

FILM REVIEW

Ten Years Later, Back at the Killing Fields to Heal the Spirit

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

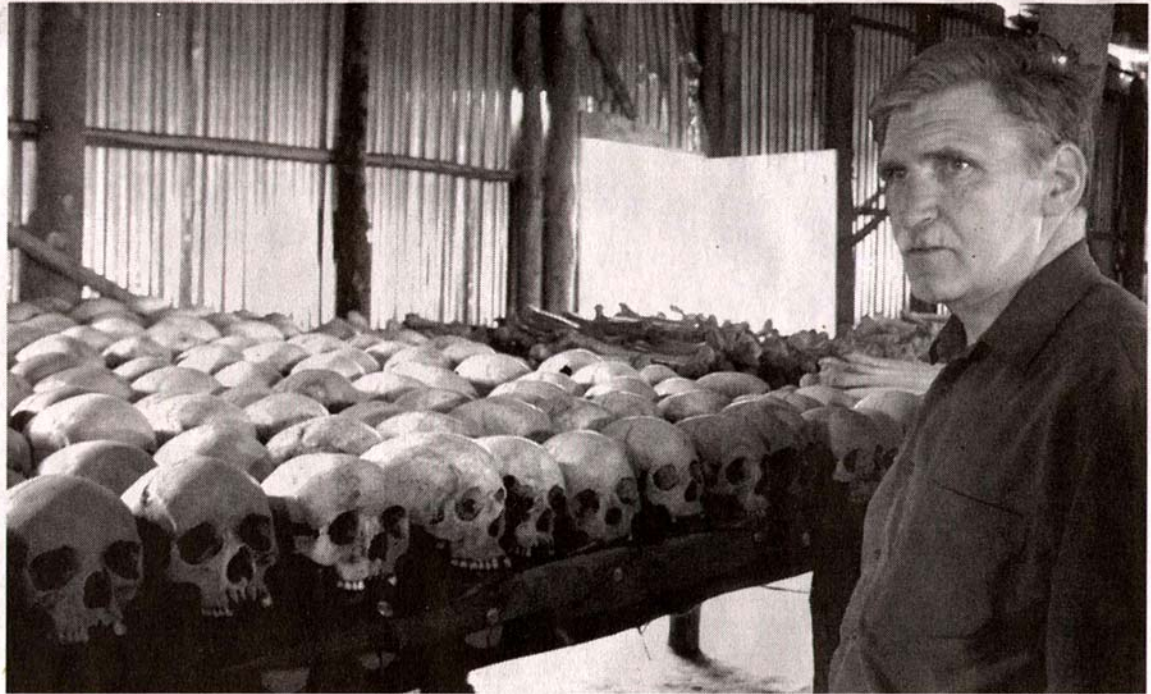
Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian commander of the tiny United Nations peacekeeping force stationed in Rwanda in 1994, remembers meeting twice with Hutu extremists who belonged to the bloodthirsty Interahamwe militias. These killers, who carried out the slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 100 days, had cold hands, he recalls in Peter Raymont's unsettling documentary "Shake Hands With the Devil." When you looked them in the eye, he remembers, there was no sign of humanity, only "the most evil I could ever imagine."

The film, which opens today in New York, is a respectful portrait of General Dallaire, now retired, who comes across as a thoughtful, resolute but profoundly shaken man, more philosopher than warrior. In 1992 he was dispatched to Rwanda with a 60-member peacekeeping force. A treaty between the Hutus and Tutsis had just been signed, and his first impressions of the African country were rosy: he imagined he had gone to "paradise on earth."

But heaven quickly turned into hell. Civil war erupted the following year after Rwanda's moderate Hutu president died in a plane crash. The peace treaty, he realized, was a bluff, and Hutu extremists had already planned their deadly uprising. General Dallaire repeatedly and frantically alerted United Nations officials in New York to the coming bloodbath.

Even after they refused to send more troops or allow him to confiscate Hutu weapons, he remained in the country during the reign of terror and tried to save as many lives as possible.

If Terry George's wrenching film "Hotel Rwanda" and Raoul Peck's HBO movie "Sometimes in April" have already put a tragic human face on a catastrophe that the American mass media barely acknowledged while it was happening, "Shake Hands With the Devil" ratifies their horrifying visions. General Dallaire's descriptions of the sights, sounds, and smells of human butch-



Peter Bregg/Maclean's

Return to Rwanda: Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire in the documentary "Shake Hands With the Devil."

Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Peter Raymont; written by Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire, based on his book, written with Maj. Brent Beardsley; director of photography, John Westheuser; edited by Michèle Hozer; music by Mark Korven; produced by Mr. Raymont and Lindalee Tracey; released by California Newsreel. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Sixth Avenue, South Village. Running time: 91 minutes. This film is not rated.

ery, as well as the movie's images of piles of dead bodies, severed limbs and rooms of skulls, are grimmer than anything seen in those films.

"Shake Hands With the Devil" is the second Canadian documentary to make General Dallaire its subject. It follows Steven Silver's equally admiring portrait, "The Last Just Man," shown two years ago in the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival.

The new film, in following the general's anxious return to Rwanda with his wife, Elizabeth, on the 10th anniversary of the massacres, fleshes out that portrait. The trip is presented as the necessary final step in his recovery from post-traumatic stress, which left him depressed and suicidal after his return to Canada in a state of nervous exhaustion.

As he continues on a trip that he worried would be a journey into hell, he gains in strength and spirit the more he discovers that order and sanity have replaced chaos and madness. Most of the Rwandans recognize him as a hero and a humanitarian. He participates in the commemorative ceremonies of the bloodbath and delivers a quiet but devastating speech.

He and the film's other talking heads, most notably Stephen Lewis, a Canadian who now serves as the United Nations Special Envoy for H.I.V./AIDS in Africa, mince no words in excoriating the reluctance

of the United Nations and the powers that could have stepped in and halted the slaughter and didn't. If there is plenty of blame to spread around, the Belgians, who colonized the area and created the ethnic distinction between Hutus and Tutsis based on dubious anthropology, receive the sharpest criticism.

Many reasons are given for the West's indifference. Since there was nothing anybody wanted from Rwanda, it was convenient to dismiss the civil war as African tribal feuding. Racism, of course, was a deep, underlying factor. Wasn't the war in the former Yugoslavia also rooted in longstanding tribal animosities?

Beyond apportioning blame, "Shake Hands With the Devil" acknowledges that the capacity for evil is a human component. Under certain conditions, entire populations can lose their humanity and go berserk. With madness all around him, General Dallaire maintained his humanity and (just barely) his sanity.