Four Weddings actress Charlotte Coleman dies, aged 33

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The death of any young artist inevitably evokes a feeling of regret at the talent that has been cut off, at the work that will not now be achieved. In the case of actress Charlotte Coleman, who died suddenly last week of a bronchial asthma attack aged 33, that feeling is exacerbated by the awareness that she was just beginning to grow into her full capabilities as an original and inventive performer.

Charlotte was born into a comfortable middle class theatrical family. Her mother, Ann Beach, is an actress, and her father Francis Coleman is a television producer and teacher at the London Film School. Her sister Lisa is also an actress. As a child, she attended drama classes at the Anna Sher school (which has produced such actors as Tim Roth and Kathy Burke), making her television debut at the age of eight.

What happened then was not entirely in the script, and marks the beginning of Coleman's route to her originality as an actress. At 14 she left home; she was expelled from school the following year. She went straight into the children's television show *Educating Marmalade*, in which she played the lead. The riotous Marmalade Atkins was the first of many characters she played that were not quite in the mainstream of society.

Although she came to loathe being identified as Marmalade by a generation that had grown up with the show, she used the money to put herself through the liberal boarding school Dartington Hall and catch up with her education.

In 1987, her boyfriend was killed in a cycling accident. In her own words she "really fell apart". She seems often to have been in the unstable position of belonging to a comfortable and reassuring world while remaining unsure of her position within it.

In 1989, she starred alongside Geraldine McEwan and Kenneth Cranham in Beebon Kidron's television adaptation of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Adapted from Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Oranges* tells the story of a young girl, Jess, discovering her sexuality in the environment of a charismatic evangelist community in Lancashire. Jess' home life revolves around a church that is ridiculed by the wider community for their Christian fundamentalism. In one wonderful scene, her sewing mistress at school despairs to discover Jess embroidering the slogan "Summer is over and we are not yet saved", but they turn on her when she forms a lesbian relationship.

In many ways, Coleman was the perfect actress to play Jess (the character was based in part on Winterson's own childhood). She was able to give Winterson's poetic oddness a visual form without ever lapsing into any ethereal other-worldliness. The performance was charmingly sturdy and concrete. Her big-eyed elfin features conveyed brilliantly the baffled emotional intensity of this character's peripheral relationship to society, who suddenly becomes its focus. *Oranges* was one of her finest performances, but that same intensity was to become, in various ways, the trademark of her work.

After the high achievement of *Oranges*, for which she won a Royal Television Society Best Actress award, there was a period of mixed fortunes. For much of the 1990s her television work was caught up in the cycle of uninspired casting and poor work available, which have blighted many careers. This seems to have been particularly the case for Coleman, whose looks frequently saw her cast to play a character younger or more immature than her age. She played a string of child-like waifs and outsiders in work of varying quality, but she retained the ability to engage in even the most hackneyed of material. The quality and conviction of her performance almost rescued even that

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most soporifically self-important of police dramas *Inspector Morse*.

Her best-known work is undoubtedly playing Scarlet, the chaotic and eccentric flatmate of Hugh Grant's character; in the depressingly successful film *Four Weddings and A Funeral* (1994). It is not a good film, and it is not one of her better performances, but even here she displayed a quality that hinted at things to come. The character of Scarlet was an over-written attempt to offset the relentless upper-class veneer of the rest of the film. Coleman's performance was a bravura emotional roller coaster, teetering on (and falling into) self-parody certainly, but carrying some weight of honesty too. She looked more and more like an actress in need of something to say.

The change in material that hinted at what she was capable of came with a sitcom. Written by Simon Nye (author of the infantile *Men Behaving Badly*) the premise of *How Do You Want Me* did not initially work. An Irishman (played by comedian Dylan Moran), proprietor of a successful and trendy comedy club in London, has married a primary school teacher Lisa (played by Coleman). Without his knowing anything about what he was getting into, they move back to the country village where her family farm. Her father (Frank Finlay) is a terrifying patriarch who wants the city slicker out of his village. Her brother (Peter Serafinowicz) is a rural thug who wants to humiliate the city-boy as widely as possible. Lisa wants the village to be an idyll, but she also wants her husband to be accepted because she loves him.

What was surprising about the show was that inconsistencies in the ideas were overwhelmed by the strength of the performances. Coleman was the absolute centre of the two series. The scripts managed to be quite dark: Moran's character was the shambling figure of fun, trying to fight his corner with brutal wit, while Finlay was a figure of brooding menace, trying to hold on to his old life. In the centre stood Coleman with the emotional honesty that had always marked her best performances.

It was the first time, she said, she had not played someone slightly weird or very childlike. The result was an emotional directness coupled with a distinctively personal pattern of performance. She did not sound like anybody else. This was an achievement.

Simon Callow, her co-star in *Four Weddings*, has pointed to her gift for "creating her own outlandish rhythms which made everything she ever said as an actress seem new and original and hilarious". That may sound like a definition of what acting should be about, but it is uncommon, nonetheless. Callow wrote that he thought she was "going to be one of the great comic talents of our time" because of this ability.

In a television world of increasingly homogeneous performances, such an accomplishment is rare indeed.

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