuse to recount the woes of a prosperous white westerner after this colossal tragedy, the untold story

of Dallaire sheds a good deal of light on the important issue of UN's inglorious infighting and bureaucracy that paralysed any hope of doing anything about Rwanda.

There was, in particular, a decidedly poisonous dispute involving the Belgians, the Rwandans' former imperial masters, whose civil service is said to have exaggerated and, in a sense, even invented the racial difference between Hutus and Tutsis as part of an unacknowledged divide-and-rule policy. They had contributed important and much-needed military personnel to the UN force but high-handedly withdrew them after 10 of their men were shot in a skirmish which Belgium's political classes blamed on Dallaire personally, and even now 10 years after the event, the movie records an ugly encounter between him and a grandstanding Belgian politician.

The "devils" with whom Dallaire shakes hands are the Interahamwe, the Hutu militia who cold-bloodedly directed and carried out the killings. Dallaire says that he was forced to meet some of these people face-to-face as part of his many futile diplomatic initiatives, and they were truly chilling encounters. But Dallaire locates his heart of darkness not in the African interior but the United Nations building. A final extraordinary scene shows the older Dallaire giving an emotional and indeed incendiary address to a packed crowd of Rwandans, bitterly claiming the United Nations ignored their plight in favour of protecting the supposedly civilised European values of white Bosnia.

Roméo Dallaire, a married man with grown-up children, is shown to be marginally happier now - though for him, as for everyone else, Rwanda is far from resolved. The movie leaves us with tough questions. Have the western superpowers faced up to their own guilt? The clip of Bill Clinton sadly claiming to have been just another "guy in an office" who didn't understand what was going on, makes for very uncomfortable viewing. Where are the guilty men in Rwanda now, and what positions of power do they enjoy? On what basis do we divide the portions of moral responsibility between us and the Rwandans themselves? A gripping and moving film.