The French Connection

Didier Lestrade cofounded ACT UP Paris. His life and work trace the arcs of AIDS and gay activism in France, much as those of Larry Kramer do in the United States. Just when Lestrade worried that his legacy might be fading, he was immortalized—in a roman Ã clef by a writer almost half his age. But his true history, he feels, remains unwritten.

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My father was a farmer in Algeria, and I grew up in the dirt, with mice and cows and everything you want in between," says Didier Lestrade, the father of French AIDS activism, as he navigates his red Dacia pickup truck through the winding country roads of Alençon, France, in Normandy. His truck arrives at the simple stone farmhouse he decamped to in 2002 after more than 20 years of gay journalism and AIDS activism in sophisticated, jaded Paris. "This is really what I am," he says in his charming French accent, "a country boy. I like to get my hands dirty in my garden."

And it's true, he looks like a country boy—*un mec de la campagne*—in his simple navy zip-up jersey and twill khakis, commenting appreciatively on the rough-hewn beauty of the road workmen he passes on the way home. He's 53 and has been HIV positive since at least 1986, when he received his diagnosis. His prominent nose, horn-rimmed glasses, beard and balding head echo those of the HIV-positive American author/activist to whom he is often compared. "I'm supposed to be the little Larry Kramer of France," he says proudly. Their lives mirror each other's in many ways, and Lestrade has always modeled his life after gay American culture, whether in his love of soul-based house music (of which he is considered France's leading expert) or his respect for in-your-face street-theater activism.

Kramer cofounded the original ACT UP in New York City in 1987, creating a group that radically improved AIDS treatment and policy in the United States; Lestrade did the same thing in Paris in 1989. Kramer's uncompromising, furious demands and fiery, moralistically driven temper eventually alienated him from the group he cofounded; the same with Lestrade. Kramer, a respected published author, continues to inflame his targets with his public writing; ditto for Lestrade.

Kramer, too, is comfortable with the comparison. "I've spent enough time with Didier to know our hearts are in the same place," he says. "We want equality for gay people, and we want gay men to be responsible about their lives and their bodies and their health." If you can trace the arc of U.S. AIDS activism among gay men by looking at Kramer—from red-hot emergency mode in the '80s and early '90s

to a more relaxed presence as the fruits of the rage paid off in the post-protease era—you can do the same on the French side with Lestrade.

And just as Kramer, now 75, has largely left the New York City spotlight for the Connecticut countryside to complete an epic novel, Lestrade has, for the past near-decade, enjoyed a lower profile in the stone house he rents from his sister. Yes, he still regularly airs his views, on the French-language website minorites.org, on topics close to his heart, such as the European overlap of homophobia and Islamophobia as well as the ongoing HIV transmission among young gay men—a 2010 study found HIV infection rates in France down among all groups except gay men, who had 200 times the rate of their straight counterparts. But his public profile has shrunk dramatically compared with a decade ago, when he, a staunch condom advocate since the earliest days of AIDS, was locked in a venomous, high-profile battle with the gay author and barebacking apologist Guillaume Dustan, who died of a (perhaps suicidal) drug overdose in 2005.

“There was a time when Didier could snap his fingers and have 500 people protesting in front of the health ministry building,” says Hélène Hazera, a longtime HIV-positive French transgender activist and journalist who was in ACT UP Paris with Lestrade. “Now he lives in the country, he’s got his young [journalist] lover who visits him from Paris, he gardens. He’s got some serenity now.” Lestrade, who wrote an entire *Walden*-inspired book, *Cheikh*, about leaving city pleasures behind for rural self-sufficiency, agrees. “I don’t sashay my way through the supermarket out here,” he says, “but I’ve never had a mean word or look. The Normandy people, they are so nice. In eight years I’ve had only two fights. When I go to Paris, I have a fight 10 minutes after arriving.”

