

AoF: Atkinson On Film

World & Domestic Cinema

WHEN THE ROAD BENDS: TALES OF A GYPSY CARAVAN (Gypsy Caravan) (Jasmine Dellal, US, 2006, 110 m.). If you like Roma music (and if you don't I hope you can be reincarnated until you do; it'll be worth it) you'll love this brilliantly crafted documentary film. Director Jasmine Dellal and her two fine cinematographers, Alain de Halleux and Albert Maysles, go on a U.S. tour with five of the very best Romani bands around. Their music is to die for. Here's a sketch of each group:

Fanfare Ciocărlia is a 12 piece brass band from Zece Prăjini, a NE Romanian village near the Moldavian border. Their music, sometimes referred to as "Balkan funk," blends Romanian, Roma, Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbian and even klezmer influences. They were featured in the recent German-Turkish hit drama, *Head On*. **Taraf de Haidouks** (means band of brigands - or bandits) hails from the Romanian village of Clejani, SW of Bucharest. The players are called lautari, meaning traditional (folk) musicians. They have played with Yehudi Menuhin and the Kronos Quartet. The actor Johnny Depp is a big fan, after working with them in the Sally Potter film, *The Man Who Died*. He once flew them to his nightclub in LA and paid them \$10K to perform (Depp talks about them in this film). Their leader for many years was Nicolai Neaurescu, a droll violin player who busked wherever he went. Ms. Dellal, who was present for this screening, tells a story about when the tour was playing in Berkeley, and Mr. Neaurescu went busking around town. One listener was so moved that he gave Nicolai his gold watch. I had the pleasure of seeing Taraf perform a few years ago at the Vancouver (BC) Folk Music Festival. Between gigs, Mr. Neaurescu circulated through the park grounds playing for tips. In its 25 year history, no previous performer had ever busked at the VFMF. Festival staff - mostly sweet, organic food loving Birkenstockers - couldn't for the life of them figure out if this was OK.

Antonio El Pipa, a Gypsy Flamenco ensemble from Andalucia, Spain, is led by the dancer Antonio, who was born in Jerez de la Frontera. Performing with the group is his aunt, Tia Juana la del Pipa, whose raw, almost basso voice is as earthy as one can possibly imagine (think Tom Waits here). **Maharaja** (formerly Musafir) is a song and dance troupe from Rajasthan in NW India. The group is influenced by diverse traditions, including north Indian folk music, Arabic and Sufi. Their star is Sayari Sopera, a gorgeous young man who performs as a dazzlingly costumed female Sufi-style dancer.

Esma Redžepova is probably the best known Rom performer in Europe. Her career spans over 40 years and 15,000 concerts, many of them benefits for humanitarian causes. Known as "Queen of the Gypsies," she hails from Skopje, Macedonia, though for most of her career she has lived in Belgrade. She sings with the Teodosievski ensemble, founded by her late husband, Stevo Teodosievski. The couple adopted 47 boys over the years, raising them and teaching them music in particular. Esma, as she is simply known everywhere, has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize for her human rights work on behalf of Romani people, and has received an award from UNISEF for these efforts.

The music these groups create is sublimely exciting, amusing, and full of attitude. In the case of the eastern European groups, there is also more than a touch of what one might regard as a sort of blues. The music is one of two wondrous elements in this film. The other is the superb way in which the film itself is built. Ms. Dellal blends concert footage with scenes of the musicians at leisure or dressing for performances. The musicians delight in getting to know each other.

Ms. Dellal also visits the villages where these people come from. There are remarkable views of the musicians' homes and families, townspeople, buildings, farm animals, countryside, you name it, in places like Jerez, Zece Prăjini, rural Rajasthan and Clejani, where the indomitable Nicolai tells us he may build a pool like Johnny Depp's. The photography and editing are first rate. This is quite a step up for Ms. Dellal from her 1999 film, *American Gypsy: A Stranger in Everybody's Land*. That film featured some interesting characters but was not nearly as well made as *Caravan*. For lovers of music and cultural diversity, *Caravan* is a film you must not miss. (In Romani, Spanish, various Northern Indian dialects & English) Grade A (01/26/07)