



Left: Guillaume and Gérard Depardieu during a French film festival in California in 1993

Total eclipse of the SON

He was the enfant terrible of French cinema. A tormented soul who inherited his famous father's talent — along with his demons. It was a fatal combination that would send Guillaume Depardieu to an early grave. By David James Smith

The story you are about to read is a tragedy of French cinema, a meditation on life, death and amputation, the love and hate between a father and son, and a young man of Paris who lived hard and fast and all too briefly.

"We are born to die," the actress said to the young man, reciting the lines of the film they were making in the days before his death. But as she said the lines, a great sadness welled up inside her and she began crying — real, unscripted tears — and when she looked at the young man she saw that he was crying too.

The young man truly believed that his premature death had been foretold at the moment of his birth, and he had lived most of his 37 years in anticipation of that fate. By this point he did not have long to go...

No father, surely, or none but a cursed few, ever imagines they will still be around for ►►►

their own child's funeral, but perhaps Gérard Depardieu, more than most who have faced that unenviable appointment, had some inkling that he might outlive his actor son. Despite the great chasm that had opened up between them, Gérard cannot have missed the unhappiness that enveloped Guillaume, nor his son's struggle.

On the set of the film, Guillaume complained that he had not heard from his father in a while and didn't really speak to him any more. He would send Gérard texts from his mobile, he said, to keep in touch. But his texts had not been answered. It was the same with his actress sister, Julie. He sent her texts, but she did not reply. Those unanswered texts awakened unhappy childhood memories of the years, from the age of four onwards, when his father was away being famous and his mother was also busy working, and Guillaume would be at home with his sister, who kept herself locked away in her bedroom.

Guillaume seemed especially raw that morning in early October, a few weeks ago, as he paraded his soul in front of the two women journalists who were visiting the set of the film. A press visit to a film in production is ordinarily a routine, if not dull, affair in which the unwelcome guest gets to stand around for long

'The amputation was always with him. It's hard to wake every morning with just one leg. He'd go on about the little things he couldn't do'

hours during takes, drinking weak coffee, and, then, when a break in filming occurs, is treated to hurried interviews that elicit bland platitudes — "We're a little community here", "Everyone's working very hard", "It's a fascinating story" — from the film's leading actors.

Alexandra and Flori, the two Romanian journalists, must have expected more of the same when they answered the invitation to attend Castel Film Studios — the place where Cold Mountain and Borat had been made — on the outskirts of Bucharest on October 2, 2008. Instead they got the unvarnished, possibly unhinged Guillaume Depardieu in what would be the last interview before his death.

Quite why Guillaume had chosen to become an actor, competing in the same arena as his father when he claimed to have spent most of his life trying to escape from his shadow, is hard to comprehend. He had not yet equalled or surpassed Gérard's success but was liked and respected as an actor in Europe, and was still busy, despite having endured the amputation of his right leg in 2005.

Guillaume was not quite so lumpy or physically imposing as his father, his nose not quite so bulbous, though clearly inherited.

Guillaume lacked none of his father's intensity of performance, however.

This film could have been written for him. *L'Enfance d'Icare* (The Childhood of Icarus) was a modern reworking of the Greek myth in which the father makes his son wings of feather and wax but warns him not to fly too close to the sun. Icarus gets carried away with the thrill of flying, ignores his father's advice and soars too near to the heat. The wax melts, the feathers burn, Icarus plummets into the sea and drowns.

Guillaume had taken his girlfriend, Réjane Tremel, and her son, Sean, with him to Romania for filming and, instead of staying in a luxury hotel with the rest of the crew, he had opted to live in a motorhome, sleeping in different locations, sometimes in nearby woods, and driving the motorhome to the studios each day.

Réjane told *The Sunday Times Magazine* that Guillaume liked living close to nature, away from the stress of city living. In the early days of filming he had been full of the joys of life, she said, wanting to sing, to make music, to act, to recite poetry and to celebrate all the good things in life. If this was so, something must have gone badly wrong. In mid-September, according to a reliable family source, Guillaume had been arrested in Bucharest while naked and

brandishing two guns at a waiter. The incident had been smoothed over, and Guillaume — no stranger to gun incidents — had escaped without so much as a fine.

