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La Salamandre



Directed by Alain Tanner. "A sensational new Swiss film? It sounds like a contradiction in terms. Who ever heard of the Swiss cinema? But *La Salamandre*, by a 42-year-old Swiss film critic turned director named Alain Tanner, is the most interesting foreign film of 1972 and vaults both Tanner and his fascinating star, Bulle Ogier, into the front ranks of European filmmaking.

Ogier, who reminds one in both looks and talent of Julie Harris, with an added dimension of powerful eroticism, plays a young working-class girl named Rosemonde, a typically Godardian heroine who lives her own life — working at one job after another when the spirit and sinking finances move her, returning home to dance her head off to the liberating energies of hard-rock music, seeking out men who please her and shedding them when they start weighing her down.

Tanner establishes her sensuality early on. We see her at work stuffing priapic sausages, then luxuriating in a public Geneva swimming pool, warm water washing over her lithe, scantily camouflaged body. With Tanner's help Ogier creates a complex, endlessly fascinating modern woman of the proletarian variety. Like the salamander, she can endure fire — of repressive work — and survive. She is at once ignorant, uninformed, smart, rebellious, indifferent, elusive, direct, a melange of opposites resolved in a sure sense of womanliness. Two young men, one a writer of imaginative fiction named Paul who plasters houses to make money and the other a journalist who writes dry stories on the Brazilian economy, win an assignment from Swiss television to invent a story based on Rosemonde's run-in with her uncle in which

the uncle was wounded by his own shotgun.

Pierre sets out to find out whether the shooting was accidental or deliberate but his inquiry dissolves quickly into a courtship. Paul continues to write about the fictional Rosemonde until he, too, meets the real one and falls in love with her. In the end, both men become so entangled with their subject that they cannot write, nor can they accept the narrowness of their own lives when viewed against Rosemonde's catch-as-catch-can lifestyle.

This dramatized dialectic — objective inquest, subjective involvement, rejection of a conventional way of life — moves the story forward. But the film finally succeeds in the eruption of small scenes and moments that are suffused with the spontaneous spirit of the heroine: Rosemonde walks off the sausage job when her boss criticizes her hair as messy, leaving the machine to spurt out endless yards of innards; Rosemonde gets herself fired from a shoeshop deliberately, by slyly caressing the legs of every customer, male or female.

Ironic: Like all Swiss artists — Klee, Honegger, Durrenmatt — Tanner must embrace a foreign tradition to survive, since the Swiss esthetic tradition is nugatory to say the least. Not surprisingly, he adopts a number of French styles — Godard's slapdash, journalistic spontaneity, Truffaut's themes (two men and the girl who changed them is pure 'Jules and Jim') and Eric Rohmer's highly literate, ironic kind of scripting. But Tanner's vision — his impatience and anger at the crushing quietism of a tidy consumer society and his call for a joyous, impulsive celebration of life — has been shaped by the glum, cold character of Geneva as surely as Godard and Truffaut's visions are refractions of the

City of Light."

Paul D. Zimmerman, *Newsweek*

"There are three people in Alain Tanner's Swiss film *La Salamandre*, which is a black-and-white movie that one remembers in so many shades of gray that it might have been in color. It is made with a drollery, intellect, and gay clarity that are distinct and reviving . . . the film is photographed and edited to proceed slowly, with a lot of mid-shots that characteristically allow you to make your own choice of what to look at. Sometimes there is a voice-over commentary, adding to the sense of distance and the possibilities of forming judgments. The intellectual means are subtle and simple; what one sees on the screen is funny and exact. The picture imparts the same freedom to fool about and to feel intimate that Paul and Pierre have together. Rosemonde, less grown-up and more battered, breaks loose in more violent ways. Her face changes are extraordinary . . . *La Salamandre* is a beautifully lucid and affectionate film. When the picture ends, the word 'FIN' does not appear."

Penelope Gilliatt, *The New Yorker*

La Salamandre (The Salamander). Written by John Berger and Alain Tanner. With Bulle Ogier, Jean-Luc Bideau and Jacques Denis. 1971. Black and White. In French with English subtitles. 125 minutes.