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- News
- Entertainment
 - ▶ Movies
 - ▶ Theatre
 - ▶ Music
 - ▶ Literature
 - ▶ Television
 - ▶ Celebrities
- Biz/Finance
- Style
- Health/Fitness
- Sports
- Travel
- Weather

Directory

- City Map
- Nightlife
- Shopping
- Lodging
- Food/Drink
- Businesses

Community

- Calendar
- Daily Blog
- Discussions
- Resources
- Pride 2007

- Cars
- Real Estate
- Classifieds

Fun

- Circuit Parties
- Horoscopes
- Giveaway Ctr
- Wallpaper

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Gypsy Caravan

Rated Not Rated » Grade: B+

by Kilian Melloy
EDGE Boston Contributor
Friday Jul 6, 2007



Cross-dressing dancer Harish Kumar (Source:Shadow Distribution)

Thirty-five performers, hailing from four countries, speaking nine languages, on a music tour for six weeks during which they will play eighteen shows: even if director Jasmine Dellal had trained her camera on the stage, filmed the concerts, and left it at that, **Gypsy Caravan** would have been a gem of world music.

But Dellal follows the stories of her performers, and the story of the Roma (or gypsies, as they are more commonly known) off stage and backstage, on the bus, and even in their home countries. What she shows us is an ethnicity too broad and diverse to be boiled down to any one stereotype, let alone the ages-old prejudicial view that gypsies are itinerant mystics specializing in the exotic and the criminal.

"Gypsies, tamps, and thieves," the old Cher tune goes; well, in this case, it's more like gypsies, pillars of their communities, and passionate musicians.

The performers hailing from poorer countries, like Romania and Macedonia, support their families and their communities through their music. One Romanian group, Fanfare Ciocarlia, brought electricity to their village with revenues from their CD sales; these are not self-obsessed rock stars live in mansions. Indeed, when Dellal brings her camera into their homes, what we see is neither gold nor marble, but rather laughing children and livestock.

A Taraf de Haïdouks band-member, upon returning to the troupe's native Romanian village Clejani, discovers that his son has gotten engaged in his absence; there's much good natured grumbling about the expense of a wedding (and a few gasps from the audience when he discloses that his 19 year old son is marrying a 13 year old bride), but the occasion itself, caught on film, is every bit the joyous family occasion it should be.

And in Jaisalmer, India, Maharaja member Harish Kumar--one of only two people in the world who do "the knees dance"--makes his preparations for a day of shopping, concerts, and a cross-dressing portrayal of a mythical figure from Indian lore. He's a sweet, beautiful figure at home with his family, and just as much so whirling on stage in drag. Maharaja's web site describes Kumar as "the one and only dancing desert drag queen" whose act is "a crossdressing confusion emphasized by the warmest winks," and, by golly, it's all true. Though Maharaja are not ethnic gypsies, they seem to be included here for the spirit of their music, which their site says "represents what was played at the time of

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the great migration."

In wealthier countries, such as Spain, where Flamenco singers Antonio El Pipa and his aunt, Juana, live, the housing situation is a little more familiar to American eyes: Juana lives in an apartment, and when she speaks of her family's struggle with drugs and her faith in God, and when she ruffles the hair of her pubescent son (who rolls his eyes like kids everywhere will do), it's easy to see these people not as Other, but as Us; they may have a more glamorous day job, but their problems and their goals are the same.

It takes a movie of some scope and caliber to bring us the lesson, though. When the tour checks into an American hotel and has a look at the guest register, they are shocked to see that another guest has written about them: "I'm scared," the guest has inscribed in the book; "Oh Jeezus God, save me form gypsies." Whether he's genuinely afraid or simply insensitively waggish is beside the point: after centuries of persecution, this is where the gypsies still find themselves, even in the land of the brave.

But persecution and demonization, as it turns out, lies at the heart of Romi music: we are told that the early Rom protested social injustice through music, and we're reminded throughout that despite the differences in sound and form, the heart of Romi music is an unquenchable passion.

We hear references to the Roma history, to a migration of some sort, and a diaspora that has led, today, to the scattering of an estimated twelve million Roma throughout the world, conforming to the languages and customs of the nations into which they have assimilated, and yet sharing the ancient Romi language amongst themselves. Aside from mention of the persecution they endure, we hear little about what is, in effect, a global secret society. What prompted the great migration into Europe centuries ago? Where did they come from? The word "gypsy" came from Europeans speculating that this new migrant population coming into their midst had originated in Egypt; but analysis of the Romi language suggests they might have come from Eastern India. The film offers no enlightenment, though we do see an American Romi speaking with the others in the Romi tongue, eliciting a frisson of comradely delight.

A little more of the Romi passion and music in the form of concert footage would not have been out of place here, either. Like Wim Wenders' Buena Vista Social Club, the profiles of the musicians are fascinating, but it's the music that should shape and define the film: in this case, that shape is a little loose and the music a little scant, but with so many traditions coming together on stage and on the road, what are you going to do? A scene of the musicians trying to cobble together a fitting finale number that honors all of their disparate musical traditions sums up both the charms and frustrations of the movie, but their laughter and sense of community suffuse the movie, too, and lift it above its shortcomings.

Gypsy Caravan

Producer, Jasmine Dellal; Executive Producer, Wouter Barendrecht; Executive Producer, San Fu Maltha; Executive Producer, Michael Werner; Cinematographer, Alain de Halleux; Cinematographer, Albert Maysles.

Running time: 110 minutes.

Kilian Melloy reviews media, conducts interviews, and writes commentary for EDGEBoston, where he also serves as Assistant Arts Editor.

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