



Roméo Dallaire goes back to Rwanda in *Shake Hands With The Devil*.

comment

# Witnessing as salvation

Only after revisiting his Rwandan horrors was Roméo Dallaire able to transform the trauma **By HAL NEIDZVIECKI**

**SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEVIL: THE JOURNEY OF ROMÉO DALLAIRE** directed by Peter Raymont, at the Art Gallery of Ontario's Jackman Hall (317 Dundas West), Friday (February 4) at 6:30 pm as part of Cinematheque Ontario's Canada's Top Ten 2004 series (sold out). For details, see *Indie & Rep Film*, page 95, 416-968-FILM.

IT'S BEEN A DECADE SINCE THE MASSACRE in Rwanda. It's been 60 years since the liberation of the Nazi death camps. Firsthand witnesses of Hitler's mad plan have told their stories. Now equally bleak tales of tribal hatred goaded by Western power are emerging.

In books, Quebec journalist Gil Courtemanche's novel *A Sunday At The Pool In Kigali* tells the story of a jaded journalist, his Rwandan lover and the various heavy-drinking politicians who perpetrate a massacre. Roméo Dallaire's memoir, *Shake Hands With The Devil*, chronicles his time in Rwanda as head of a UN peacekeeping mission doomed by cynical bureaucrats who just couldn't be bothered.

The Dallaire documentary of the same name recently played at Sundance (where it won the audience award in the world cinema documen-

tary competition), aired on *The Passionate Eye* last Monday and is soon to be screened in Toronto.

The documentary follows Dallaire as he returns to Rwanda for the first time since 1994 to take part in ceremonies commemorating the tragedy. This movie, too, has a fictional counterpart, *Hotel Rwanda*. A Dallaire-like character, Colonel Oliver (Nick Nolte), helps a hotel manager (also based on a real person) hide Tutsis in Kigali's only luxury hotel. Another feature film based more directly on Dallaire's story is currently in development.

For once, this not an entertainment trend looking to cash in. The Rwandan genocide is an unlikely choice to draw box office bucks.

There's something else at work here. This is about witnessing.

Witnessing is a long, torturous process. Consider the travails of the tormented Dallaire. It took him 10 years to write his book, a full decade to be able to talk about being a relatively powerless firsthand observer of a massacre. Why does a man haunted by memory immerse himself in a book, a documentary and a future feature film about something so devastating? Because witnessing is ultimately all

an individual has to offer in the face of horrific mass events and intransigent international bureaucracies.

Until Dallaire could tell his story, he was just a shell filled with a narrative over which he had no power. Witnessing is the process by which someone reclaims his humanity and dignity; ultimately, it's an assertion of his ability to perceive and articulate his perceptions: I was there. This happened to me.

Some understand the cultural act of witnessing as a warning to the despots and tyrants. If even one of us is left alive, then the story will be told. If the story is told, then it happened. And if enough people remember, perhaps revenge, sometimes called justice, is possible?

But plenty of villains are never punished. And some bear false witness, denying a holocaust, a genocide, an "ethnic cleansing." By depending on individuals to say what they saw, we invite a contrary opinion: "I didn't see it that way. I didn't see anything."

So, then, is there no point in witnessing? In terms of altering future political reality, it certainly has had mixed success. But witnessing isn't ultimately about prevention or intervention. Dallaire employs a devil metaphor to describe the Rwandan

genocide. He writes of "the unimaginable evil that had turned Rwanda's gentle, green valleys and mist-capped hills into a stinking nightmare of rotting corpses."

What else but pure evil from the bowels of hell could explain those who hacked away at their neighbours, fellow parishioners, countryfolk? To follow the metaphor is to arrive at some slight measure of salvation: if we are capable of pure evil, we are also capable of righteousness. Witnessing, the simple act of telling your truth, is a kind of righteousness. To tell one's story is to demonstrate that even in the aftermath of the darkest deeds, there are those who, through struggle and forbearance, will emerge to shine a light on the sanctity of human life.

To bear witness or sit in a theatre and be a witness won't change the course of world events or make you a hero. But it does make you human—with all the responsibilities that entails.

A full review of *Shake Hands With The Devil* appears in the February 17 edition of *NOW*. The film opens at the Camera and the Bloor on February 18. ©