



ALFONSO CUÁRON ON ALAIN TANNER

The Salamander

The Salamander (La Salamandre)

Director: Alain Tanner

Production Company: Svociné

Producer: Alain Tanner

Geneva Associate Producer: Gabriel Auer

1st Assistant Director: Michel Schopfer

2nd Assistant Director: Florian Rochat

Script Girl: Madeleine Cavussin

Screenplay/Dialogue: Alain Tanner

Co-screenwriter: John Berger

Director of Photography: Renato Berta

Assistant Cameraman: Sandro Bernardoni

Electrician: Jean-Paul Auberson

Editor: Brigitte Sousselier

Assistant Editor: Marc Blavet

Post-production: Jean-Marie Lambert

Music: Patrick Moraz, Main Horse Airline

Sound Recordist: Marcel Sommerer

Boom Operator: Gérard Rhône

Narrator: Anne-Marie Michel

Cast:

Bulle Ogier (*Rosemonde*)

Jean-Luc Bideau (*Pierre*)

Jacques Denis (*Paul*)

Véronique Alain (*Suzanne*)

Marblum Jéquier (*Paul's wife*)

Nathalie (*Paul's daughter*)

Marcel Vidal (*Rosemonde's uncle*)

Dominique Catton (*Roger*)

Daniel Stuffer (*shoe shop proprietor*)

Violette Fleury (*shoe shop proprietor's mother*)

Mista Prechac (*Rosemonde's mother*)

Pierre Walker (*property assessor*)

Antoine Bordier (*civil defence inspector*)

Janine Christoffe (*Catherine*)

Marcel Robert (*Max*)

Claudine Berthet (*Zoé*)

Guillaume Chenevière (*police inspector*)

Michel Viala (*head painter*)

Pedro Penas (*painter*)

Jean-Christophe Malan (*factory foreman*)

François Simon, André Schmidt, Denise Chollet,

Delya Saviane (*customers in shop*)

Philippe Nicati

Olivier Brun

Adrien Nicati

Germaine Epierre

Claudiane Lanz

Jean-Pierre Moriaud

Alain Lecoultre

Pierre Holdener

Jane Friedrich

Switzerland 1971

127 mins

Digital (restoration)

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A salamander, Alain Tanner tells us during his film, is an attractive but venomous lizard which can go through fire and emerge unscathed. By fire Tanner doesn't mean passion or catastrophe; rather he has in mind a monotony of work, of people, of conversation and landscape (all of them, apparently, particularly Swiss) which is as menacing as any natural phenomenon.

By class, geography and sex, Rosemonde, the salamander of the title, is born to a world of oppressive tedium. Seventh in a rural family of 11 children who live in a bare valley doomed to six months of winter, she is at 12 packed off to a war-obsessed petit bourgeois uncle in Geneva who uses her as a housekeeper. Even holidays with the uncle are unendurable; but Rosemonde, with the police on her tail, manages to escape to the Cote d'Azur. One day as the uncle is obsessively cleaning his gun, he is wounded in the shoulder. He claims that Rosemonde has shot him; she insists the gun went off accidentally. The case is dropped, and Rosemonde escapes to a superficially independent life of tedious jobs.

So much for case history. At which point enter Pierre and Paul – and a dichotomy which may owe something to Tanner's co-writer, John Berger. They will collaborate on a television script based on Rosemonde's life. Pierre (Jean-Luc Bideau), the journalist, armed with a battery of tape recorders and cameras, will arrive at the facts via an exhaustive investigation of Rosemonde and her life; Paul (Jacques Denis), the writer, will discover the facts in his imagination. Extrapolating from Rosemonde's name (a Saint's Day, therefore a younger child in a large working-class family...), Paul swiftly pieces together a story which, we later discover, closely resembles the real one.

