

HOTEL RWANDA

by Rebecca Czarnecki

Forego the trite holiday movies this season and go see *Hotel Rwanda*, the new film by director Terry George and winner of the 2004 People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival. At a time when Hollywood war films bank their money on impressive explosions and gore, this low-budget, independent film takes a sensitive approach to a brutal subject, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. It renders the audience speechless from start to finish.

In 1994 nearly a million people in Rwanda were brutally slaughtered in a period of just over three months while the international community stood by and watched. Ethnic conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis was re-ignited by the death of the Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, whose plane was shot down by a rocket attack above Kigali airport on 6 April 1994. This occurred while the United Nations was in Rwanda on a peacekeeping mission, hoping to get the two sides to sign a peace accord.

Tensions between the two groups grew out of Rwanda's colonization by Belgium, who considered the Tutsis to be superior. The departure of the Belgians in

1962 resulted in a power struggle between the two ethnic groups that exploded in 1994. The extremist Hutus blamed the death of the president on the rebel Tutsi army and called for the extermination of all moderate Hutus and Tutsis, or, as they referred to them, the “inyenzi”—cockroaches. The Hutus weapon of choice: the machete.

Hotel Rwanda does not recreate the bloodbath. Instead, the filmmakers choose to focus on a real-life hero, Paul Rusesabagina, the fastidious manager of a luxury hotel in Kigali who does everything in his power to provide a safe haven for refugees. When it comes to his appearance, Paul is obsessive-compulsive. As the genocide rages and the situation around him deteriorates, this is the last thing he has control over; it keeps him together. Don Cheadle, perhaps best known for his role in “Ocean’s 11,” portrays Paul as a man who does everything to remain calm, yet the strain is clearly swimming beneath the surface.

The cast includes Nick Nolte and Joaquin Phoenix, who appear in the film as a general and a journalist respectively. Nolte’s character is clearly based on the real life General Dallaire, the commanding UN officer in Rwanda at the time of the genocide. Nolte and Phoenix do an excellent job portraying men who are frustrated and ashamed at their inability to do anything that will bring an end to the violence. The UN withdrew the vast majority of its troops early on in the conflict and failed to return until most of the killing had subsided. The cast powerfully conveys the chaos that Rwanda descended into, without the presence of a strong international force to protect the desperate refugees and quell the brutal callousness of the Hutu leaders.

Violence is captured either at a distance or in gut-wrenching subtlety. For example, Paul forces his driver to stop the van they are in because the mist rising from the river has obscured the road and the ride has become disturbingly bumpy. Paul is convinced that the driver is about to plunge them into the river. As he exits the van, he stumbles on a pile of bodies. As the mist clears, we see the remnants of a massacre and suddenly realize why their ride had gotten so rough. It is a scene that makes your stomach rise into your throat. The violence is not shoved in your face: instead, director Terry George leads the audience into it, eyes wide open, imaginations filling in the blanks, which is quite possibly worse than anything the screen could show.

During the course of the film, *Hotel Rwanda* plows the viewer through a gamut of emotions, turning the horror of Rwanda into something that is accessible. It is a marriage of solid acting and a powerful script that turns familiar images we remember from the TV into people we can relate to. It humanizes the almost unimaginable plight of the people in Rwanda, compelling us to be more compassionate in others’ times of need. This movie comes at an important time, as the international community faces the escalating crisis in Darfur, leaving this reviewer to wonder whether, if the film moves us to tears, will it also move us to act?

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