It quickly became apparent to the first visiting journalist, Alexandra Olivotto, that Guillaume "was completely nuts", while her colleague Flori Ciuverca saw him as a "really, really sad person", "deeply unhappy", if a little unpredictable.

He told them he had left France to live in exile because of the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, whom he referred to as "Sharkozy" and said he despised. "Sharkozy is from a filthy nobility. I have every reason to be anti-Sharkozy. I'm not going back to France until the 2012 election, when I'm standing for president. I'm very serious."

Perhaps Guillaume's antipathy towards the French president was, in part at least, personal. He had recently married Guillaume's old friend Carla Bruni, who hailed from the same Left Bank world — the Rive Gauche — as Guillaume.

Whatever the reason, Guillaume said he was keeping on the move, not letting "people" find out where he was, as if "they" were after him. "I was in the army, you know — I was in Bosnia." He had not been in the army, had never been in



Bosnia. In an expression of serious "paranoia", he suggested he had been targeted by French government snipers because of his involvement in dissident broadcasts.

He referred to Réjane as his wife and spoke of her child as his own son. He then told the journalists he had just cheated on her. He went off and came out again, this time appearing without a shirt, which revealed a torso covered with bruises and tattoos. Were they bruises from fights, or what? The journalists had no idea. They could see what they took to be the unhealed scars of injection marks on his arms — a further indicator, perhaps, that he had been continuing to take drugs, despite their effect on his health.

"It looked like the body of a 50- or 60-year-old," said Alexandra, "not a pretty sight." His hands shook and his voice quavered. Later they

watched as a make-up artist struggled to apply make-up to his face as his eyes kept watering. When filming was finished, he began drinking beers and smoked handmade cigarettes, the journalists wondering if they were spliffs or simple roll-ups. Meanwhile, Guillaume jumped from one theme to the next. He needed to keep a cool head, he said, or he would kill himself.

In general terms, his life had not been rosy. He had been born in a poor but happy area of Paris, and when his father began to earn money he became rich but unhappy. His paternal great-grandmother and grandmother had both been witches — a white witch and a black witch — and they wanted to induct Guillaume into witchcraft when he was born, but he had chosen music instead, spending



Left: Guillaume aged 32, two months after his leg was amputated in 2003

Above: an early picture of father and son. Guillaume said Gérard was often away during his childhood

Right: Guillaume, aged 25, with his father, mother and sister, Julie, in 1996



eight years of his life as a street musician.

He spoke of his seven-year-old daughter, Louise, from his failed marriage to the actress Elise Ventre. He had been in survival mode since Louise was born, and it tore him up inside that he now only saw her on the occasional weekend.

Death was constantly on his mind, he said. "Life invites death. In my family we've all learnt to die with dignity. After all, we have God in our name." *Par Dieu* means literally "by God" or, in the old French exclamation, "my God!"

"From time to time I lose my head, I'm not sure what's going on, because of my amputation and that's always present in the film."

Réjane would later describe the intensity with which he lived through the film as well as acted in it, which she saw as his devotion to his art, bringing the script home in the evenings so that they could work on rewriting his lines together overnight. He told her the difference between him and his character was that he knew his limb could never grow back.

"Guillaume loved making the film in Romania and was certain it was going to be a success," Réjane said after his death. "The amputation was always with him, however. He used to go on about how he had to wake up with it every day. It

was not easy to live with. It's very hard to wake up every morning with just one leg. He used to go on about the little things which he couldn't do, like walking on sand, on sand dunes. We agreed that we would have loved to do this together, but could not."

The amputation and the reasons for it are part of Guillaume's painful history. But there was something else, which the Romanians did not understand when he first mentioned it.

The whole interview was like this, they said: they had not probed for confessions or personal revelations; they simply poured forth from him, as if he could not keep them in.

