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Beyond the Multiplex

Bowling, genocide and one man's strange blimp dreams: A new wave of documentaries offers great tales and impressive variety.

By Andrew O'Hehir
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"Shake Hands With the Devil": A return to the heart of darkness

Not many Americans have heard of now-retired Canadian Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire. While he was commanding an embattled United Nations force during the Rwanda genocide of 1994, you and I and our countrymen were hypnotized by the early stages of the O.J. Simpson case. North of the border, though, the fact that a Canadian officer had been entrusted with such a sensitive and difficult mission was a source of tremendous national pride, at least at first.

But after Belgian, French and Italian troops pulled out of Rwanda amid an increasingly ominous atmosphere -- and the governments of the United States, Britain and Canada more or less stuck their collective fingers in their ears and shouted "I can't hear you!" -- Dallaire became something closer to an international martyr and pariah. Stuck in a compound in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, with a few hundred ill-prepared troops from Bangladesh, Ghana and Tunisia, he could do nothing to stop the roving Hutu militias from committing a genocidal massacre as bad as anything else in recent history.

Egged on by an unprincipled government eager to exploit tribal divisions (which, as Dallaire explains in the film, had more or less been invented during the era of Belgium's colonial rule), Hutu hard-liners murdered about 800,000 of their fellow citizens -- Tutsis and moderate Hutus -- in 100 days. The world did almost nothing. Dallaire and his embattled U.N. forces tried to help, and by some accounts they saved thousands of lives. But it wasn't nearly enough, and the laconic, mustachioed general went home to Quebec a broken man and a perennially controversial figure.

Filmmaker Peter Raymont accompanied Dallaire and his wife on his return to Rwanda to mark the 10th anniversary of those terrible events, and the result is a remarkable, and remarkably painful, confrontation with history. (The film also includes compelling and horrifying news-camera footage of 1994 events; at times it is extremely difficult to watch.) One may feel that Dallaire didn't do everything right -- he clearly feels that way and has never forgiven himself for what happened and how -- and still see that he is an extraordinary man who faced an impossible, indeed unimaginable, situation with courage and dignity.

As the Western world's appointed overseer, Dallaire basically sat and watched the massacre. Understandably, his bitterness today is directed toward the United Nations and the international community that forced him into that position, rather than the Rwandans who murdered other Rwandans in such amazing numbers. As he tells a captivated audience in Kigali's football stadium, he believes the Western world's attitude was that Rwanda didn't matter: It was a tribal

question, deep in Africa. It was blacks killing each other, and perhaps there were too many of them anyway. No one could understand it or stop it.

Dallaire doesn't especially want to go back to Rwanda, as he tells Raymont's camera. His leonine head has gone from dark brown to steel-gray; his eyes have deepened and hollowed. Once back in Canada, his memories drove him into alcoholism and a suicide attempt, and even now politicians in Europe (less so in Africa) are eager to make him a scapegoat for the entire tragedy. But Dallaire is also a profoundly religious man who believes he saw God and the devil in combat on earth. After seeing this film, you may not be willing or able to contradict him.

It's paradoxical, and perhaps unfortunate, that it takes a film with a white Western protagonist to engage the indie-film audience's attention to the near-destruction of an entire African nation, which could have been stopped but wasn't. But in some ways "Shake Hands With the Devil" hits harder than either "Hotel Rwanda" or the recent HBO film "Sometimes in April." If Dallaire isn't and wasn't a hero (and he insists the label doesn't fit), it's his flawed humanity and surprising humility that makes his journey back to the country that shaped him so redemptive. In the classic white-man-in-Africa tale, a civilized man loses his humanity in the Dark Continent. Roméo Dallaire found his there.

"Shake Hands With the Devil" is now playing in New York and Boston. It opens June 3 in Los Angeles and Washington; June 10 in San Francisco, Berkeley, Calif., and San Jose, Calif.; June 17 in San Diego; June 24 in Chicago; July 1 in Atlanta and Seattle; and July 8 in Denver, with more cities to follow.