He was enjoying the bucolic life until mid-2008, when an editor at *Têtu*, the French gay magazine (it means “stubborn”) Lestrade cofounded in 1995, called Lestrade with a heads-up that his highly contentious life was being thrust back into the media spotlight: A twentysomething, heterosexual philosophy professor named Tristan Garcia would soon publish a novel, *La Meilleure Part des Hommes* (recently released in English as *Hate: A Romance*), with a thinly veiled, only partly fictionalized account of the bitter battle over barebacking between Lestrade and Dustan. One of the fictional liberties? The novel, which caused a sensation and won France’s prestigious Prix de Flore in 2008, turned the Lestrade character into the Dustan character’s early lover—the lover who gave Dustan HIV.

“I felt used,” Lestrade says. “I do all this battle on prevention, being the moral bitch, gay people hating my guts, and then I get punished. I’m the sucker of the whole story.”

Worse yet, as Lestrade sees it, he gets punished twice: “Then both Dustan [before he died] and Garcia win literary prizes and get published in America. Not me! I’m the one who was supposed to be in Warhol’s *Interview* magazine!”

That hurts. Lestrade has never lived in America, but he is obsessed with it, particularly with American gay and activist culture. He calls Lou Reed and the 1980s porn star Rick Wolfmier his idols. “Wolfmier was the driving force behind the idea that you could be gay and beautiful and most of all a decent, nice, gentle man,” Lestrade says. Chasing that idea—and American gay culture—has been the through-line of his life.

As a teenager, growing up the youngest of four brothers (three of whom are gay) in Algeria and then southern France in the pre-AIDS 1970s, Lestrade would hitch the night train to Paris and either buy or steal an armful of American *Playgirl* and *Interview* magazines. “That’s how I learned English,” he says, tossing a lunch salad at the farmer’s table in his stonewalled kitchen. “That American, clone-y,

masculine, hairy-chested guy who liked taking his clothes off outdoors—I loved that but couldn't find it in Paris," he says.

So, when he followed his singer brother, Jean-Pierre "Lala" Lestrade, to Paris at the dawn of the '80s, he decided to re-create that look, French-style—in the form of a magazine called simply *Magazine*, which he published once a year between 1980 and 1986. Gorgeously produced on a shoestring budget Lestrade cobbled together by working as a hotel bellhop and living like a pauper in a squat, *Magazine* combined spicy interviews of titans of 1980s gay life—David Hockney, Edmund White, Bronski Beat's Jimmy Somerville—with starkly beautiful, black-and-white, male, erotic photography by then-unknown, now-iconic photographers including Walter Pfeiffer and Pierre et Gilles. "*Magazine* captured the time so well," says Gert Jonkers, the founder of Butt, a contemporary indie gay mag that's just one of many art and fashion zines influenced by *Magazine*. "The photography was so good, and the interviews were proof of the joy of meeting people and having a fun conversation with them." The club Le Palace was the Studio 54 of 1980s Paris, where everyone gay, fabulous and fashion-obsessed gathered—and *Magazine* and Lestrade were that world's underground darlings.

But something else was also coming up from the underground in early '80s Paris, just a few years after it emerged in New York and Los Angeles in 1981: a dreaded new disease affecting gay men and drug users. "I remember meeting Didier in the street," says Hazera (before she herself was diagnosed with HIV in 1999), "and he said to me, 'We're all dying.' I was speechless. In all, I lost about 20 friends, but Didier lost 200." Lestrade learned he was positive in 1986. "At that time, you knew you had two years in front of you," says Lala, who now lives in Switzerland, making and curating art with BillyBoy, his lover of 28 years. "Didier was extremely violent, very angry about the way the sickness was perceived."