They were asking him an innocuous question about what it was like to collaborate with Romanian actors. Instead of coming up with a bland platitude about how lovely Romanians were to work with, he said, in a complete non sequitur, that his mother had taken the drug Distilbene during her pregnancy with him.

"It was given to women to help them keep their babies, but it made women infertile and made men prone to suicide," he explained.

"My mother took Distilbene," he repeated. "Now you understand why I'm losing my mind." If Guillaume was the *enfant terrible* of >>>

French cinema, as Paris Match was so fond of describing him, there is no doubt who passed on the title. There were clear similarities between father and son, still apparent even as they drew apart from each other, riven by differences in their approach to life. The Sunday Times Magazine was told by someone close to the family, who did not wish to be identified, how furious and disappointed Guillaume had been when Gérard bought him a Rolex Oyster gold watch. Had his father never noticed he did not wear a watch? Besides, ostentatious jewellery was not Guillaume's style. He was all bohemian chic and professed no interest in material possessions (except, apparently, drugs and weapons).

Guillaume lived in what was described to us as an "outhouse", loaned or rented to him by his mother, Elisabeth; it was part of her separation settlement from Gérard. The "outhouse" is, in fact, a quaint cottage with shuttered windows and a front door opening on to a back street in Bougival, the Paris suburb Gérard had colonised in the late 1970s, owning at least three properties there at one stage.

While Guillaume lived in the outhouse with Réjane, in something approximating the careless poverty of the unworldly artist, Gérard had moved on to wealthy Versailles, where he now lived in a "glorious mansion" with the actress Carole Bouquet. It was the opulent heart of a small empire he had created on the profits of his success. He had a château in the Loire Valley surrounded by vineyards, additional vineyards in Bordeaux and Languedoc, and beyond France in Spain, Morocco and Argentina.

Gérard has opened two expensive restaurants in Paris, within a stone's throw of each other, across Gaillon Square in the grand 1st arrondissement. The restaurants — La Fontaine Gaillon and L'Ecaille de la Fontaine — carry the subtlest traces of their owner's presence.

He was said to have invested in oil exploration and to have got on to the well-paid international lecture circuit, like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. His fame had given him access to a surprising range of powerful figures, from Pope John Paul II to Fidel Castro, both of whom he was said to be close to. He used to call his friend Princess Diana "ma vraie reine" (my true queen).

Meanwhile, he continues to make films at an alarming rate, with some 20 projects started, completed, released or lined up over this year and next. He remains the greatest film star in France, his life a national obsession there, much of it played out in the media, especially the bitter disputes with Guillaume, who had, among many other accusations, publicly criticised his father for being obsessed with money.

Gérard's own background was certainly poor and dysfunctional. His father, Dédé,



Left: in L'Enfance d'Icare, the film he was making just before he died

Paris to try to become an actor, soon working regularly without any great success.

In 1971, when he was 22, Gérard married Elisabeth, who was seven years older. Their first child, Guillaume, was born in April 1971. Maybe Elisabeth had suffered an earlier miscarriage or there was some other medical problem; she has never spoken about it. But, for whatever reason, she was one of around 160,000 French women who were prescribed and took Distilbène (diethylstilbestrol) before it was banned in 1977 (six years after it had been banned in the US).

The drug was meant to protect against miscarriage and maintain risky pregnancies, but it soon became apparent that babies were being born with genital defects. Later, other problems began to reveal themselves in the babies, including infertility, cancers and psychiatric problems such as depression and schizophrenia.

Réjane told us that Elisabeth "has always been deeply upset about having taken this drug, and about the effects it has on her family. She regrets ever having taken it".

The precise impact on Guillaume is unclear. He would often say he was born with bones sticking out in the wrong places and needed a series of 17 operations, "all of them in vain". Perhaps the clearest account came in the book Tout Donner (Giving Everything), which he published in 2004 as a series of interviews, seemingly unstructured and meandering, with the French TV presenter Marc-Olivier Fogiel.