Pierre stubbornly begins a lugubrious inquest into Rosemonde's past, unleashing a baleful litany of abused authority from a landlady ('Shocking disorder!'), an employer ('Broke all records for lateness!'), and the uncle ('She's a bad lot!'). When Pierre finally meets Rosemonde, his own journalist's authority topples and he finds himself acceding ironically to her requests to feed her, advise her, make love to her, spend a frozen weekend in a dreary hotel near her family. Paul, initially with great reluctance and later with great commitment, finds himself on the same route. Despite its accuracy, he is forced to abandon his script: 'Now I feel I no longer know anything about her. A journalist repeats what he's just learned. Whereas I'm trying to make sense of what I already know.' Finally both men abandon their scripts.

In this Pirandellian situation of two (or four, with Tanner and Berger) authors in search of a character, Tanner ensures that the audience will be no farther ahead on the trail. The opening slow-motion shot of the old man falling wounded while cleaning his gun, with Rosemonde's frightened, disembodied face in a corner of the frame, visually reproduces the *fait divers* on which Pierre and Paul will base their story, but gives nothing away on the question of Rosemonde's innocence. We, like Pierre and Paul, must wait until Rosemonde feels like confessing. To Pierre's requests for her life story, Rosemonde replies by turning up the volume on a jukebox or making up a fairytale. The truth is not discoverable by direct enquiry; it can only emerge obliquely. In the same way, Tanner's camera rarely confronts its characters head on. Instead it often

ALFONSO CUÁRON ON ALAIN TANNER

Charles, Dead or Alive Charles mort ou vif
+ intro by Alfonso Cuarón
Sat 25 Jan 15:00

The Salamander La salamander
Sat 25 Jan 17:50

Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000
Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000
+ intro by Alfonso Cuarón
Sun 26 Jan 15:40
In the White City Dans la ville blanche
Sun 26 Jan 18:35

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locates itself on their backs, peers over their shoulders, or wanders away as they are speaking. Music will set up a scene and then suddenly disappear, startling us into an uncomfortable awareness that we are in a cinema watching a movie. An ironically omniscient commentary often previews what a character will do next, or mockingly describes what we have already seen.

The tone and style of the film – expectations constantly thwarted or ironically fulfilled, scenes apparently (though not in fact) improvised, offhand visual gags (the condom-like sausage skins which Rosemonde fills in her first production line job, the startled reactions of the customers in her next job at a shoe shop when she absentmindedly massages their legs) recalls the freewheeling exercises of the early *nouvelle vague*. Specifically, Truffaut's shadow lurks throughout the film; Paul and Pierre, the dreamer and the realist, complementary friends and amicable rivals for one woman, might well be stepsons of Jules and Jim. But Rosemonde (played with deadly accuracy by Bulle Ogier), for all her dominance, capriciousness and darting flashes of gaiety or sadness, is no Catherine.

Although she is very aware of her sexuality, it is more likely to play a part in her victimization by society than to help her to rise above it. Disillusioned and a confirmed drifter at 23, Rosemonde resembles Barbara Loden's Wanda; but unlike Loden, Tanner translates his character's lack of ties as freedom. We last see Rosemonde after she has quit her shoe shop job, her face a joyous and confident contrast to the grey, empty faces of the monotonous crowds.

Tanner reputedly made *The Salamander* on a budget of £26,000, on 16mm, later blown up to 35mm, with a small crew and in a minimum number of days. It is actually his second feature, following *Charles, Dead or Alive*, which he made in 1968. But it's worth recalling that Tanner made his debut in England 16 years ago, when with Claude Goretta he made *Nice Time*, an open-eyed look at Piccadilly Circus which was shown in one of the Free Cinema programmes. After working as an editor at the BBC, he returned to Switzerland when his work permit ran out, since when he has been making documentaries for Swiss television. His television experience shows to advantage in *The Salamander*, for which he received a partial grant from the Swiss government. That he could produce this accomplished and original film with such slender resources is a lesson from which British directors might have something to learn.

Victoria Radin, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1973