

Courage (2019)

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Duration 2 hours 20 minutes, including intermission

Cast size 4

Excerpt

PROLOGUE/EPILOGUE

(Calm, collected, matter-of-fact)

ULLA-BRITT

I received a letter once from the countryside, found it in my mailbox. It just said, "Ulla-Britt the AIDS chaplain, Stockholm." It had found its way, despite the lack of address.

STEVE

I don't take much medicine these days, I take three pills a day. One in the morning, two at night.

P.O.

Everything I know about HIV I learned from my patients. After all, we had to look for solutions together. I experienced the sorrow and curiosity of the eighties, the backlash of the early nineties, the joy of successful treatment in the late nineties, and the increasing invisibility in the 2000s.

STEVE

I feel grateful that I got to be part of it. And grief for all of those who didn't make it this far.

P.O.

I just happened to be there when a new illness appeared. Maybe I managed to have some small effect on the course of events, but the illness and the people I encountered affected me a great deal.

KRISTER

The age of AIDS was my university. It sounds horrific to say I think anything positive came out of AIDS, but I was fortunate to work with AIDS as a funeral director, because I learned so much. Standing in the eye of the storm.

ULLA-BRITT

It was the relationships you had when you were standing in that storm. We were like an army.

JOHAN

ULLA-BRITT *(with a photograph of Johan. Simple, unadorned)*

Johan. Strong, insightful. Unique. A precocious child. Was reading adult literature by the age of eight and read constantly. Lots of science fiction. History. He was very interested in the tomb of the young pharaoh Tutankhamen, and he liked to build it in the sandbox when he was four. I was studying theology when the kids were little, and he would say, "Mom, you look really tired, is there anything I can help you with?" Thoughtful.

Johan studied in Uppsala and was going to become a priest too, his studies went well and he hadn't come out as gay yet. And then he met a guy there, waved it off by saying "we're just friends." But I tried a little, "are you really sure that's all you are?" but I didn't want to pressure him at all. I'd never met many gay people myself, you don't, really, in the church. At least none who were officially gay.

But then he came home, sat down next to me, and said, "You're right, we're in a relationship." But I wasn't worried, because Johan was Johan. He must have been twenty-three then.

THE START

STEVE

I was born in Gävle. When I was four we moved to Piteå, Dad worked for the paper industry. Then we moved to Dalsland, and from there to Värmland. I went to secondary school in Karlstad. I really blossomed there. Singing in a dance band, "Värmlands Dansband." So corny.

Later I move to Gothenburg and start studying theology at the university. But later I start working for the Church of Sweden, too, as a member of the parish staff. And I only last there for two and a half years, like, those views of people...the bishop is strongly against female priests, and I felt like, "if only you knew I was gay." So I quit at halftime, so to speak.

P.O.

I study in Lund and Malmö. And later on I end up at Roslagstull Hospital. I apply there because I'm interested in international medicine, or tropical medicine as it was called at the time. There are a lot of people working on malaria, so I become interested in other tropical diseases, intestinal diseases. Poop is always fun. Especially because no one else thinks so.

Around the same time there's an epidemic of hepatitis among homosexual men in Stockholm, and I'm working with my intestinal parasites, so, yeah, I think it's interesting—bacteria and parasites that can be transmitted sexually.

STEVE

Twenty-five years old, and like—what am I supposed to do now? So I start working with kids and teenagers who have physical and cognitive differences, and that sort of lays the groundwork for activism in me.

P.O.

We always go to the library on a certain day each week, to read the latest issues of medical journals. So I'm standing up at the library, as usual, reading a tiny, tiny journal from the United States, on the first page of this tiny, tiny journal there's an article about an unusual pneumonia found in three different hospitals in Los Angeles—"five cases of *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia among previously healthy young men."

When you get a little farther down in the article it turns out that these five men were in fact homosexual. This is right up my alley. And even now, talking about it, and every time I think about it, I get goosebumps. Because when I'm standing there—it's such a particular feeling, that this is something important, really important, that's going to affect the rest of my life. This illness is what I'm going to devote my life to.

(Pause.)

It's late afternoon. I'm about to head home. Then the nurse I work with says, "P.O.—there's a guy out here in the waiting room you need to take a look at." We're the only ones left on the unit. He's sitting there with this big fur coat on, I've never seen him before. Then he comes in. He's slight, emaciated and pale. And...sunken cheeks, gray skin. He didn't look that skinny out in the waiting room, because he was wearing that big coat, but when he takes it off I just...

