

## The physician at the movies

enough money. Meanwhile her daughter, Marcelle, born to her and a local delivery boy, dies of meningitis. She is discovered by Louis Lepage (Gerard Depardieu), who convinces her to change her outfits and gives her the new name of Piaf (“sparrow”) because of her four-foot-eight stature, the genesis of her nickname “Little Sparrow.” When Louis is murdered, ostensibly by Albert, she is accused of being an accessory to murder but is released. All this is packed into only twenty years.

Edith is fortunate to come under the tutelage of Raymond Aso (Marc Barbe), who polishes her singing and diction, while his colleague, Marguerite Monnot (Marie Armelle Deguy), writes the songs that make her famous. Her affair with Marcel Cerdan (Jean-Pierre Martins), the Algerian boxer and married father of three who beat Tony Zale for the world middleweight title in 1948, is the only one that the film focuses on, ignoring other celebrity lovers like Charlie Chaplin, Charles Aznavour, Yves Montand, etc. This is probably because Cerdan is said to have been “the love of her life”; a picture entitled *Edith and Marcel* was made in 1983 by Claude Lelouch, starring Marcel Junior. Cerdan’s death aboard an Air France plane that crashed in the Azores in 1949 was largely responsible for her subsequent despair, which, along with injuries in an automobile accident, led to her descent into morphine addiction and alcoholism.

Cotillard is remarkable in portraying the stooped-over hag-like Piaf, a transformation that took almost five hours of makeup artistry to achieve. As for the songs, she convincingly mimes Piaf, most of whose “greatest hits” are included. If you like Piaf, see the film, but be ready to be turned off by some scenes. It’s mostly in French with subtitles.

*La Vie en Rose* brought to mind the stories of Judy Garland and Billie Holiday, who also kept singing to the end with severe debilitating addictions. It raises the old question, “Does one have to go through all that depravity, drug and alcohol addiction, consorting with lowlifes, and having multiple lovers to live the lyrics or to be successful an artist?” When we had this conversation in another context, my wife Colette pointed to the happily married and certified genius Felix Mendelssohn, whose life, though short (he died at thirty-eight), mirrored his first name. Then again, he may have been the exception that proved the rule.

### References

1. Morgenstern J. ‘La Vie en Rose’ is stark, passionate Edith Piaf biopic. *Wall Street J* 2007 Jun 8: W1–W2.
2. Picturehouse. *La Vie en Rose* Production Notes. New York: Time-Warner; 2007.

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## One of us

You would have loved to see them—  
fourteen kinetic bits of life,  
paddling in a fresh-hatched frenzy,  
a fountain for a pond.

Right here we’d rest your chair,  
the wig set aside, the sun warmed  
your body even to the cells  
taking over your bones.

Your patients got a little extra care,  
a mindful touch. Each minor complaint  
sanctified by their dying doctor living  
as if training would one day end.

I wasn’t there that last day,  
not by your bed to comprehend  
the remnants not entirely you,  
as dry as a grasshopper  
abandoned by the dawn.

I watch a bit more at the spot  
where you used to sit,  
while the last chill pales  
and new pink petals rise.



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