

## CULTURE Club



### Before The Devil Knows You're Dead

Available on DVD August 21 – packed with extras including The List; the directorial debut from actor Joel Edgerton.

Starring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ethan Hawke and Marisa Tomei  
Directed By Sidney Lumet

The superb, razor-sharp story of the robbery of a “mom and pop” jewellery store, looking at the events leading up to it and the disastrous consequences from several points of view. Planned by two brothers as a simple, supposedly risk-free and non-violent scheme the heist goes horribly wrong with their father heartbreakingly left to deal with the aftermath.

To win one of 10 copies of Sidney Lumet's *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* DVD Courtesy of Hopscotch Entertainment then tell us in 10 words or less “If you had half an hour to get to heaven before the devil knew you were dead, what would you do?”

To enter this competition SMS A01, your answer, name and address to: 199 11 022. SMS messages cost 55 cents incl GST. Dialect Interactive. This competition starts 16/08/08, 12.01 am [EST] and closes 01/09/08, 12.01am. Entries will be judged on 02/09/08 at 11am at level 4, 2 Holt Street, Surry Hills, 2010. Winners will be announced in *The Weekend Australian* newspaper on 06/09/08.



### Win an evening with Andrea Bocelli

Want to experience the magic of world-renowned tenor, Andrea Bocelli live in concert?

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For your chance to win one of these prize packs tell us in 10 words or less your most memorable entertainment experience.

To enter this competition SMS A02, your answer, name and address to: 199 11 022. SMS messages cost 55 cents incl GST. Dialect Interactive. This competition starts 09/08/08, 12.01 am [EST] and closes 18/08/08, 12.01am. Entries will be judged on 19/08/08 at 11am at level 4, 2 Holt Street, Surry Hills, 2010. Winners will be announced in *The Weekend Australian* newspaper on 23/08/08. We have 4 X double passes to each concert in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Tickets are non-transferable and winners will have to be available on the date of the concert local to their state.

# Dynamo defies predestined life

Rowan Callick meets Zhang Lijia, an energetic dissident optimistic about China's future

**Z**HANG Lijia has written a book called *Socialism is Great! A Worker's Memoir of the New China*, though she doesn't think it is, of course. She is the epitome of the driven individual who defies her background and, against many odds, reinvents herself astonishingly. The word routinely used for such people's autobiographical works is inspiring. In this case, it's more like fun.

Zhang began work at 16, testing pressure gauges in a missile factory in Nanjing, where she grew up. Today, aged 43, she is a ubiquitous, insatiably curious journalist, writing and broadcasting for the West's weightiest media from Beijing. Every press conference, every maybe-interesting talk, every party, it seems, she's there. And she writes in short sentences, eager to move the reader on to the next event or emotion.

It would seem odd for such a life force to have produced yet another tome in the important, brave, but also sometimes debilitating books of Chinese “scar literature” that have sold so well in the West in recent years, starting with Jung Chan's wonderful *Wild Swans*.

While the world of *Socialism is Great!* is harsh, however, Zhang's tone is different. “It's about chasing your dreams,” she says. “It's about the start of the *kai fang* (opening up) era in the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution, when China was starting to respond to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms.”

Plus, there's more sex. “I finished my story and waited for Jiang to speak,” she writes in the book. “With a scratch a match flared to life. In a fleeting moment, I saw his frown as he dragged on yet another cigarette. ‘If you want me, I don't care whether you are a virgin or not.’”

Another distinction from most other Chinese books is that Zhang wrote it in English. She learned written English by reading classic English literature and has not stopped.

And she has a real ear for her second language, again aided by the next English resource she relied on, the radio; she became

“obsessed with listening to the BBC,” she says.

Again, she writes in the book: “My ‘Dear John’ letter to him was more or less a copy of Jane's confession to Mr Rochester. I wished I was more beautiful, I said, better educated, and of better social standing. But my spirit was equal to his, and I wanted to be treated as an equal. If I wasn't as important to him as he to me, I just had to give him up.”

It's intriguing that a self-taught woman who left school at 16 may cause some readers in Australia to Google the English literary references that come naturally to her.

“People tend to write memoirs when they reach old age,” Zhang says. “But if you have a compelling story, anyone can write one at any age.”

For some reason, while her friends were

## As she grew older, she ‘found it more fun to misbehave’

workers' children who held out no higher expectations for themselves, she dreamed from very young of being a journalist or writer. She imagined going to university but instead, with unemployment sweeping the old state-owned enterprises following the Deng reforms, her mother retired early, aged 43, to pass on her reliable job to Zhang.

