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Movie Reviews Land of Gypsies

Movie Reviews
By *Ken Eisner*
Publish Date:
July 26, 2007

Gypsy Caravan

Featuring
Esma
Redzepova
and Johnny



Joyous Gypsy Caravan trails Romani musicians through Canada and the U.S., then on to Romania.

Depp. In English, Romany, Spanish, Macedonian, Romanian, and Hindi with English subtitles. Rated G. Opens Friday, July 27, at the Cinemark Tinseltown

Even if you have little interest in the music of the far-flung Romany people and not much patience for concert movies, you are likely to want to run away with this Gypsy Caravan.

Directed by Britain's Jasmine Dellal and shot by Albert Maysles and Alain de Halleux, the film follows five diverse musical groups on a six-week tour of Canada and the United States back in 2001, taking time out to visit each of their homelands.

The most immediately ear-catching, and eye-filling, performer is Esma Redzepova, a size-large Macedonian dubbed "the Queen of the Gypsies" on a previous tour of India, from where the hypnotic Maharaja hails. So do the Roma people, in fact, as is made clear by this largely non-narrated effort, with its combination of on-camera discussions, storytelling songs, and colourful travel footage. Aside from intimate moments in the tour bus and within the confines of various planes, stages, and hotel lobbies, we spend the most time in Romania, home to two of the groups.

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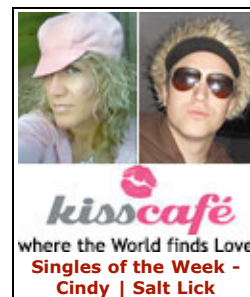
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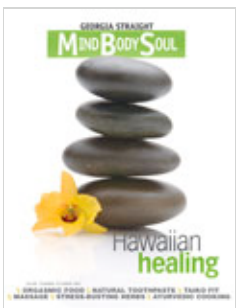
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One is the infectious horn-based Fanfare Ciocarlia, who combine Turkish, Balkan, and klezmer influences, while the better-known outfit Taraf de Haidouks (translated as Band of Brigands) is led by the wizened Nicolai Neauescu. This philosophical fiddler is seen in his 80s, still working and, like everyone else here, chain-smoking to support his entire village back home. (The support of fan Johnny Depp hasn't hurt.) It turns out that Redzepova, whom we also catch in a marvellous 1960s TV clip, raised 47 abandoned children with her late husband.

This soulful diva proudly claims that she has "never been assimilated", but that isn't quite true. She may not have compromised her art, but the Queen's music is as different from that of the Romanians as Spaniard Antonio El Pipa's dancing is distinctive from that of Maharaja especially when they feature a cross-dressing specialist in the "knee dance". As El Pipa points out, flamenco is now so associated with Spanish culture that people often forget its Romani nature.

Indeed, part of the film's purpose is to school viewers as to the tremendous variety of expression among what used to be called Gypsies, and to replace widely circulated stereotypes with more humanistic which is to say purely joyous insights. At almost two hours long, Gypsy Caravan is dense with feelings as well as information, so don't be surprised if some in the audience need to leave the theatre once or twice to cool down, and then come back for more.

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