

Rwanda Revisited

***Shake Hands With the Devil* looks back at the genocide.**

by ELLA TAYLOR

Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire, force commander for the United Nations Assistance Mission during the civil war in Rwanda in 1994, has naturally deep-set eyes that today, except when he gets mad, have a hollowed-out, almost vacant look. That may be due, in part, to the medication he still takes to steady his nerves more than a decade after he watched helplessly as vengeful gangs of ethnic Hutus massacred some 800,000 Tutsis over 100 days. It is also because Dallaire remains haunted by the stinking corpses he saw sprawled by the lush Rwandan roadsides (“a paradise visited by the devil,” he calls it), or in ditches, or stacked up by the hundreds in the churches the victims fled to for sanctuary. Dallaire, who is French-Canadian, still fires up at the memory of being hung out to dry by his superiors at the U.N. —

who, despite a flood of phone calls and faxes requesting backup and authority to act, ordered him to stay out of it — and by the wishfully named “international community” that responded with an unseemly scramble to pull its soldiers and citizens out while ignoring cries for help of local leaders. He also maims tortured by doubts about whether he could have made better decisions and thus saved more lives.



The man who knew too much: former U.N. peacekeeper Roméo Dallaire

Still, Dallaire allowed himself to be persuaded by Canadian filmmaker Peter Raymont to return with his wife to Rwanda in 2004 for ceremonies commemorating the 10th anniversary of the genocide. *Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire* is based, in part, on the anguished 550-page-plus memoir that Dallaire wrote with his former assistant, Major Brent Beardsley. The film follows the old warrior, now thickened at the waist but still carrying himself with the erect bearing of a career soldier, through the major sites of his trauma (including a memorial filled with row upon row of skulls, many of them cracked where the victims were clubbed to death) and observes him as he meets up with old comrades or delivers impassioned speeches at the ceremony. Though it includes plenty of footage from those terrible days, this wonderful, devastating documentary is as much Dallaire’s story as it is the story of a whole continent abandoned by a cynical world because, as the now wised-up general sadly puts it, “it has nothing to buy and nothing to sell.” It is a story of abject failure, of a man who was hopelessly naive about the byzantine internal politics of the organization in which he believed, and so became its victim.

Dallaire certainly made mistakes, though they were errors of omission committed with both hands mostly tied. And he has his detractors, at least some of whom have murky vested interests. Prominent among those who seek to cast doubt on his conduct is a Belgian senator intent on blackening Dallaire’s name with a vigor befitting a representative of the colonizing power that fomented Hutu-Tutsi tensions and, years later, pulled out its peacekeeping unit when those tensions boiled over. Raymont, a longtime political activist who makes no secret of his partisanship, sees Dallaire as both victim and hero, but he is scathing about the United States’ woolgathering on Rwanda and about the U.S. media’s compulsive fixation on O.J. Simpson’s white Bronco as, during the heat of the genocide, it cruised the L.A. freeways with the cops in hot pursuit.

Shake Hands With the Devil is a hero’s story, though in a far more ambiguous and compromised sense than that of Paul Rusesabagina, the touchingly if sentimentally depicted protagonist of *Hotel Rwanda*, who turned his hotel into a sanctuary for scores of Tutsis. Part of Dallaire’s tragedy is that he doesn’t

know how many lives he succeeded in rescuing by hanging in as long as he did, or whether he could have done more to save 10 Belgian peacekeepers who were murdered early on by Hutu thugs. Four months after taking up the mission, he fell apart under the strain and was relieved of his command. Back in Montreal, he was found passed out on a park bench, dead drunk; later, he made two attempts to kill himself and was subsequently treated for posttraumatic stress disorder.

Finding the courage to journey back to a recovering Rwanda appears to have helped Dallaire's own recovery. Politically, he's a much savvier man today (this year, he became a senator in Canada's Liberal Party), and the film makes clear that he's no longer the obedient military man bound by orders from above. But he still agonizes over the capacity for human depravity that he saw in the country he hopes one day to make his home, and fears that the world will once more choose to ignore. As we wring our hands over Darfur and make out our guilt checks to Doctors Without Borders, we'd do well to keep that fear alive in ourselves.

SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEVIL: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire | Directed by PETER RAYMONT | Based in part on the book SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEVIL by Dallaire with Major Brent Beardsley | Produced by RAYMONT and LINDALEE TRACEY | Released by California Newsreel | At the Nuart