Fogiel asked Guillaume why he wasn't more conventional. This was the reply: "My mother took a medicine, Distilbène. I had body malformations, extra bones. And so I had lots of operations, such as an operation on my sex organ. I refused an operation on my bones — but I always had an extra bone. From the start I wasn't normal. I wasn't like the others. From a young age I felt different." Gérard, meanwhile, was about to become

characterised as a drunk and a dreamer who played no positive role in Gérard's upbringing, must have brought shame to his son, who has described how he sometimes found his father asleep in the gutter as he walked to school.

Gérard was the third of six children, born in 1948, the year his mother, Lillette, told him she had hoped to travel and had been disappointed to find herself pregnant again. She also told him she had tried to terminate the unborn Gérard with a knitting needle. The family home had been a place of shouting and disharmony, with no meaningful dialogue, according to Gérard, many things left unsaid, or never discussed, not least among them the revelation that Dédé's mother had carried on an affair over many years with Lillette's father. As Gérard once put it in an interview with Le Monde, "They f***ed, all the time. It left the family shell-shocked, confused, knocked for six. What it meant was, my grandparents stole my parents' love."

He has often spoken of his early years as a *voyou*, a hoodlum, wheeling and dealing on the

"I was uncultivated, I had no principles, no wisdom. My only model for being a father was my father — an illiterate on the margin of society"

black market, handling a gun, involved in petty car crime and theft, referring to himself as a *pétarou*, a firecracker, always fighting and stealing and once getting his nose broken while sparring with a boxer. He left home in his early teens and lived for a while with two prostitutes, fancying himself as a minor gangster, then living as a beach boy in Cap d'Antibes before being captivated by films and theatre and going off to

famous, with the 1974 Bertrand Blier film Les Valseuses (Making It). As he has often said, he was poorly prepared for fatherhood, and thinks he was too young to have children when he did. He once told Paris Match: "I was still uncultivated, in the middle of educating myself. I had no framework, no principles, no wisdom. My only model for being a father was my father — an illiterate on the margin of society." ➤➤➤

While Gérard soared in the world, heading eventually to Hollywood in the 1990 film Green Card, Guillaume floundered, much as Gérard had done before him. It seems poignant now that Guillaume's early taste of his father's world came when he appeared as a baby in his father's arms in the 1974 film Pas si Méchant que ça (later released in the US as The Wonderful Crook). The pair went on to appear in half a dozen films together, notably Tous les Matins du Monde (All the Mornings of the World) in 1991, and Aime ton Père (Honour Your Father) in 2002.

Guillaume always gave the impression that he was left to get on with life and hence found his way into trouble. He had been difficult to handle even before his father became famous, he said in his book, not sleeping, getting up at 4am, making his breakfast, stamping around the house.

With hindsight, perhaps, these were early signs of the psychiatric disturbances that would trouble him as he got older, the legacy of Distilbène. But, really, it is impossible to say with certainty, especially when other factors were feeding his distress. He remembers moving to the big house in Bougival and how he felt even more alone and not like "normal" children who were always able to be with their fathers.

He described in his book how he told Gérard that children at school were teasing him because

He remembers moving to the big house and how he felt more alone. Not like other children who were able to be with their fathers

of his famous name, and Gérard was dismissive, simply telling him he had better change his name. Asked if he lived like the son of the famous Gérard, he replied: "No, I was in total anonymity. I invented plenty of identities, lots of lives... It was my freedom, my gasp of oxygen. I was firmly Arsène Lupin [one of the aliases he used, the name taken from a hero of French literary detective fiction]."

He began taking drugs when he was around 14, graduating from glue-sniffing to cocaine and heroin, apparently a lifelong habit he found hard to break. He said he was into "self-mutilation".

