

POINT OF VIEW

Epidemic Amnesia: AIDS Is Curiously Forgotten in Denys Arcand's *Les Invasions barbares*

By Matthew Hays



Right: Yves Jacques (Claude)

It's impossible not to be happy for Denys Arcand. After two less-than-stellar features (*Love and Human Remains* and *Stardom*), *Les Invasions barbares* has proven a massive international hit, the biggest cinematic success story to emanate from Canada in years. An Oscar, César and Genie winner, snapping up two major awards at Cannes 2003, and the opener at the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival, the sequel to his immensely successful Oscar-nominated 1986 feature *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* now serves as the unofficial anchor for a banner year for Quebec cinema. The film is

perfectly symbolic of a new, bold, successful Quebec—reflective while never insular; specific but universal; all the things that make for a fantastic regional cinema.

Despite its undeniable success, however, I couldn't help but be taken aback as I sat through *Les Invasions barbares*. For those (few) who haven't yet seen it, the film reunites the main cast members from the original film. Rémy Girard reprises his role, though here he has tragically been struck by cancer, and we witness his demise as friends and family gather to say farewell. Full of Big Ideas, the film is a careful reflection on mortality and reunion, with a group clearly meant to represent Quebec's crucial boomer generation. Although the film is more than competently directed and worthy of much of the praise it's receiving, something didn't sit right with me as I watched it. A central element in the original, you'll recall, is that the gay character (Claude, played by Yves Jacques), is suffering from a very, very nasty bout of an unnamed, fatal disease—clearly HIV/AIDS (something Arcand confirmed in an interview I conducted with him in 1993). As Claude explains to another character toward the end of the film, he is getting night sweats and is often tired. The visuals of his illness are fleshed out rather direly—he pisses bright-red blood into a toilet bowl in one scene.

Then there's Claude in the sequel, seemingly healthy, in the midst of gay-marital bliss. This appearance requires the kind of suspension of belief usually reserved for the *Terminator* or *Matrix* sequels; if Claude is really sick with HIV in 1986, that's a full decade before the epidemic-altering protease inhibitor cocktails were readily available. Applying the basic tenets of what one might vaguely regard as realism, there's virtually no way this character could possibly still be alive 17 years later.

It may sound odd, a gay critic complaining that a gay movie character is allowed to live, rather than die—especially when one considers that the central complaint of gay cinema historians has been that gays and lesbians have been snuffed out in disproportionate numbers on the big screen. In his landmark book *The Celluloid Closet*, late author Vito Russo punctuated his tome with a "Necrology," a carefully documented reference to all of the movies in which gay and lesbian characters were mutilated, skewered, chopped up or hanged by final credit roll. But when you ponder it, the exclusion of HIV/AIDS in *Les Invasions barbares* is both strikingly odd and very significant. Arcand used HIV/AIDS pretty heavy-handedly in the first film. Its presence was a sure sign that, indeed, the American empire was declining,

Cast of Denys Arcand's
Les Invasions barbares



and fast. All that slutting about by boomers had ramifications after all.

So the lack of even a mention of AIDS or HIV in the sequel seems bizarre. *Les Invasions barbares*, of course, is a film about mortality in general, with specific references to a collapsing health-care system. What better place to make further allusions to AIDS, an epidemic that created a massive medical crisis for minority communities in the West and has effectively crippled much of the developing world? Arcand's sidestepping of the issue appears even more glaring when one takes this into consideration, not to mention his pre-filmmaking career as a historian.

This isn't to suggest, for a second, that Arcand is a homophobe. Clearly, quite the opposite is true. I've interviewed the man, and he is a highly intelligent, compassionate artist who's collaborated with famous gay artists such as Robert Lepage (who's acted in Arcand's films) and Brad Fraser (whose play *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* Arcand brought to the big screen). And he deserves praise for including a gay character amid his ensemble players. Gays and lesbians were notably absent from two other "boomer retreat" sub-genre films, John Sayles's *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980) and Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* (1983); a glaring absence, considering the massive influence the gay liberation movement had on this generation.

This isn't a charge of homophobia but rather a lament for a lost opportunity. Imagine the possibilities this sequel presented in terms of the subject of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps as

protagonist Rémy looked back on his life and pondered his own demise, some flashbacks could have shown us what Claude suffered at the hands of an equally clueless, hemorrhaging hospital system. (For many of us who had friends die of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, it certainly isn't hard to recall the anguish of witnessing this very scene.)

Okay, so I'm no screenwriter, but I am a disappointed moviegoer. And my disappointment has been heightened by Arcand's rather weak response when asked about the lack of any mention of HIV or AIDS in the sequel. The gay character, he insists, was never meant to have AIDS. It was merely something many audiences simply assumed. Come again? A gay character on the big screen in a 1986 movie who complains of weight loss and night sweats, in the middle of a film about the decline of Western civilization (it's even in the title!), and we're supposed to assume it's not AIDS? What was it supposed to be? A nagging cold? Arcand's no fool, but it's extremely hard to take the man at his word on this point.

Arcand deserves praise for *Les Invasions barbares*, easily one of the best films of the past year. But I would argue the film also is yet another case of severe media amnesia surrounding the subject of HIV/AIDS, a disturbing phenomenon considering the epidemic's ongoing profound effect on the human race. In this respect, *Les Invasions barbares* stands as a sad failure.

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