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MOVIES

## TOUR DE FORCE

Gypsy Caravan, You Kill Me

By **GERALD PEARY**  
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*YOU KILL ME*: When John Dahl chooses mushy, he chooses wrong.

Two movies push at each other within Jasmine Dellal's *GYPSY CARAVAN*, which opens this Friday, July 6, at the Kendall Square. One is joyful and buoyant, the other pedantic and annoying. Let's start with the half empty. Was it to qualify for funding and grants that so many moments are given over to special PC pleading for the Romani community? We gadjos are lectured time and again on how Gypsies have been stereotyped as shiftless thieves, though in fact they're regular, hard-working folks, just trying to support their families. Even Johnny Depp makes a cameo to belabor the point.

It's misguided of the non-Romani filmmakers to insist on a scrubbed version of Gypsy life. Peek into the corners of this documentary and you'll discover characters far earthier and rowdier than this narrative dares promote. There's rampant cigarette smoking, happy guzzling of cheap wine, some positive mentions of wenching. Who knows where these vices might lead? To unspeakable areas for PBS, where *Gypsy Caravan* is headed after its theatrical life.

When the preaching stops, however, there's music, fabulous music, culled from a historic 1991 tour across America that featured five masterful Gypsy bands from four countries — India, Romania, Spain, and Macedonia. Northern India was the first homeland of Gypsies, before their thousand-year migration across the world. Maharaja, a dashing coiffed ensemble with turbans and winding moustaches, play classic Indian music, assuming the lotus position on stage. Their formal, slightly rigid weave of string instruments counterpoints the madcap whirling of Harish Kumar, who spins mightily on his knees beneath his shiny skirt.

Antonio El Pipa's Flamenco Ensemble from Andalusia sings out in Spanish rather than Romani. Antonio is a handsome, tight-pants dude in the Antonio Banderas mold, and his electric dancing is urged on by the hoarse, chimney-sized singing voice of Juana, his salt-of-the-earth aunt. One of two big-mama divas in the Gypsy Caravan tour, Juana is nonetheless a teeny violet next to Macedonia's venerable Esmá Redzepova, who in 1976 was declared Queen of the Gypsies. "Babs" Streisand, move over! Esmá remains super-royalty, with her quivering, histrionic, gorgeous pipes. Childless in Skopje, she and her gadjo husband adopted 47 orphans over the years. Some grew up to play in Esmá's band, courting their foster mother with trumpet and clarinet.

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Remember the rousing call-to-arms of the title song for Emir Kusterica's Time of the Gypsies? You get a rat-tat-tat trumpet-and-trombone version in Gypsy Caravan. Which Romanian outfit plays it, Fanfare Ciocăria or Taraf de Haidouks? I confess to uncertainty — their robust tune making (don't forget the oom-pah-pah tubas) melds into one frenetic, jubilant, hypothermic sound.

For a time in the 1990s, John Dahl was as important a "neo-noir" director as the Coen Brothers, with his smart, neo-hardboiled duo Red Rock West and The Last Seduction. Dahl tries again with **YOU KILL ME**, which also opens at the Kendall Square this Friday. Alas, his new gangster tale about a Polish-American hoodlum, Frank (Ben Kingsley), who joins AA to stop drinking and be an more effective murderer is fatally unsure of its tone. Is this a straight-ahead black comedy, or is it a feel-good movie about second chances, with a de rigueur happy ending? When Dahl chooses mushy, he chooses wrong. Kingsley is an efficient killer from Buffalo, but Téa Leoni is a sour choice for his San Francisco love interest.

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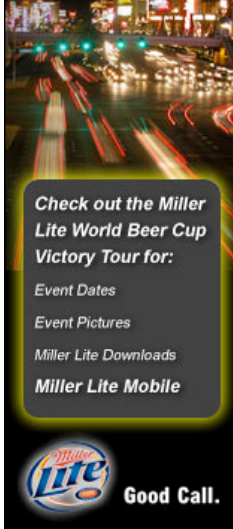


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