

REVIEW



Ontario physician James Orbinski returned to Rwanda and Somalia after 15 years. STEVE SIMON

Overcome by memories

TRIAGE: DR. JAMES ORBINSKI'S HUMANITARIAN DILEMMA

Directed by Patrick Reed
Written by Patrick Reed, Peter Raymont and Michelle Latimer
With Dr. James Orbinski
Classification: 14A

★★★

BY LIAM LACEY

An inspiring, if occasionally frustrating documentary, *Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma* explores the personal crucible of humanitarian work. Director Patrick Reed and his crew follow the Canadian doctor's return to Africa 15 years after his work in Somalia and Rwanda with *Médecins sans frontières* (Doctors Without Borders), or MSF.

The film, produced by the National Film Board along with White Pine Pictures, takes a similar approach to the last two films by producer Peter Raymont, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire* (2005) and *A Promise to the Dead: the Exile Journey of Ariel Dorfman* (2007). In each case, a humanitarian returns, with film crew, to a place where he lived through an historically traumatic event. Each film is related to a published memoir.

Orbinski, slim, earnest, with sandy hair sticking up at the front, was a 32-year-old doctor living in Orangeville, Ont., when he first decided to go help out in Somalia, where famine, exacerbated by civil war, made a situation both urgent and dangerous. Orbinski was part of a team assigned to provide food and medical care to upward of 100,000 people who had arrived in the city of Baidoa.

Fifteen years later, when he returns, memories are deeply mixed: Orbinski sees a successful orphanage and school, and says MSF saved about 80,000 lives. But there's also an apparently permanent refugee tent city and the Somalia aid mission ended badly. American peacekeepers pulled out after the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu left 18 soldiers killed and 84 wounded. After the 1997 killing of one of his MSF colleagues, Dr. Ricardo Marques, most aid workers packed up and left as well.

But by 1994, Orbinski was in Rwanda when Hutu militia orchestrated the killing of an estimated 800,000 Tutsis in a three-month period and the world's military powers failed to intervene. Orbinski was the head of the MSF mission in the King Faisal Hospital in Kigali, which became a refugee camp for 6,000 people. He tells a number of stories, both touching and horrific. He meets a refugee family that stayed in the room next to him and, in perhaps the most trenchant scene, explains to an oddly ignorant new hospital director exactly what happened there in 1994.

Though not an overtly emotional person, Orbinski is sometimes overcome by his memories. As indelible as his stories are, he has a distracting habit of inserting the adverb "literally": A man "literally" has a hole in his head, the gutters "literally" ran with blood. It's as if the words alone can't communicate his experience.

He acknowledges as much when he explains the difficulty of writing his memoir, *An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-*

first Century, published last spring by Random House.

"For me one of the most important knowings I have now — it's literally beyond words. It comes from a place of silence. There's no way in words to capture what it is. And so the challenge of writing is, how do you capture what has no words because in the expression you lose it."

The film struggles with the same problem. The stories evoke suffering on an inconceivable scale, but the archival images of Somalis starving and Rwandan dead feel like too familiar emblems of African despair. Orbinski's use of his experiences is more inspiring. We learn how he became international president of MSF, under whose auspices he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. Orbinski continues to draw from his experiences to motivate political activism. Compassion, by itself, he says, is "a brand of humanitarianism that is cleansed ... of its political importance."

One source of irritation in the film's overreliance on Gerald Caplan as the film's go-to talking head. Caplan is introduced as an international-affairs analyst and initially he provides context about the links between the Somalia famine, the Rwanda genocide and the subsequent refugee crisis in the Congo. By halfway through the film, though, he is speculating about "James", his psychological struggles and writing challenges on a far more familiar basis. If Caplan is, in fact, Orbinski's friend and confidant, the film should say so. If not, why not let the doctor, or someone close to him, do the talking?