No wonder America-phile Lestrade was already observing how a bunch of activists across the pond—Kramer, Mark Harrington and legions more—had taken to the streets in the shrewd, mediagenic guise of ACT UP and were forcing the crisis of AIDS research and treatment onto front pages, nightly newscasts and the halls of power in Washington, DC. Having given up *Magazine* in 1987 and become a pioneering dance-music critic for the venerable French leftist newspaper *Libération*, Lestrade now turned around and, with others, founded ACT UP Paris in 1989. He immersed himself in treatment data, becoming a crucial information link between politicians, scientists and people with HIV/AIDS. "You had this superficial fashion gay who suddenly became the one in Paris that knew the most about AIDS," Hazera says. "It's a lesson about how people can become heroes." Lestrade offers a more pragmatic recollection, saying, "I was trying to live up to the example of ACT UP NY, TAG [Treatment Action Group], the activism."

With their universal health care, France and Western Europe as a whole already had the edge on the United States in treatment and care. But in the 1990s, ACT UP Paris—and smaller, brainier, more research-focused groups Lestrade would later cofound, such as TRT-5—played a crucial role in seeing that French people with HIV/AIDS got the earliest and best access possible to new therapies, especially once protease inhibitors revolutionized HIV treatment in 1996 and AIDS deaths began declining. ACT UP Paris garnered massive media attention with its clever, visually beguiling demonstrations in front of famous Paris landmarks. In 1993, to the amorous city's delight, ACT UP put a massive pink condom over the 75-foot-tall Luxor Obelisk at the Place de la Concorde. "I remember visiting Didier and other ACT UP Paris activists in the mid-'90s," says longtime HIV-positive U.S. treatment activist Gregg Gonsalves, "and I remember this fondness and affinity of being with people trying to do similar things and find a way out of the darkness."

By the late ’90s in France, as in the United States, “condom fatigue” had set in among many gay men, and the “edgy” new vogue of “barebacking”—having sex without condoms—had found its perfect French bad-boy poster child in the form of Guillaume Dustan, a writer in his early 30s who penned “transgressive” gay novels and became a media sensation by going on French talk shows wearing a wig and saying it was OK to bareback, that personal sexual freedom trumped gay community responsibility. “Didier was wild, wild, wild with anger,” Hazera says. “Imagine seeing so many friends die and then there’s a writer on TV saying it’s OK to contaminate other people.” (French for “to infect” is *contaminer*, or “to contaminate.”) Lestrade urged his ACT UP peers to condemn Dustan’s views publicly, which the group did—but not strongly, or personally, enough for Lestrade, who ended up battling it out, with icy dagger eyes, in toxic duals with Dustan on French talk shows, much to the media’s glee. Lestrade convinced some ACT UP *confrères* to break away with him and start a new group to do more aggressive HIV-prevention for gay men, but, according to Hazera, even they decamped to Dustan’s side of the debate. “It was like a betrayal for him,” Lala says. “ACT UP was his baby.”

By Y2K, newer, younger people were joining ACT UP. The group’s focus, like the epidemic itself, was expanding beyond gay men to include other risk groups, such as France’s new wave of African and Arab immigrants and transgender people, plus the crisis of global AIDS. “As gay people,” Lestrade says, “we need to stop focusing on the gay thing and try to help other minorities, because we are now the rich, the privileged.”

He didn’t stay around for that, though: In 2002, Lestrade further marginalized himself from ACT UP by leaving Paris, where the organization has long had spacious, albeit gritty, offices just east of the city center. He formally broke with the group in 2004, when he publicly denounced them for trashing drugmaker Gilead’s promotional booth at the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, which they did to protest trials of the company’s drug tenofovir (sold stateside as Viread) for HIV prevention in high-risk groups around the world. “[ACT UP Paris members] were telling Thai [people] they would die if they were taking Viread in the trial,” Lestrade claims, “and I went bonkers because we knew that was a lie.” (In fact, ACT UP Paris protested the trial—which took place among sex workers in Cambodia—because trial organizers wouldn’t provide lifetime HIV treatment to any participants who acquired HIV. Trials that continued elsewhere, including in the United States, made headlines last year, saying tenofovir appeared to reduce the risk of contracting HIV.)