“So aged 16, I grabbed her toolbox. She had made a great sacrifice for me,” Zhang says. It was to be 10 years before she moved on. “My mother wanted me to be grateful, but it was difficult. I felt miserable.”

The family lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment, and Zhang shared her bed with her grandmother and younger brother. They ate sparingly. “I had a craving for meat,” she says. In the summer, she and her brother would shin up trees, catch cicadas, roast them over a fire and

eat them mashed. Their world was contained by the factory, surrounded by its high-security walls. As was still typical then, their home, clinic and dining hall were all provided by the government-owned firm, whose job it also was to indoctrinate its workers and their families, to keep them loyal to the party-state. *Socialism is Great!* was the title of a song that became popular after being entered for a music contest at that time.

Zhang received no promotion in her decade at the factory, mainly, she believes, because “my boss thought I permed my hair”, which she says is naturally curly, “and only a bourgeois did that”. She had to queue monthly to show she was not pregnant and was then handed the next month's supply of sanitary towels. Families were very strictly planned.

She started to read English literature as an escape. “I was fascinated by this language system so different from ours. I began listening to English songs and of course singing them, especially as I cycled.” The Carpenters' oeuvre was the first she can recall hearing. “That represented Western high culture for us.”

She hung around at Nanjing's “English corner” — every city in China seemed to have one by then — where young Chinese went in the hope of meeting a native English speaker with whom to practise.

“Some of my colleagues laughed at me, calling me ‘a toad who wants to eat swan's meat,’” she says. The phrase refers to someone with ambitions way too high. “‘You're a factory worker,’ they'd say, ‘why learn English?’ But I just didn't care. The idea of individualism took root in me.”

It was still a shocking idea then, one that appeared to friends and family to contain the seeds of betrayal and rejection.

“Chinese people have a strong tendency towards conformity.” There are many traditional sayings about this, she says, such as “the bird who flies first gets shot” and “the big tree catches the wind”.

# Aid world's foot soldiers share

Tim Johnston

## An Imperfect Offering: Dispatches from the Medical Frontline

By James Orbinski  
Text Publishing, 431pp, \$34.95

## Rebel Without Borders: Frontline Missions in Africa and the Gulf

By Marc Vachon  
ECW Press, 274pp, \$49.95

it is a lot less violent and upsetting than the reality it describes.

Ultimately, however, Orbinski is less concerned with the perpetrators of these horrors than how the international community — politicians, soldiers and, most particularly, aid organisations — should react.

Modern humanitarian aid started with the establishment of the Red Cross in 1863 and for more than a century it largely had the field to itself. Its members worked, and still work, in war zones everywhere, treating the wounded without distinction and keeping to themselves their

opinions of those causing the wounds. The rationale was that by speaking out they would inevitably anger one side or another and their access to those who most needed help would then be limited.

For people such as Bernard Kouchner, a young Red Cross doctor working in Biafra in the late 1960s, this was not good enough. He believed he had a duty to speak out and, by doing so, to mobilise public opinion against the perpetrators of violence. Kouchner quit the Red Cross and went on to found MSF. Although Orbinski appears to have irreconcilable differences with Kouchner, he is in some ways his philosophical heir. With the ugly conflation of arms and aid that started in Somalia and is growing in Afghanistan, however, Kouchner's heirs are facing a new question: should they become more politically engaged and try to push governments back out of the humanitarian sphere, or should they retreat to a more Red Cross-like position and hope to remain untainted by association with national interests?

Orbinski believes it is possible to speak out and remain politically neutral but, time and again, he recounts how MSF's vocal criticism angered the factions and made it more difficult to assist those

**T**HE world of international humanitarian assistance has reached the second great crossroads of its modern history, and James Orbinski and Marc Vachon are pointing in very different directions.

Both have worked at the front lines — literally and figuratively — of the international aid effort. Both came through the baptism of fire that was the Rwandan genocide: the nadir of modern geopolitics and an event that not only killed a million people and tore apart the lives of countless others, but also all but destroyed the lives of hundreds of aid workers and journalists who strayed too close to the fire. The unquenchable anger that was sparked by Rwanda and continues to burn inside these authors gives these books an authority that is difficult to criticise from the comfort of our normal lives.

Orbinski is a former president of *Medecins sans Frontieres* (Doctors without Borders), an organisation at the cutting edge of the debate on the ethics and practice of modern aid intervention. He says his book is a personal narrative of a political journey, and his elegant prose walks readers through the unspeakable horrors of Somalia, Rwanda, Afghanistan and the Congo. At times it is violent and upsetting, but even as it repulses, one cannot help remembering that