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MOVIES

## Return to scene of Rwandan genocide

■A filmmaker reflects on his experience profiling a Canadian general who had warned of impending slaughter.  
By Nancy Ramsey, Special to The Times

"I missed the Rwandan genocide, I'm embarrassed to say," filmmaker Peter Raymont readily admits. "Like many people in journalism and filmmaking. I remember vague reports of tribal warfare in some obscure African country."

The tribal warfare was actually one of the modern era's worst genocides: In an organized campaign of mass extermination, with neighbor killing neighbor, an estimated 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered in 1994 as the international community stood by and did nothing.

But one man tried.

Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire, a Canadian who was commander of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Rwanda at the time of the massacre, sent cable after cable, warning after warning of the impending genocide to the United Nations and the international community, to no avail.

He was in fact forbidden from intervening militarily to stop the genocide, although he did set up protective zones in various places — a football field, a hotel — and saved thousands of people. He returned to Canada later that year, and over the next several years suffered from depression and post-traumatic stress; on at least one occasion, he attempted suicide.

Dallaire returned to Rwanda in 2004 to mark the 10th anniversary of the genocide, a journey captured by Raymont in his new movie, "Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire." Opening Friday in Los Angeles, it is both a profile of Dallaire — featuring interviews with people who worked with and knew him in Rwanda — and a chronicle of his two-week journey back to the land he once called "paradise on Earth."

Raymont, who is also Canadian, was living in Ireland at the time of the genocide. He and his wife, Lindalee Tracey, had recently completed a documentary about neo-Nazi groups recruiting Canadian high school kids. "We got some nasty phone calls when the film came out, including death threats and people saying, 'We know where your kid goes to day care.' " Moving to County Cork allowed them to "get out of the rat race for a while."

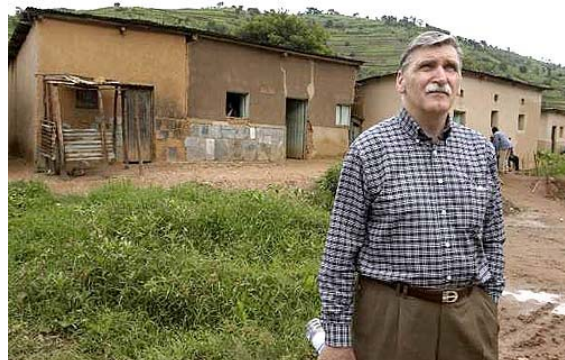
On the subject of Rwanda, he added, "I was reading newspapers and watching a bit of television, but mostly trying to get away from the madness of the world. But that's no excuse. I missed what was happening, and I feel kind of horrible. I really do believe that we are our brother's keeper."

Rwanda, however, stayed with Raymont, after the genocide, after he and his family returned to Canada. "I realized that the film to make as a Canadian would be a film on Gen. Dallaire."

For five years, Raymont phoned and e-mailed Dallaire. "I went through his doctors and lawyers in the military, and I got nothing," Raymont said. Dallaire was undergoing psychiatric treatment for post-traumatic stress; he was writing a



Rwandan children in 2004, when Roméo Dallaire's return to Rwanda was captured by filmmaker Peter Raymont.  
(Peter Bregg / California Newsreel Release)



Dallaire had been leading a U.N. peacekeeping mission.  
(Peter Bregg / California Newsreel Release)

book called "Shake Hands With the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda," which was published in 2003.

Finally, in fall 2003, "I bumped into him in an Air Canada lounge in Toronto," said Raymont. "There he was all alone and he had an hour to kill before his flight. A smile came over his face when I said, 'I'm Peter Raymont.' "

"In many ways it was an extraordinary journey," Raymont said of the filmmaking process. If any one individual embodied the words of John Donne, "No man is an island ... any man's death diminishes me," it was Dallaire, he said. What's more, he added, "Rwanda is one of the most beautiful places you'll ever see. It was called the Switzerland of Africa. It has lush, green rolling hills, and the people are gorgeous. But as you meet people and move around the country, it feels as if the whole place is still in shock."

If the world turned its back on Rwanda during the genocide, the film community has turned toward it in the last few years.

"Hotel Rwanda" featured Don Cheadle as Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel proprietor who sheltered 1,200 in his hotel during the genocide; Nick Nolte played a character based on Dallaire. Raoul Peck's "Sometimes in April" featured a Hutu schoolteacher (married to a Tutsi) looking back on the genocide. Two more films, "Shooting Dogs" (BBC) and "A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali" (a French-Canadian production) are in the works.

"It's an incredibly compelling story," said Anne Aghion, a documentary filmmaker who is working on her third film about the reconciliation process that is taking place in Rwanda in the wake of the genocide. (People who have been in jail for murder are returning to live in their communities, next to widows and widowers and children whose families they destroyed.)

"We're still completely flabbergasted and dumbstruck and wondering how it's possible to live with something like this," Aghion said. The films are "very important in the reconstruction process. Rwandans feel they're not alone. They hear about them on the radio, just as they knew from the radio during the genocide that the world was turning its back."

Today, Dallaire is actively involved in Canadian and international politics. He is a senator in Canada, and he sponsored a bill to increase benefits to veterans, providing psychological care for post-traumatic stress. Last week he traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for a meeting with member states of the African Union for discussions about ending ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region of Sudan.

LOOKING back on the two weeks he spent with Dallaire in 2004, Raymont recalled, "I was very worried about him, how the whole experience would affect him psychologically, returning to the killing fields. There were some places he didn't want to go." The Kigali morgue, for instance. "We had talked about going, he said he wanted to go, but it kept being slid off the agenda.

"On our last day, we were going back to the hotel to clean up for dinner," said Raymont. "And he said, 'Let's go to the morgue.' "

In the film, Dallaire recalls seeing dead soldiers "piled like sacks of potatoes" and later talks about the guilt, about why they were dead while he continued to live.

After the visit, said Raymont, "we got back in the vehicle and drove back to where we were staying. It was the only time he didn't say a word. An hour later, we were having a dinner party to say thank you to our drivers and interpreters. He showed up, put his arm around me and said, 'Thank you, I'm glad we organized this party because I could feel myself slipping downhill.'

"I have enormous respect for Dallaire, for not succumbing to the demons," added Raymont. "What motivates him is injustice." The injustice, he continued, of "realizing the world has decided that the value of a human life in Rwanda is not the same as the value of a human life in New York City or Los Angeles. At its core is racism, sad to say, but I think that's true."