Lestrade denounced ACT UP again a few years later when the group played a large role in shutting down HIV-related drug trials at some sites around the world, once again calling the trials unethical in their treatment of poor people from poor countries. In doing so, Lestrade aligned himself with mainstream American and South African activists such as Harrington, Gonsalves and Nathan Geffen over his own French ACT UP colleagues, whom he felt were interested in opposing postcolonialism rather than acting in service to data and research that could help reverse AIDS.

“ACT UP Paris is dead,” Lestrade says today, full of contempt. “Boring. They should close shop.” It seems the current group feels the same toward him. At the ACT UP office, three members, all in their 20s and hence children when Lestrade started the group, recently expressed frustration that the group is still so widely associated with Lestrade. In a separate conversation, Emmanuel Chateau, an HIV-positive member who was an ACT UP Paris newbie when Lestrade was drifting away, says that Lestrade “wasn’t up on the facts [about the disputed drug trials]. He minimized the ethical problems.” On the other side, longtime American treatment activist Harrington acknowledges that the trials raised ethical questions, but says they needed to be amended, not ended. “In other places, the trials were improved, not shut down,” he says, “and they led to breakthrough results last year.”

With all that flap in the past, Lestrade's life had grown more serene. Then came Garcia's novel. To an American eye, it's a curious book, driven more by abstract French political ideas of left and right than by credible human characters and emotions. It's also a curiously cool, dispassionate book, with no real hero amid the mutual desire of the Lestrade and Dustan proxies to destroy each other's reputations. "I wanted to understand this era in France, the '80s, which was like the Reagan era in the U.S. or Thatcher in the U.K.," Garcia says. "It was the end of the idealism of the left, and only gays and ACT UP were doing something exciting and different." Garcia insists that in real life, he sides with Lestrade against barebacking, but he didn't want the novel to take a side or be simplistic. Ask him why he has the Lestrade character infect the Dustan character in an early love affair, and he's careful to say that the characters are not really based on the two men—they are fictions with some elements borrowed from real life.

Lestrade says he's angry that Garcia gave him no warning, writing to him only after the book was out—and Lestrade's and Dustan's names were back in the media—to acknowledge some real-life similarities but insist the characters were not carbon copies. He's angry that Garcia gave his character an upper-class background and Dustan's a working-class one, whereas in reality, it was the reverse. But mostly he seems angry that both Garcia and the late Dustan have received attention in America, while he has not. "People don't KNOW ME IN AMERICA," he complains with caps in an e-mail. "All I did in my life was for America. I was trying to live up to ACT UP New York, then some kid takes the credit and no one knows who you are." (Despite this, Lestrade and Garcia both say they are cordial e-mail and Facebook friends.)

Lestrade desperately wants an English or American publisher to translate his books, which include a history of ACT UP, a memoir of 1980s Paris called *Kinsey 6* and a rant against barebacking called *The End*. He has another book coming out this summer that he is loath to discuss because, he says, it is going to be "a real troublemaker, real controversial" among French gays and left-wingers. And he continues to shout, on minorites.org, about topics including fiscal mismanagement and what he considers too-high salaries at AIDES, France's biggest AIDS organizations. He says he intends to write in English on the website but hasn't yet, adding to his difficulty in getting noticed in the United States. He also continues to rage against unsafe sex, pointing to the rise of sexually transmitted hepatitis C among gay men throughout Europe. "Everybody's fisting," he says, dripping with sarcasm. "These 22-year-old kids, they take it up to the elbow and smile." (This is the very sort of talk from Lestrade that ACT UP-er Chateau said he found exaggerated, moralistic and counterproductive in encouraging safe sex.)

Only when prodded will Lestrade admit that, like Kramer, whatever he does next, he's pleased to have cemented his reputation as an AIDS pioneer—as someone who screamed for action in a dark era and made it happen, as someone who's never been afraid to identify what he felt was the ugly truth about bad behavior even if it lost him friends and standing. "I'm dead proud," he says, half-convincingly. "But I'm the little sod at the end of the line." Others beg to differ. "He's the father of French treatment activism," Gonsalves says. "I hope he likes being called a daddy."

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