

Triage honours humanitarians in harm's way

Film documents impact of Medecins Sans Frontieres

Stories by MARI SASANO
Special to *The Journal*
EDMONTON

Dr. James Orbinski worked at the hospital in Kigali during the Rwandan genocide. New patients were triaged and given a number: a one meant they were treated right away; a two was treated within 24 hours.

The three were considered irretrievable — they were made as comfortable as possible as they died, often lying on the ground wherever there was room.

The experience left Orbinski with feelings of “uncontrollable rage.” Nevertheless, as president of Medecins Sans Frontieres during that time, he continued to travel to human disaster zones, doing whatever he could to help people caught in the worst man-made crises.

Besides his work in Rwanda, he has provided relief during the Somali famine, and in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Congo.

Now, he is writing his memoirs and trying to reclaim the language of humanitarianism at a time when the term itself has been co-opted by the military — for example, in the “humanitarian war” in Iraq, started presumably to aid civilians living under Saddam.

Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma shows the true face of the work done by the MSF and other humanitarian organizations. As he returns to Africa to research his book, we see the impact of his work and the strength of those who stayed behind to continue

MOVIE REVIEW

Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma

★★★★★

When: Tonight at 8, opening-night gala as part of the Global Visions film festival

Where: Paramount Theatre, 10233 Jasper Ave.

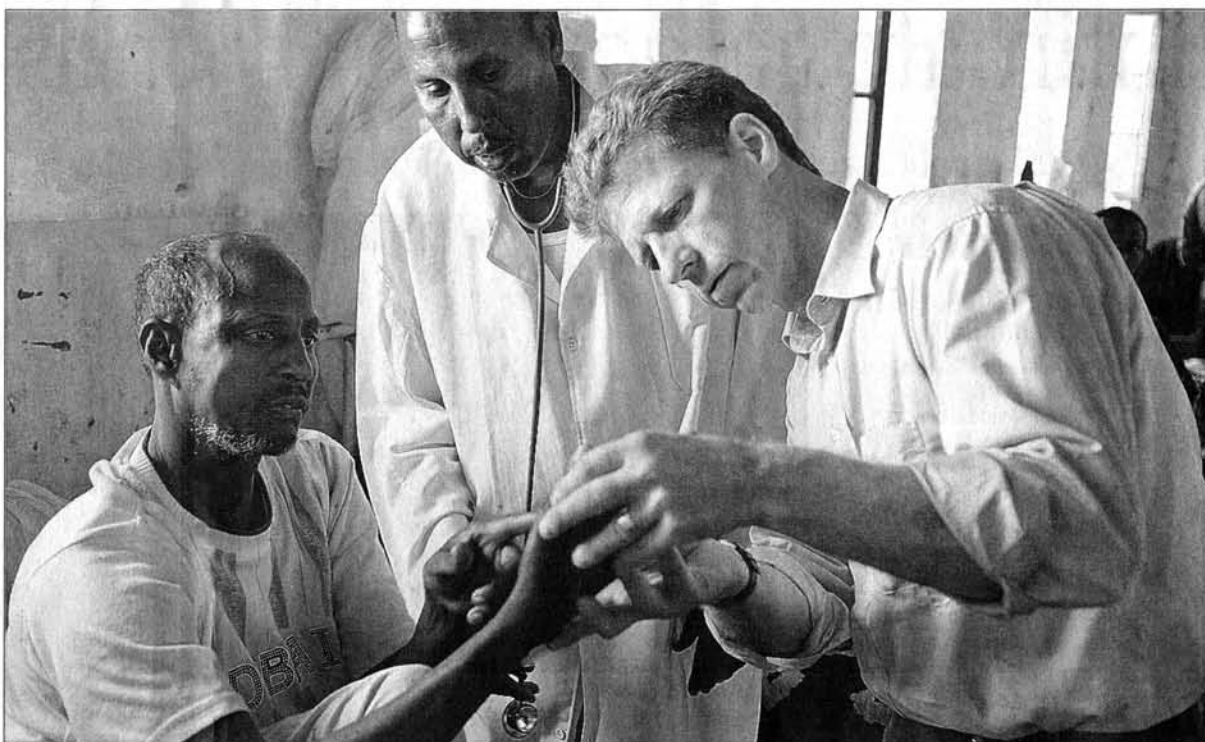
Tickets: Passes available at Earth's General Store, Remedy Cafe and Mountain Equipment Co-op; individual tickets available at the door only

working now that most of the help has left.

