

Hotel Rwanda

This is Don Cheadle's picture, the role of his life so far. He has long been a reliable character actor in films (the recent *Devil in a Blue Dress*, for example) and on TV (doing a credible Sammy Davis, Jr. in "The Rat Pack"), but here, as Paul Rusesabagina, a real hotel manager in Kigali, Rwanda, during that country's 1994 genocide of the Tutsi, he shines as a true hero. The real Rusesabagina turned out to be a kind of African Oskar Schindler, eventually harboring some 1,200 threatened Tutsi (and Hutus) in his four-star Hotel des Mille Collines.

Directed and co-written by Terry George (the British screenwriter who wrote *In the Name of the Father*, *The Boxer*, etc.), the film, shot principally in South Africa, builds as the massacre did, slowly, then explosively, ultimately engulfing the country in a bizarre, random blood-letting. Smoothly above politics, Paul is the ingratiating, "Westernized" professional African who knows how to both gently coddle his European clientele and to neatly bribe the general necessary for his hotel's protection.

After the assassination of the country's Hutu president in April 1994, however, blame is sought and the Tutsi are castigated, especially in fire-breathing radio broadcasts. Paul himself (a Hutu) has married Tatiana, a Tutsi (Sophie Okonedo), and rightly begins to worry about her fate, his neighbors in his middle class enclave, and his staffers at work. One of the running conceits of the movie is that, though Tutsi are supposed to be singled out for revenge by angered Hutus, no one can really tell the tribal groups apart. The tension builds, especially with threats involving Rusesabagina's family, as the hotel manager does everything he can--through adroit use of cash and wit--to protect the world fast shrinking to the size of his hotel.

It would have been easy for Messrs. Cheadle and George to give their character an "actorly" over-the-top scene in *Hotel Rwanda*, but they eschew this. Throughout his ordeal, Cheadle--rarely off the screen--keeps his cool while expanding his humanity. Apparently, the original Paul Rusesabagina was able to help so many of his countrymen survive because he never panicked and always looked for a practical way out for the appalling choices he faced. Don Cheadle captures that restraint while combining it with a fierce alertness. He's not a chilly character--that's evident from the scenes with his family, much emphasized in the movie--but a man whose very human levelheadedness makes him a hero in a feral world. It is a performance that honors the man who saved so many and honors the man who portrays him.

(*"Hotel Rwanda"* is rated "R" for intimations of horrible violence.)

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