Not just self-mutilation, but self-abasement too. Just imagine being a father often absent from home and reading this about your son's early teenage years: "I started earning money this way one evening when I missed my train home from school. I must have been 15. I was accosted by a man at the station who said, 'You have the air of a misfit.' I said to him, 'I've missed my train, I'm in the shit, I don't know what I'm going to do, I haven't a coin on me,' and he said to me, 'Good, come, I can give you a bit of bread for a taxi. In the meantime, let me offer you a drink.' At this moment, I understood fully. We



Left: Guillaume's mother and sister at his funeral, on October 17, 2008



Below left: Guillaume's seven-year-old daughter, Louise, at his funeral

"superbug" during one stay for surgery. The leg became so badly infected, he would say, that he lived in constant pain. In 2003 he decided to have the leg amputated. But perhaps a superbug was not to blame. The Sunday Times Magazine was told that Guillaume missed several stages of the treatment to his leg and continued to deplete his health with drink and drug abuse, and it was this that put his leg injury beyond repair.

In 1996 Guillaume told an interviewer he had looked death in the face 11 times, in three bike accidents and eight drug overdoses. He was then 25. The interviewer noted his "cadaverous" appearance and the ever-present *Gitane* dangling from his lips.

Like father, like son. Gérard is said to have survived 17 motorbike accidents and a plane crash on the tarmac at Madrid airport. He is prone to roll up his trouser leg to show off his scars, just as Guillaume might roll up his trouser to reveal his prosthetic limb. It was Gérard's own massive intake of wine and *Gitanes* that led to quadruple heart-bypass surgery in the 1990s.

Guillaume appeared in French films with some consistency and had some success — he won a French "Oscar", a *César*, for his role in *Les Apprentis* (The Apprentices) in 1995, and was twice nominated in other roles — but he could not stop getting into trouble.

He was back in prison in 2001, after again driving while drunk. He had married a would-be actress, Elise Ventre, a year earlier, but they separated shortly after their daughter, Louise, was born. Not everyone had approved of Elise — we were told the marriage had run into trouble because she wanted a show-business life and was too interested in the family name and the prospect of joining an acting dynasty. "She thought she would end up as another Brigitte Bardot-type figure," we were told.

We don't know when or even how Guillaume met Réjane Tremel, as she would not tell us, saying it was a secret between her and Guillaume that she would always keep. The only clue was that their meeting had something to do with art — naturally — and specifically involved a painting. "I had a lot of time for painting a few years ago and this brought me very close to Guillaume. That's how our relationship started."

In 2003 Guillaume was arrested after threatening a man with a gun at a bar in the Normandy town of Trouville. The man insulted him in some way, apparently saying ➤➤➤

Guillaume was wearing the same suit that night as he had been wearing in a recent Paris Match photo. Guillaume was again given a suspended sentence and ordered to seek counselling.

He was arrested on drunk-driving charges for the last time in June this year, and was appealing against a three-month prison sentence when he died. After his death, Réjane, and others, spoke of the love that bound the Depardieus, even the father and son. That love must have been there somewhere, but it was none too evident.

Marc-Olivier Fogiel told The Sunday Times Magazine that the book he co-wrote with his friend in 2003, *Tout Donner*, was Guillaume's love note to Gérard: "They had a very peculiar relationship. The problem was certainly that they loved each other too much. They would argue fiercely..." (sometimes even physically, we were told) "...like any two people who love each other greatly. They had an uncompromising love for each other."

Fogiel characterised Guillaume as a man interested in experience rather than money and said that was the reason for some of the sordid incidents he described in the book. "He did not believe in a balanced life. Guillaume wanted to live an extreme life." The book does not seem much like a love

note, more like a bomb lobbed at Gérard. A year before it was published, not long after Guillaume's amputation and his skirmish with the gun in Trouville, Gérard had given an interview to Paris Match with the apparent intention of publicly disowning his son.

"He's a real poet who touches me enormously, but who is very difficult, incorrigible. At the moment we have no ties. I cut things off because I no longer want to be the wall, or the trash bin where one dumps anything one wants. He has tried to contact me but I don't reply, because I think it's better for his mental health. We'll see."

Guillaume quickly retaliated with his own interview — in *Le Parisien* — describing his father as "a coward, a cheater and lazy... the only person I know who lies to his analyst. Gérard Depardieu is obsessed with the desire to be loved and the need for money. The only thing we have in common is our demons". It was around this time that Gérard gave Guillaume the Rolex and Guillaume gave his father a motorbike. They then apparently argued on the phone and agreed to hand back the gifts.

