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Messidor

(FRENCH-SWISS-COLOR)

Variety — 2-28-79
Paris, Feb. 16.

A Gaumont release of a Citel Film-SSR Geneva-Action Films-Gaumont co-production. Written and directed by Alain Tanner. Stars Clementine Amouroux, Catherine Retore. Camera (Eastmancolor), Renato Berta; music, Arie Dzierlatka; editing, Brigitte Sousselier; sound, Pierre Gamet; production manager, Bernard Lorrain. Reviewed at Salles Ponthieu, Paris; Feb. 14, '79. Running time: 120 MINS.

Jeanne Clementine Amouroux
Marie Catherine Retore

After a two-year hiatus from commercial filmmaking, Alain Tanner returns with "Messidor." His previous film, "Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000," disconcerted some admirers who thought it a step in the wrong direction. This film should dissipate anxieties — it is a remarkable and harrowing filmic scanning of Tanner's own heart of darkness, Switzerland.

With lucid objectivity and insight Tanner presents the frightening and, at times, strangely exhilarating disintegration of two ordinary girls at odds with themselves and a prosperous but vacuously nondescript society. "Messidor" is the name given to the harvest period in the old French Revolutionary calendar; at one point the student lies to a policeman that she and her friend are the "Messidor sisters." They are, in effect, the children of prosperity, but the joke is to take on cruelly ironic significance.

Tanner shot the film with no fixed script, all the more reason to admire its fluid but unlinear progressions, its inexorable feeling of deepening anxiety. The film runs two hours and it would be hard to find a single scene that could be excised, as oblique as it might seem to the film's concerns. Few directors are as good as Tanner at creating such loose-limbed but sinewy textures.

Every scene is marked by Tanner's tact and intelligence. Incidents like a rape attempt are rightly horrible and devoid of the voyeurism that seems to titillate too many male directors. And canny good judgment dictates how far to take a scene in which the girls give expression to sudden homosexual impulses. In all of this Tanner's camera manner is limpid and his editing spare and unemphatic. He is finely served by Renato Berta's photography and Arie Dzierlatka's musical score.

The girls are played with unerring truth by Clementine Amouroux and Catherine Retore, both making their film debut. They are as much responsible for the film's impact as Tanner's technical expertise. —*Len.*