The memories are painful, but he insists it's as important as ever to allow them to be heard — to show the horrors and the potential for them to return, as seems to be happening, even now, in the eastern Congolese city of Goma.

He stoically recalls the things he saw: children too weak to feed themselves and masses of people so wounded that he found it difficult to maintain his professional detachment.

But we also meet people like Lesto, still working in Somalia for the love of his homeland; Adan Hussein, who runs an orphanage; Emmanuel, one of the only survivors of a massacre, who collects human remains at a genocide memorial; Jacques, who was a boy during the genocide; and a group of genocide survivors who are now medical students, deter-



Dr. James Orbinski, right, and Dr. Tamir examine a patient with a gunshot wound in a scene from the documentary *Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma*.

STEVE SIMON

mined to help heal their country.

You should neither look away, nor bury yourself in guilt for our culture's culpability in all of this. Orbinski, who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 on behalf of MSF, is very serious on-camera about his experiences. But each time he meets his old friends, they always share laughter and fond memories.

“We are responsible for our lives and our world,” Orbinski says early in the film.

“It's not about creating perfect systems,” he adds later. “It's about solidarity.”

For all the complexities and imperfections in the work of humanitarians like Orbinski, there is a need to continue to

support that work and to try to understand the impact of our actions here on places where we might never go.

As much as humans are capable of atrocities, we also have considerable ability to heal each other.

Triage isn't always an easy film, but it should be required viewing. For the sake of us all.

Producer of Romeo Dallaire documentary finds new ground

Special to The Journal
EDMONTON

In 2004, Patrick Reed was a producer and researcher for *Shake Hands With the Devil*, a documentary film about the Rwandan genocide as seen through the eyes of former Canadian general Romeo Dallaire.

But that experience also opened the doors to another perspective on the human tragedy: the humanitarian side.

"When we were in Rwanda in 2004 with Romeo Dallaire, at the end of a long day I saw a guy writing in a bar," says Reed. "I introduced myself, and he turned out to be James Orbinski."

Orbinski is a Toronto physician and a past-president of *Medicins Sans Fron-*

tieres, an international organization that provides medical relief. At that Rwandan bar, he was researching a memoir about his experiences.

The conversation eventually turned into the film, *Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma*, which opens the Global Visions Film Festival tonight at 8 p.m. at the Paramount Theatre.

"On a personal level, I was fascinated — James experienced the same things as General Dallaire, and they were both understandably affected by that.

"But what's different about James is that Rwanda was just one of many places he went to: Somalia, Congo, Afghanistan. And knowing how completely debilitating it was for Dallaire, the thing that interested me was that James

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has seen the same things and would go back to these places, and that despite that, he remains generally optimistic."

Initially, Reed was reluctant to rehash the Rwanda story, but with Orbinski, he found an entirely different angle.

"Where we had a different perspective was that with *Shake Hands*, we went as part of the 10th anniversary. It was a big public event, and we were with a well-known figure, and in some ways

that affected where we went and what we saw.

"With James, we went after the media had left, and it was far quieter. We had more of an ability to blend in, more connection with people, more time in a more natural setting.

"I wanted to show ... the humanity of these people apart from the suffering; their resiliency, humour and ability to connect. They have an incredible degree of strength — they are victims of circumstance, but they are not passive," Reed says.

"That's why I think it was really important for us to go to Somalia. News cameras don't go there. It's considered a so-called failed state. We expected chaos and an absence of security, but things

continue to function.

"That alone contradicts the stereotype of Africa and other developing nations as helpless and waiting for a saviour."

The areas where the documentary crew went are still considered dangerous, and have been largely abandoned by humanitarian relief groups. Reed knows he's lucky to have had so much access, and that in itself is quite a story.

"It was a true Canadian story; we're lucky in that we have communities from around the world here. In Somalia, the only reason we could get into those places was because of the efforts of the Somali community in Toronto. They contacted people there to make sure we got in and out safely."