

## The Devil Certainly

### Filmmakers face up to the Rwandan genocide

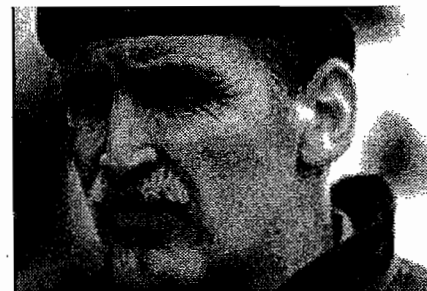
by SCOTT FOUNDAS

*Genocide can occur anywhere. It is not an African phenomenon. We must have global vigilance. And never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence.*

—Bill Clinton, 1998

*A few years down the road, [President Clinton] will ask for forgiveness. He'll make the promise of "never again." But in terms of national interest, we did everything right.*

—dialogue from the film *Sometimes in April*



**U.N. peacekeeper Roméo Dallaire, circa 1994**

Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire can still smell Rwanda. He wrote about this in his 2003 memoir, *Shake Hands With the Devil*, and it's written on his face too — the unrelenting stench of the 800,000 bodies that rotted in mass graves, filled the streets of Kigali and dammed the Kagera River over 100 bloodstained days in 1994. Dallaire knows the smell because he was there, from August 1993 until September 1994, as the sometimes Head of Mission and full-time Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda. What transpired, he would later write, was "a story of betrayal, failure, naiveté, hatred, genocide, war, inhumanity and evil" — one which Dallaire didn't merely observe, but in which he played a leading role. He is, as many now know, one of modern history's great and tragic witnesses, not just for what he saw, but for his accurate prediction of it and his ultimate inability to prevent it. He is, simply put, the boy who cried genocide. And it has taken much of the world the better part of a decade to respond to his call.

"The 10th anniversary was a great catalyst. It's funny how we're so Cartesian," Dallaire says, speaking in clipped language that carries the echo of the many man-made tragedies, from the Holocaust to Hiroshima, that have endured similar intervals before gaining due recognition. In other words, we think about the genocide, therefore it is.

"In my opinion," Dallaire continues, "these catastrophes — the human-led ones — are so shrouded in the political, in the residual ethnicities of the groups that have been affected and so on, that many of those who have been the targets themselves don't speak much. They're still living with it, wherever in the world they may be. And those who are still in the seat of power or close to it are also not particularly keen on this stuff getting out. You need a sort of purging area. I've estimated that it takes about five years — that's when you've had enough change and enough key people are out of the decision-making processes that you can actually get them to talk."

It's January of this year, halfway through the Sundance Film Festival, and I'm riding back with Dallaire to his hotel following a screening of *Shake Hands With the Devil*, a new documentary film based on Dallaire's book about his year in Rwanda, and its aftermath. Catching up with Dallaire during his Sundance trip hasn't been easy — wherever he goes, he's mobbed by those who wish merely to proffer their sympathies and by others who pose the inevitable questions: How could this happen? And why didn't I know about it when it was happening? Dallaire has heard it all before, and yet he's happy to lend a compassionate ear and offer forthright opinions. It's an approach that hasn't always served him well. In the years immediately following his return from Africa, Dallaire's frank criticisms of the international community's failure to intervene, coupled with his testimony at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, made him a pariah in certain government circles (culminating in 2000 with his forced exit from the Canadian army). But Dallaire has persevered, overcoming bouts of suicidal depression and posttraumatic stress disorder to emerge determined that, where matters of genocide are concerned, "never again" won't apply only to Rwanda, but to the world entire.

Directed by Peter Raymont, *Shake Hands With the Devil* is but one of a host of recent fiction and nonfiction films (including this week's HBO premiere *Sometimes in April*) that grapple with Rwanda's troubling legacy. First unveiled at last year's Toronto Film Festival, Raymont's documentary relies on Dallaire's own impassioned words to guide us methodically through the genocide, from its earliest warning signs (in the incendiary hate broadcasts of Radio RTML) to its brutal peak in the spring of 1994. And as he accompanies Dallaire on his 2004 return voyage to the Rwandan capital and his participation in the Days of Remembrance, Raymont frequently allows his camera to rest on excruciatingly unsentimental images of death and destruction — buildings and people that still bear the scars left by machetes, bullets, shrapnel blasts — until we are overcome with the sense of a hallowed place inexorably frozen in time.