His name is Roar and he has explanations for all of this. He's lost weight because he hasn't had time to eat, he's been working a lot, almost twenty-four hours a day, because they're working on Café Opera, which is going to open soon, and they have to be ready. And it's a lot of work, day and night, basically. He says he's very tired. And then he coughs. And that's because he smokes all the time, so he has explanations for all of it. His fever, though, is hard to explain away. But he's scared, deep down he's scared.

Roar is showing all the signs described from the United States. I've got the picture, of course, I know how they describe it, what it looks like, a pre-AIDS stage, but it's not easy to prove. There's no sure way to give a diagnosis, so it has to be a "suspected" diagnosis. But after ruling out other things, I feel that this has to be *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, which means he fulfills the designated criteria. It all lines up. I write, at the end of his file, that this is likely what those in the United States are calling AIDS.

Roar comes back after a few days, and we admit him. He gets sicker and sicker. Various laboratories refuse to handle his samples, because I report that he is presumed to have AIDS, so we never do get a confirmed diagnosis for him.

Now this illness is in Sweden. If one person has it, others surely do too. A one hundred percent fatal illness.

Roar dies of pneumonia in September of 1984. He is the first one.

THE ILLNESS

ULLA-BRITT

One winter evening in December, Johan suddenly tells me he's going to have an HIV test. "Just to be safe I'm going to get tested, no, I'm not necessarily infected, but just to be safe. But if I were to die, I would want you to perform the funeral, Mom." Then I said, joking, "I can't do that, you know, because if it comes to that, I want to be a mother and cry, but I will make sure it's a nice funeral."

STEVE

I can't imagine getting tested in Gothenburg, not a chance. So I go up to Stockholm and get tested there. It's a Friday. And they want me to stay the weekend, because they'll check on me on Monday and make sure I didn't go home and hang myself. And then back home to wait on the results for a week, so I had to head back up again the next Friday.

ULLA-BRITT

In January of 1985, Johan gets the news. I'm the only one he tells, under clergy privilege. One in four of those infected develops symptoms and dies, they say. And as soon as Johan tells me he's infected, I think, "You're one in four, you're going to die." Johan feels the same way.

STEVE

I get the news. *(Pause.)* Leave the hospital. *(Pause.)* And I'm...totally numb. I go out dancing. Stand there, and...loud music, throwing back a ton of alcohol. I can't quite take it in. No crying. None of that kind of reaction. Not a single tear.

Has something changed in me? Am I going to lose my empathy for others now that something awful has happened to me? How long can I live? There's a ton of stuff I need to buy for my apartment, but am I really supposed to go buy all this if I'm going to die anyway?

ULLA-BRITT

Johan gets sick suddenly, pneumonia, it's around Midsummer. They say you'll survive the first and maybe the second bout of pneumonia, but the third will kill you. I call his doctor. "Is this *pneumocystis carinii* that Johan has?" "Yes, it is." "So he has AIDS now?" "Yes, he does."

P.O.

The tangibly difficult thing about it is how much prejudice there is. Colleagues who feel we shouldn't be dealing with this, that people have only themselves to blame. Those who have exposed others to risk of infection can even legally be subject to indefinite isolation. Men, mostly, and female addicts and people who come from countries in Africa whom some think are purposely infecting innocent Swedish men.

STEVE

Then come the stories of what happens when you tell. Someone lost their job. People lose their homes. Stress and anxiety increase.

ULLA-BRITT

And then I visit Johan at Roslagstull, in the Observation C wing. Many days and long nights are spent there. I spend long periods sleeping on county-hospital sheets, eating only hospital food, watching the trees outside Johan's room change color. And of course I meet lots of other young men there, in various stages of the illness.

STEVE

So I move to Stockholm. I just want to do whatever I feel like now. Live life to the max. Lots of people are with me in that way of thinking, of living in the now. Sick people mortgage their condos, take out everything.

ULLA-BRITT

The health services and psychologists are taken by surprise. Until now, the task of psychologists has been to get people to go out and live life. Now, instead, they are supposed to prepare young people for the end of their lives, and there's no advance plan for that. And it turns out that there are no priests who are interested in working with the AIDS patients at Roslagstull and Observation C.

STEVE

I visit a friend at the hospital and after just a few minutes I realize he's developed dementia. That empty gaze, like no one's home. He's maybe thirty-seven. And when you visit the unit and see one of these skeletons in a hospital gown, with an IV, some young kid, emaciated and sick, I think, "Dear God, don't let this happen to me."

ULLA-BRITT

So I go into the smoking room because that's where you make connections, and say I want to be at Roslagstull. As the hospital chaplain. And I get my wish, I'm assigned there part-time. I become the chaplain for those infected with HIV, and those who have AIDS.