



Dr. James Orbinski's documentary, *Triage*, deals with atrocities in Africa.

A lesson in human darkness

Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma

★★★ (out of 4)

A documentary about Canadian physician and humanitarian Dr. James Orbinski. 88 minutes. At the AMC Yonge-Dundas. **14A**

PATRICIA HLUCHY
TORONTO STAR

Dr. James Orbinski's memory must be a minefield. As a physician with Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) during the 1990s, he worked in hell zones including Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The film *Triage* suggests his nightmares are populated by dying children, maimed adults and gutters flowing with blood.

He revisits Africa in this deeply affecting documentary, which opens with Orbinski in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, where he was MSF's head of mission during the 1994 genocide. He offers a chilling reminiscence of triage after a particularly violent day.

He and his colleagues attached small pieces of tape, numbered one to three, to victims' foreheads. One was for those requiring immediate treatment; two indicated there was a 24-hour window. Three "meant that even though they were alive, they were irretrievable," and all anyone could do was make them as comfortable as possible.

Orbinski, who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 as president of the MSF International Council, says calmly of such judgments, "There are moral implications, but it's a technical decision.

"I don't have regrets about such decisions. I have complete outrage about the circumstances that created that situation."

That outrage, and Orbinski's decision to channel it into a struggle on behalf of the world's downtrodden, are what make this devastating film so memorable — and inspiring.

In addition to practising medicine and teaching in the University of Toronto's political science department, Orbinski, 48, is president of Dignitas, an NGO focusing on AIDS in Africa. A married father of two young children, he has also written *An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-First Century*, published last spring. He made the Africa trip, featured in *Triage*, to prepare for his book.

The documentary, directed by Patrick Reed, was also shot in Baidoa, Somalia. That's where Orbinski, as a 32-year-old physician who had been practising in Orangeville, had his first MSF posting (he had co-founded the Canadian chapter two years earlier).

He recalls that in 1992-93, there was "virtual anarchy" in Somalia, then ravaged by civil war. Baidoa was the "epicentre of the famine."

As Orbinski and his former MSF colleague, a Somali named Lesto, visit the local chief of graves, archival material shows bodies being loaded off a truck, bodies that seem shockingly light for their length.

But by far the most powerful segment of *Triage* shows Orbinski in Rwanda. He describes the genocide as "the most transformative moment of my life." It was an extreme lesson in human darkness. "This is what we are," he says. "I am this."

But Orbinski refuses to give up on humankind. Given what he's seen, that refusal seems truly heroic.

STAR RATINGS

Outstanding	★★★★
Excellent	★★★★½
Very good	★★★
Good	★★½
Fair	★★
Poor	★½
Awful	★