

One Man's Journey to Hell

'Shake Hands With the Devil' Explores Legacy of Rwanda

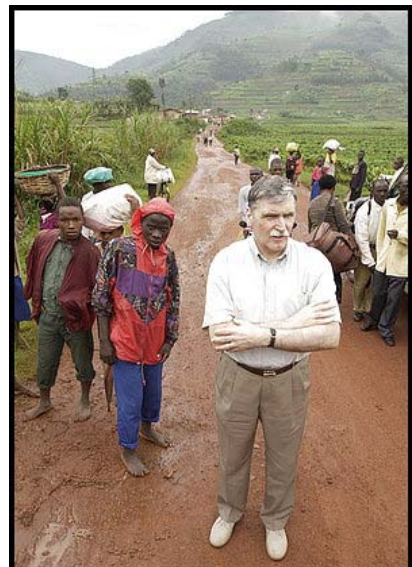
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Filmgoers eager to see a movie about heroism in the midst of moral ambiguity, about the superhuman efforts of one man against the engulfing forces of evil, about the competing and sometimes self-destructive dynamics of duty, courage and conscience, are hereby urged -- no, ordered -- to forsake the cartoon fictions of "Batman Begins" and rush instead to see "Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire." For a gripping, thoroughly involving account of a flawed but inspiring real-life hero, audiences need look no further.

In 1993, Gen. Romeo Dallaire was chosen to command the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Rwanda. It was the assignment of a lifetime, a post he'd been waiting for the whole of his military career. As the first Canadian to head a U.N. mission, Dallaire was especially proud; arriving in that beautiful country in the center of Africa, on the heels of a recently signed peace agreement between rival Hutu and Tutsi tribes, Dallaire likened arriving in Rwanda to "going to paradise on Earth." Soon, however, he realized how fragile the peace really was, how inadequate the U.N. presence was to enforce it, and how "all you needed was one guy to do one stupid thing" for the entire country to blow up.

There was a guy, and he did a stupid thing, shooting down the Hutu president's airplane in April 1994. That was the match that set off an explosive 100 days of brutal killing, during which 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered.

As the man putatively in charge of stemming the violence, Dallaire watched helplessly, his desperate faxes and phone calls to the U.N. going unnoticed, his pleas through the international media going unheeded. "Shake Hands With the Devil," which is based on Dallaire's memoir of the same name, follows the retired general as he returns to Rwanda for the 10th anniversary of the genocide. Still haunted by what he considers his colossal failure, Dallaire literally returns to the scene of the crime, reliving a journey worthy of Joseph Conrad in its physical courage and moral complexity.



Romeo Dallaire, who commanded U.N. peacekeepers in Rwanda in 1993, is haunted by the genocide. (California Newsreel)

And, for such an epic journey, one couldn't ask for a more dashing or articulate leading man than Dallaire. Handsome, rugged, with piercing eyes and a strong, hawklike visage, he radiates the kind of "command presence" that characterizes so many legendary leaders.

But, still fighting post-traumatic stress disorder a decade later, Dallaire can remember only what he didn't do, the decisions he didn't make, or the ones that went horribly wrong. It's left to those who witnessed his actions firsthand -- subordinates, journalists, Rwandan leaders -- to attest to his steadfastness in the face of cowardice at just about every turn.

Much like "Hotel Rwanda," the fictionalized account of the heroism of Paul Rusesabagina, "Shake Hands With the Devil" is a portrait of geopolitics at its most craven, as nearly every country and institution involved -- Belgium with its cynical colonial legacy, a chillingly amoral France, a calculatingly political Catholic Church and the United States, represented by Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright at their most mealy-mouthed -- turn a blind eye to a country whose sin is to be black and, as one observer puts it, "having nothing to sell and nothing to buy." More than anything, "Shake Hands With the Devil" is an indictment of a hopelessly dysfunctional United Nations, which refused Dallaire money, troops, supplies and, most egregiously, a mandate.

It's all infuriating, made all the more so by the incredible footage director Peter Raymont has assembled, so that the audience relives, step by horrible step, the insanity that took hold during those weeks.

Brilliantly edited, "Shake Hands With the Devil" lays the past and present on top of one another, so that they melt together on-screen in the same way that they do in Dallaire's own troubled consciousness.

Often, those images of 1994 are graphic and deeply disturbing, and often they convey an unconscious iconographic power; in a shot taken inside a church where dozens of people were murdered, the mummified, attenuated corpse of a child looks for all the world like a crucifix.

The least we can do is pay attention now; as the film reminds us, the summer of 1994 was one that most Americans spent transfixed by the O.J. Simpson trial. And the very least we can do is listen to Dallaire as he recounts his own experience in Rwanda, his abiding love for its verdant, now peaceful hills, and his efforts to come to grips with his almost fatally conflicted feelings.

And at its heart, "Shake Hands With the Devil" is an emotional journey, as the anguished Dallaire tries to forgive himself and his colleagues try to figure out why one of the few men who acted in good faith is the one beating himself up the worst.

Although Dallaire has begun to heal, he still says he failed the most important part of his mission, which was to shame the world into coming to Rwanda's aid. "Shake Hands With the Devil" poses an essential question: How can you shame an international community that, even now, seems constitutionally incapable of it?

Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire (90 minutes, at Landmark's E Street) is not rated. It contains graphic images of violence and its aftermath.