*Shake Hands With the Devil* could hardly be more different in its approach than Terry George's Oscar-nominated *Hotel Rwanda*, an unrepentantly Hollywoodized portrait of the approximately 1,200 fortunate Rwandans who found refuge within the walls of Kigali's posh Hotel Des Milles Collines. Of course, that story is also true, and the film deserves credit, at least, for not telling its African story through a white interlocutor, à la Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom*. But in its narrowly focused rush to inspire, *Hotel Rwanda* trivializes its protagonists by turning their plight into a succession of false climaxes and false hopes, a schematic game of will they or won't they make it out alive. In Toronto, where it was possible to see both films virtually back to back, the disparity was particularly telling. Where *Hotel Rwanda* (notwithstanding Don Cheadle's fine, honest performance) offers us a spoonful of sugar to make the genocide go down, *Shake Hands With the Devil* fills our nostrils with the same pungent aroma that still haunts Dallaire.



*Sometimes in April*  
Photo by Roméo Dallaire

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Thanks to *Hotel Rwanda* and the slew of 10th-anniversary commemorations, we may have finally arrived at a moment when the terms "Hutu," "Tutsi" and "interhamwe militia" are understood even by those who get their hard news from *Entertainment Tonight*. But, when the highest-profile film on the subject is also the softest, can it be that we are truly prepared to confront the specter of Rwanda in its full-scale horror? "You've got to fight revisionism," Dallaire cautions. And a small but committed group of filmmakers around the world, including Raymont, are making movies in exactly that spirit — you just may have to look a little harder than usual to find their work. Featured in numerous festivals over the last year, two excellent, hourlong documentaries by French filmmaker Anne Aghion employ a compact style to pull us deep into the social fabric of post-genocide Rwandan village life. In the first, *Gacaca: Living Together Again in Rwanda?*, the question mark in the title hangs over the entire film as Aghion skeptically records the early days of Rwanda's newly formed citizen-based justice tribunals. Set two years later, Aghion's no less riveting *In Rwanda We Say . . . The Family That Does Not Speak Dies* hones in on one convicted prisoner's return to his native village and how it sparks a complex debate on the subject of re-assimilation.

The most apt comparison case for *Hotel Rwanda*, though, is HBO's extraordinary *Sometimes in April*, another big-budget Hollywood-backed fiction feature, this one harrowing and wide-ranging in all the ways that George's film seemed myopic and trite. Written and directed by Raoul Peck (who did an equally fine job at the helm of 2000's politically charged biopic *Lumumba*), it tells the story of two Hutu brothers, one a Radio RTML disc jockey (Oris Erhuero) standing trial for the crimes he incited, the other a former soldier (Idris Elba) trying to uncover the fate of his Tutsi wife and three young children. Lucidly shifting time frames and locations — from 2004 to 1994, from Kigali to Washington — *Sometimes in April* possesses both the fluid texture of a dream and the agonizing inescapability of a nightmare, its simple, shattering power encapsulated by a series of onscreen titles: "Day 1, 8,000 people killed," "Day 3, 3,000 people killed," "Day 77, 716,000 people killed . . ." It is a chronicle of the many who sought shelter from the war but could not find it, who tried to reach the Hotel Des Milles Collines but were diverted and killed along the way. It is also a movie that asks how a country that birthed and bore witness to such terrors can ever manage to rebuild itself.

*Sometimes in April* premieres Saturday, March 19, on HBO, with many repeat broadcasts to follow.

Though it is still seeking a U.S. theatrical distributor, *Shake Hands With the Devil* has just been released on DVD in Canada and can be purchased (for about \$25) through [www.amazon.ca](http://www.amazon.ca).

**Gacaca: Living Together Again in Rwanda? and In Rwanda We Say . . . The Family That Does Not Speak Dies are available for purchase through First Run/Icarus Films at [www.frif.com](http://www.frif.com).**