



Collard, Cyril (1957-1993)

by Teresa Theophano

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French writer, filmmaker, and actor Cyril Collard was among the first artists in France to announce publicly his HIV-positive status. Along with writers Vincent Borel and Guillaume Dustan, he became a key figure in the struggle to revise attitudes toward AIDS in art. Principally known for his highly controversial autobiographical novel and subsequent film *Les Nuits fauves* (*Savage Nights*), Collard also garnered a great deal of critical acclaim in France and England for his unapologetic portrayals of both bisexuality and HIV.

Collard came from a liberal, bourgeois family and received a Catholic education in Versailles. Aside from his decision to drop out of the University of Lille, where he had been pursuing a science degree, his youth was lived relatively predictably.

He traveled extensively with his father, and it was a father-son trip to Puerto Rico for the Pan American games in 1979 that truly awakened Collard's artistic potential as well as his burgeoning sexuality. Collard stayed on to write in Puerto Rico after his father's departure, and there he began to realize fully his bisexuality--a theme he would address in most of his later works.

Upon his return to Paris, Collard began work in the film world. Claude Davy, who served as mentor to Collard, introduced him to directors Maurice Pialat and René Allio, and Collard acted as assistant director and actor in *À nos amours*, a 1983 film by Pialat. From there, Collard went on to direct his first short film, an exploration of violence, race, and passions called *Alger la blanche*. Also a musician, Collard created the score for his television film called *Taggers* in 1986, a work that explored the world of young graffiti artists.

Condamné amour, the first of Collard's two autobiographical novels, appeared in 1987. Reflecting his knowledge of his HIV-positive status, the novel explores a young man's physical and spiritual crisis when confronted with an unnamed "divine virus."

Two years later Collard published *Les Nuits fauves*. (The English translation, *Savage Nights*, was published in 1994.) The main themes of *Les Nuits fauves* are bisexuality and the search for meaning in contemporary life in the shadow of AIDS. Because of its unsentimental--even defiant--portrayal of sexuality and AIDS, it has been immensely influential on French representations of the disease.

Collard himself wrote and starred in the film based on *Les Nuits fauves*. In the movie, Collard played the lead role of Jean, a self-absorbed 30-year-old filmmaker. Jean, whose male-oriented sexuality shifts when he meets Laura, a 17-year-old actress, is HIV-positive but refuses to change his risky habits. He becomes involved with Laura--neglecting to mention his illness despite having unprotected sex with her--while sleeping with a boy named Samy throughout the relationship.

The film demonstrates a remarkable honesty and grit in its lack of sentimentality towards the less-than-heroic character of Jean, as well as towards AIDS itself. The controversy sparked by the book and film was only magnified by the fact that the woman on whom Laura was based contracted HIV herself, and later died of AIDS-related illnesses.

Savage Nights was, alas, not only Collard's first full-length film, but also his last. It won four Césars--the prestigious French equivalent of the Oscars--including Best Film, Best First Film, Best Editing, and Best Female Newcomer (for Romane Bohringer as Laura) of 1992. The awards were announced a mere 72 hours after Collard's death at age 35 of HIV-related complications on March 5, 1993.

The following year, Flammarion published a collection of Collard's poems, called *L'animal*.

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