It's not hard to see how the book might have been conceived as a further act of revenge. According to Guillaume, he sent the book to his

father, who then called him and said he had "flicked" through it and found it shameless. "Well," said Guillaume, "if he thinks I'm shameless, I sometimes find him indecent."

Guillaume's view of his father came across very clearly in the book. In one interview with Fogiel he said of Gérard: "I love him and I hate him for the same reasons. For his impotence. For his way of fleeing life and existence, and fighting against it at the same time. He is stupid. He is hopeless. He surrounds himself too much with people who bring him nothing."

Gérard would later say that Guillaume had discussed things in the book which he would have preferred to make public in his own time. He may have been thinking of Guillaume's claim that his father visited wife-swapping clubs. Guillaume said his father lied and drank too much and never confided in his son about his personal life. "I only found out I was going to have a half-sister on the day of her birth."

Roxanne was born to the actress Karine Silla in 1992. "That tells you everything. Everything. I was always presented with *faits accomplis*. That was typical of how he behaved towards me."

Gérard was said to have gone on a drinking binge when the book came out, and delayed filming of *36 Quai des Orfèvres*. The director

said there were one or two days when he was so drunk that he couldn't stand up, but they had to carry on filming as best they could. The director forgave him, he said, because Gérard was someone with enormous heart.

"He tried to contact me but I don't reply, because it's better for his mental health. At the moment we have no ties" — Gérard

Flori Ciuverca could not shake off the memory of her interview with Guillaume on the film set in Bucharest and kept thinking about it in the days afterwards. It was, she decided, the saddest interview of her whole life.

Her article appeared, filming on *L'Enfance d'Icare* came to an end soon after, and the cast and crew came together one last time for the wrap party. Some of them were drinking until dawn. Guillaume was there but seemed subdued and quiet. He had been coughing and felt unwell, and seemed unable to shake it off.

The next morning, Réjane called the producer, concerned now for Guillaume's health. He'd suffered turns before, of course, but this was the worst. He was coughing blood and it seemed as

though something was seriously wrong. He was diabetic, perhaps already suffering from the liver disease cirrhosis. Guillaume was taken to one specialist hospital in Romania and then another. They seemed unable to agree on a diagnosis,

seeing a shadow on his lung as possibly either a tumour or pneumonia. He was airlifted back to Paris that Saturday, October 11, and died of pneumonia two days later at Raymond-Poincaré hospital, in Garches, west of Paris. There was speculation that his weakened immune system might have been the result of an HIV/Aids infection, but this was denied to The Sunday Times Magazine by someone close to him.

The funeral was held at Notre-Dame church in Bougival, a short walk from Guillaume's home. A large crowd outside watched the service relayed on a screen. Inside the church the mourners included Guillaume's family, Carla Bruni, her sister and their mother, the director Luc Besson, the actress Monica Bellucci and her actor

husband, Vincent Cassel, a politician or two, and television hosts Marc-Olivier Fogiel and Benjamin Castaldi. They heard Gérard speak of his son as a little prince.

Back in Bucharest, the journalist Flori Ciuverca was distressed by Guillaume's death and was surprised to find herself at the centre of the story as one of the last people to speak to him. Paris Match asked for some help and she happily gave them a photograph of Guillaume from the set of the film — perhaps one of the last, if not the last, photograph ever taken of him.

Flori was upset to hear from the film's producer that Gérard Depardieu was furious to see the photograph in Paris Match — that would be the same Paris Match to whom he was often giving interviews — and was threatening to sue Flori for exploiting the death of his son. "He thought I had sold the picture for thousands," she said, "but I didn't, I just gave it to them. I hope he changed his mind now about suing me. I never took advantage of his son's death."

On the contrary, Flori was still haunted by Gérard's son and the things he had said to her — the unsolicited confessions of Guillaume Depardieu. He had seemed to her like a little boy.

A little boy, perhaps, in search of his father ■ *Additional reporting by Peter Allen*



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