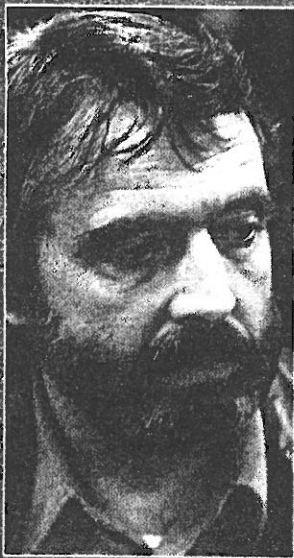


Retrospective of a director's decline



Paul (Marcel Roberts) gets rid of the car that oppresses his life in *Charles Dead or Alive* (1969), by Swiss filmmaker Alain Tanner (inset).



BY NOAH COWAN

Alain Tanner is Swiss. But he is neither a patriot, boosting national pride, nor a fabulist, divorced from his national confines. Tanner instead

interweaves his very Swiss interior life with an ironic distance, making work that is both deeply personal and pleasingly accessible.

At his best, Tanner and his films interrogate and expose the mindset, politics and horror that is Europe's Alpine centre and the world's bank. At his worst, he is an uninformed, sex-crazed egoist, searching for the El Dorado of cinematic romance.

A retrospective of Tanner's 20-year career beginning June 5 at Cinematheque Ontario gives us an intriguing look at both the development of Tanner the man and the archetype of an aging radical. On the whole, his films seem to politically decompose over time, compensating with increasingly banal autobiographical fodder.

The early films — between 1966 and 1976 — were instant classics, revered upon release and still essential viewing. Many of these — *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*, *Charles Dead or Alive* — were distributed in North America and were integral to the art film scene of the early '70s. They are greatly influenced by the French New Wave — especially Godard and Truffaut — and resonate with the same rebel spirit and deadpan wit.

La Salamandre (1971), which many consider his greatest film, begins with two oppositions: a young woman — free spirit, rebel, slut — is involved in a shooting accident with her uptight uncle; two writers — one a "by the facts" journalist, the other a poet — are hired by TV to write the story of the incident. Gradually, the uncle recedes from the picture and the rebel girl and the poet turn the journalist around to their world view. Meanwhile, the writers — obsessed, in love and making love with the woman — are unable to finish their script as the real woman interferes with their fictional construct. The film is intelligent on any number of levels — about subjective construction, the rela-

tionship of the artist to his work, gender difference — and succeeds equally well as an entertaining meditation on the limits of radicalism in this post-industrial world.

Return From Africa (1973) expands on these themes, making explicit Tanner's disgust with Swiss mores. A couple, fed up with their lives in Geneva, decide to move to Algeria. They sell all their furniture and have a goodbye party. But then a telegram comes from their friend in Algiers, telling them to stay put. So they wait — too embarrassed to leave their apartment (in case they run into friends) and too frightened to just get on the train. They construct a strange, obsessive life within their empty former space until a friend's deportation prompts them into action.

PREVIEW

MIDDLE OF THE WORLD: THE FILMS OF ALAIN TANNER

Cinematheque Ontario, Backstage Cinema,
31 Balmuto St., 923-FILM, June 5-30.

Sure, the societal critique is pretty obvious, but Tanner tells it with such flair and wit that one can't help but be charmed — both pitying the pathetic protagonists and sympathizing with their very Swiss (Canadian?) reticence.

But more impressive is Tanner's knowing political spoof of the European obsession with the "Other" — that strange cultural space represented by the JewArabAfricanChinese which is dangerous and foreign and which punishes and educates those who dare confront it. (For a recent example, I recommend the disturbed Bertolucci adaptation of *The Sheltering Sky*.) This explicitly racist concept is turned around in *Return from Africa* by Tanner's skewering of the narrow-mindedness and cultural insularism of his fellow Swiss.

But if Tanner is so smart, how do we explain *In the White City*, made 10 years later and perhaps the most critically successful film of Tanner's later period? Here, Bruno Ganz, as an AWOL Swiss sailor, obsesses his way through Lisbon, fucking the ignorant cafe girl and getting stabbed by the gutter punk, all the while

composing poetry about the strange displacement he feels and the angst of the outsider. Perhaps it's a great joke, but exoticizing and reifying the savagery of the Portuguese seems to me stupid, ill-conceived and offensive. Worst of all is the massive egocentrism that this project entails — only someone consumed with the importance of his own past would think that such well-travelled psychological shores would make for interesting viewing.

This is not to say that Tanner stopped making interesting films in 1975. On the contrary, *Messidor* (1979) is one of Tanner's best. Sharply satirical, deeply disturbing and very funny, it has recently been reclaimed by many critics and curators as an overlooked masterpiece. Two girls meet by chance hitch-hiking. Unwilling to return home, they strike up a friendship and start hanging around, hitch-hiking rides from nowhere to noplac. But, after one of them is almost raped, the film takes a turn to the dark side, as the girls begin dabbling in thievery and armed robbery. Throughout, they confront a male Switzerland obsessed with money and creature comfort. And yet, oddly enough, *Messidor* may well be Tanner's lightest work; the girls never engage in heavy soul-searching, even when their lives head for a nihilistic abyss. As such, one's first reaction is to think "Oh, what a lovely trifle that was." Then you recall that you just saw *Thelma & Louise* 10 years earlier and much more subtly realized.

Unfortunately, there has been little of interest since. *A Flame in My Heart* (1987) follows a woman (actress Myriam Mezieres, who co-scripted the work) through her sexual exploits and confessions. It turns out to be a dull plod through Euroskin, furthering the cinema of "woman as Virgin/Whore." *The Woman of Rose Hill* (1989), which chronicles the marriage of a Swiss farmer to a black woman he has brought back from an island in the Indian Ocean, is just not up to the politics it professes to explore.

Perhaps Tanner will pull it all together again, but until then, let us celebrate his early work (all of which is presented in the Cinematheque's program) and pray for rain. ☺