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Retrospective: Alain Tanner (Switzerland)

Alain Tanner's Biography



Born in Geneva in 1929, Alain Tanner studied socio-economics. At the age of 23 he enlisted in the merchant navy and was mustered by the West Africa Line in the port of Genoa.

After this very formative experience on the high seas, he returned briefly to Switzerland, then set off for London, where he lived from 1955 to 1958. It was here that he fell in love with the cinema, frequenting the Cinémathèque and making friends with critics and members of the British "Free Cinema" movement, such as Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz. With them he shared an interest in the critical and political dimension of the cinema, inspired largely by Bertolt Brecht.

In 1957, he made his first film in London with his friend Claude Goretta. This 16-mm short, entitled *Nice Time*, featured the night life of the Piccadilly district. In 1960, Alain Tanner returned permanently to Switzerland, where he was commissioned to



make a number of documentaries in the cinéma vérité style of the time. This was the beginning of a long period of collaboration with Swiss television.

From 1965 to 1968, Tanner made films on a wide range of subjects, including *Docteur B, médecin de campagne*(1968), on the daily life of a doctor in the Swiss countryside, and *Une ville à Chandigarh*(1966), on the work of the architect Le Corbusier in India. Tanner's work for Swiss television came to an end in 1968, when he embarked on his career as an independent director. In that year, he founded Groupe 5 in conjunction with four other Swiss filmmakers: Claude Goretta, Michel Soutter, Jean- Louis Roy and Jean-Jacques Lagrange. Since 1969, Alain Tanner has made 20 full-length films, the most recent being *Paul s'en va*(2004).

Retrospective: Alain Tanner

Charles, Dead or Alive

Switzerland / 1969 / 93min / B&W



Charles is a middle aged business man who runs an inherited company. On the anniversary of his company's founding, he finds himself suffering from depression and wishes more could be done for the workers. After he expresses his views to a television reporter, Charles leaves home and his business behind. His conservative son is horrified at his father's behavior when he takes up with an anarchistic couple who push his car over a cliff in a symbolic gesture of material rejection. The man encourages Charles to make love to his wife, but Charles is reluctant. Charles's daughter sees him with the couple and is delighted he shares in her liberal thinking. His son tries to have Charles committed to an asylum if he will not sign over control of the company in this satirical social commentary.

The Salamander

Switzerland / 1971 / 128 min / B&W



TV journalist reads of a lawsuit, dropped for lack of evidence, in which a girl is accused of deliberately shooting (and wounding) her uncle. For some reason, this piques his interest, and the journalist even goes so far as to talk a novelist friend of his into joining him in researching the incident. As their research and interviews proceed, it becomes clear that they have no interest in the actual truth of the incident, but are more concerned to dig deeply (each in his own way) into the characters of the girl and her uncle. One memorable scene has the girl, while serving as a shoe store salesperson, fondling the legs of her customers.

Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000

Switzerland, France / 1976 / 116 min / Colour, B&W



The revolutionary upheaval of 1968 rocked Europe, and led to many changes. For a while, it was possible to think that the radical idealism of the youth protests would finally take form in the world. In this film, eight people in their late twenties and early thirties try to keep the radical flames burning. From a man continuing his mystic quest to a Robin Hood-like grocery worker, each of them seeks an alternative to the mainstream vision. One of them is married, and his child Jonah, born that year, will be 25 in the year 2000.

Messidor

Switzerland, France / 1979 / 130 min / Colour



During the heyday of the French Revolution, the days of the week and the names of months and seasons were renamed in an attempt to deepen the effects of the rebellion through linguistic means. Messidor was the name given to the harvest season at that time. In this story, two contemporary Swiss girls are called the "Messidor sisters" by a policeman, indicating that they grew up in prosperity. Despite the comfortably banal outward appearance that the two have serene and secure lives, the girls experience many difficulties, including an attempted rape.

Light Years Away

Switzerland, France / 1981 / 110 min / Colour



In this quirky drama, a young man gets involved with an eccentric, elderly man attempting to build a one-man flying machine in his garage.

In The White City

Switzerland / 1983 / 108min / Colour



A Swiss sailor jumps ship in Lisbon, tired of the noisy engine room, the ship "a floating factory of crazy people." He rents a room and does little. He writes letters to his lover, describing the whiteness of the city, the solitude and the silence. He sends his love and emptiness; she replies with love and confusion. He sends movies from his 8mm camera. Then he becomes friendly with Rosa, a chambermaid, and soon it's a love affair. He continues to send letters and movies home. His Swiss lover is hurt and angry; she sends an ultimatum.