



# Shooting Dogs



UK, 2005, 116 MINUTES, COLOUR

*John Hurt, Hugh Dancy, Dominique Horwitz, Louis Mahoney, Nicola Walker, Claire- Hope Ashitey. Directed by Michael Caton- Jones.*

An impressive cinema achievement. Also impressive in its portrait of a priest and the Catholic Church.

However, the subject of the film is one of the most shameful episodes in human behaviour in recent times: the genocide in Rwanda, 1994. As the dominant Hutus massacred the Tutsis – 800,000 men, women and children were brutally bashed, hit by machetes or shot from April to July – the United Nations peacekeeping force stood by their mandate of not intervening, to shoot only when shot at and the superpowers discussed the definition and application of ‘genocide’. These events took place at the same time as the wars in the Balkan peninsula where the UN and other nations intervened militarily.

David Belton who co-wrote this story and has produced the film for BBC Films, was in fact a BBC director for Newsnight and was present at the events portrayed in the film. He had also reported from Bosnia and asks the questions about race and racism concerning intervention in the Balkans and non-intervention in Africa. Belton says that this is a film from a western viewpoint for western audiences rather than an inside look at the events and their meaning. This is a major means for those who live far away and do not feel connected with places and tragedies to see and to empathise. This was the principle behind such films as *Cry Freedom*, *City of God* and *Beyond Rangoon*.

*Shooting Dogs* refers to the experience of dogs outside the school grounds where over two thousand Tutsis took refuge and are being sheltered by the resident priest. It is also the designated base for the UN troops. As the dogs scavenge the many brutalised corpses lying out in the streets, the UN chief says they must be shot for hygiene’s sake and to save lives. The priest ironically asks why they can shoot dogs and not the marauding gangs who are butchering innocent people in full view.

The structure of the film is like a diary, 6 days in April 2004 and confined to the school and its surroundings. The opening scenes take us into the daily routine, ordinary things, sports, classes, Mass. Officials turn up to scrutinise the presence of Tutsis. Lists are compiled. When the president is killed by rocket attack, the guns begin to fire and the rampage begins. The president’s UN security guard are executed. No one is safe.

Then the UN troops retreat to the airport taking the Europeans but leaving the Tutsis. While there are many Tutsi characters to empathise with, the screenplay focuses on an idealistic young volunteer teacher (Hugh Dancy) and the shock he experiences and his moral crises in what he can and cannot do. It then centres on the veteran missionary, Fr Christopher, who has spent thirty years in Rwanda. (David Belton says that the priest on whom he based this character was, in fact, from

Bosnia.) Fr Christopher is one of John Hurt's great performances. It is commonsensical, low-key and committed.

The screenplay introduces several spiritual and theological themes: the place of prayer in African life, surface and deep faith, the power of the Eucharist and the issues of God and evil, the meaning of Jesus' passion and death. In answer to a young girl's question about loving one's enemies, Fr Christopher says that God might not like the things we do, those are our choices, but he still loves all of us. The issue of Jesus' loving sacrifice gives meaning

to Fr Christopher's choices, for giving his life to save others.

Last year, *Hotel Rwanda* made a strong impression with its story of the man who gave refuge to Tutsis in Kigali's prestigious hotel. Still to be released in the UK is the powerful *Sometimes in April*, a story more from the inside and broader in scope about the genocide than the other two films. They are all worth seeing and are complementary.

*Shooting Dogs* is a film that Catholics and everyone with a sense of justice should support.

### ***Fr Peter Malone MSC***

*Peter is a former president of SIGNIS - the World Catholic Association for Communication. He's a highly experienced film critic and author who has travelled the world watching, writing on and talking about movies. Since 1968, he's written reviews for a number of Catholic magazines and periodicals. He has also written many books on cinema including *Films and Values*, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, *Cinema Down Under* and the excellent *Lights, Camera, Faith (Movie Lectionary)* series.*