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THE HUMANE POLITICS OF ALAIN TANNER

★★★ CHARLES, DEAD OR ALIVE
Directed and written by Alain Tanner.
With Francois Simon, Marcel Robert, and Marie-Clair Dufour.

Alain Tanner may save us yet. This Swiss director, whose first film, *Charles, Dead or Alive*, will be shown at the Art Institute Friday night, is nearly unique among political filmmakers—he is neither a propagandist nor a stony-hearted intellectual, but an artist who approaches issues in an open and human way. His four films, *Charles, La Salamandre, Le Retour d'Afrique*, and *The Middle of the World*, have laid the groundwork for a new kind of committed cinema, one that is built with the lessons of Bertolt Brecht but is also willing to go beyond the academic problems of form and theory.

Most political filmmakers would rather challenge an audience than inspire it. Godard's analyses of revolutionary ideology and methods are usually involving, but if we end up in honest and inevitable confusion, we're more often ashamed than aroused. Tanner's films are concerned with the same questions, but they go about their work in a different way. Where Godard (of late) only gives us abstractions, Tanner shows us people, women and men trying, as honestly as they can, to bridge the gap between ideology and life.

"Empathy" and "identification" are obsolete terms in the political avant-garde—and perhaps rightly so, for all the abuse they have been put to—but Tanner makes them work again, responsibly. Character identification is too often a tool of seduction, an easy way for a director to get the audience around to his implicit point of view—if Bogart does it, it must be right. But Tanner never uses characters as vehicles for ideas. If he asks us to become involved with the people he creates, it's so we can share in their search.

Tanner's starting point, in *Charles* and elsewhere, is the vague, unsettling "unhappiness" that wedges itself into a perfectly comfortable, perfectly normal bourgeois life. Charles (Francois Simon) is a man of 50, about to turn control of his family watchmaking business over to his son. Charles is the third generation, locked in a job he dislikes by virtue of inheritance, dissatisfied both with the destiny his family structure has imposed upon him and with the rigid, stultifying society that is the family's extension.

The key moment in Tanner's films comes with the main character's realization of his condition, an insight tripped by a seeming triviality—in *Le Retour d'Afrique*, a cancelled trip; in *The Middle of the World*, a chance meeting with an Italian waitress. For Charles, the moment comes when he's asked to do a TV interview on the anniversary of his firm's founding. What begins as inarticulate shame grows into a frank and careful indictment of himself, his way of life, and the culture that made him. After the interview is televised, Charles finds that he can't go home again, and eventually drifts into a relationship with a sign-painter and his wife, living in what they think is safe isolation from society in a ramshackle house in the country.

This 1969 film finds Tanner still very much under the influence of Godard. He shows the same fondness for quotation and paradox—and for paradoxical quotations: "Be realistic, demand the impossible." But most importantly, Tanner is concerned with the same question that obsesses Godard—"What now?" Once the ideological barrier is broken, once we know that something's wrong and there is no freedom under capitalism—what do we do? For Tanner, Swiss society is a deadly soporific, so comfortable, so seductive, that the soul dies and isn't missed. As long as the factory workers have color TVs, revolution is unthinkable.

Tanner can bring himself to admit only one possibility for freedom and justice, one that exists on the most fundamental interpersonal level—between a man and a woman, between two friends. And even then the pressures are too great; it can't last. In *The Middle of the World*, the politician and the waitress have to go back to the lives they came from; the couple in *Le Retour d'Afrique* give up on political work, moving to a condominium and having a child. The shell of isolation crumbles for Charles, too. Free but impotent, he begins to drink; and when his family succeeds in having him committed to a sanatorium, he goes along with it. As Charles is driven off in an ambulance in the film's last shot, the shriek of the siren becomes an almost unbearable scream of rage, sorrow, and helplessness.

But Tanner isn't a defeatist. As long as those days or hours of freedom exist, so does the possibility—distant, perhaps—of change. Tanner gives us an image of a kind of perfection, something we can look for. Too honest to postulate utopias, Tanner finds hope in those rare moments when reason and emotion are united in a sort of moral bond, and directed toward a private revolution.

In the end, *Charles, Dead or Alive* isn't in the same class with Tanner's two most recent films. The *mise-en-scene* is often uncertain and the structure seems clumsy—two problems that most first features have. And there is nothing in *Charles* to compare with the transcendent emotional effects Tanner now seems so adept at. But it is a film of genuine intelligence, and, as a harbinger of one of the most creative directorial personalities of the 70s, it isn't to be missed.

—DAVE KEHR