Tom Villard’s Fall Season

How a Hollywood actor confronts AIDS

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If Hollywood had something even more prestigious than an Oscar or better than an Emmy, if it had an award for courage, I’d nominate working actor Tom Villard.

Villard is an actor of some renown. You’d recognize him. He had his own show, *We Got It Made*, and he’s been in movies, including *Heartbreak Ridge* with Clint Eastwood and *My Girl* with Dan Akroyd and Jamie Lee Curtis. Believe me, you’d *definitely* recognize him.

And then fate dealt him a most unkind blow, with the onset of AIDS and KS, including a lesion at the end of his nose. In the most superficial of cities, in an industry that celebrates style over substance, in a place where plastic surgery is required, Villard, rather than stowing away, changing his name and living out the rest of his years anonymously, took his struggle to the tube.

In February he went on *Entertainment Tonight* and told more than 13 million viewers that he was gay, that he had AIDS and that he needed some help. “I felt like I could do something by saying that I am not a feces-eating-pederast-sex-crazed somebody who has invoked God’s wrath. It turned everything upside down on its ear,” he says. “An awful lot of people suddenly wouldn’t let me in the door for auditions.” But on the flip side, Villard attests, Hollywood does have a heart. He got to be an alien on the *Star Trek* spinoff *Deep Space 9*. Then the producers of *Sisters* called and invited him to join the looping group where the voices for the show’s flashback scenes are done. Then the hit series *Frasier*’s producers phones and invited him aboard as a caller on the psychiatrist’s radio show. More offers, more work.

Working steadily is an actor’s dream, especially for one whose health is compromised. His outlook is sunny in spite of all he’s been through. He says the catheter in his chest is “easier than getting stuck in the arm all the time, although it’s odd to have a garden hose in your chest.” His experiment with steroids had a slightly different result. “I had the largest penis in the world and it didn’t work for six months. It was like a giant useless meatloaf between my legs. For those people who use steroids and still have a functioning sex life, more power to them. That’s a part of me I really like and I missed it a lot.”

A new treatment that made him gain 45 pounds is a hoot. “It’s the first time in my life that I’m fat. I was a bone in college. I starved myself to get out of the draft. Now I have this big tummy and big

butt and I walk around the house singing the Perry Mason theme and kind of waddling. It's very exciting. It's a good time in my health progression."

Villard strikes me as someone truly grounded with a lot of hope and love to share, far from the flaky actor I had imagined. He's come to this place gradually. He's had the acting bug since his first play in high school. "Up until that moment, I was 100 percent cooty, bad skin and a book-bag. And I had all the homo-identity stuff that makes you feel like you don't belong on this planet." One starring role later, "I found something I could do. It was thrilling. Everyone wanted to know who I was. I wasn't a cooty anymore and people were taking me out in the sand pits to smoke pot with them. My whole high school career turned around. I felt this was what I was supposed to do, and I never strayed from that until the last couple of months." And that's when the calling became AIDS. "I started speaking a couple of months ago about living with AIDS and having hope. It feels a little more useful than things in the past."

Those who know him well aren't surprised at his courage and willingness to go public with AIDS. "I am particularly proud of him," says Villard's manager, Bill Melamed. "The reality is, acting is a lousy business. There wasn't a choice here whether he could have hidden it. Plenty of people have KS, but it's on their feet. He made a decision that was courageous in any walk of life, but it doesn't surprise me. He has one of the most open spirits." (Melamed, who also manages *Seinfeld* star Julia Louis-Dreyfus, is part of an informed group of entertainment industry professionals working to destigmatize AIDS and provide continued career opportunities to those with the disease.)

Villard also counts on his friends, including the man he refers to as his "genius whiz kid husband," Scott Chambliss, a Los Angeles-based production designer on movies. "I asked him at the beginning, 'Are you sure you want to get into this because I have this to deal with and you don't?' He's always been right there. He's a wise old soul and I have a swarm of angels at any given time."

Right now, Villard is settled in with the KS. "It used to just mortify me. I was so self-conscious about it. It had so much power over me. Now I don't even see it. I am at a point in my life where, if it doesn't hurt, I don't care about it." He can't waste any more energy because Villard has more noble causes to fight for: He's on a mission to eliminate homophobia and fear of AIDS.

Why isn't there at least an Emmy award for courage?

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