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Summer ride-alongs: Three movie quests for authenticity

By Kathleen Murphy
07/18/2007

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Despite her good intentions, Angelina Jolie remains a prisoner of her exotic beauty. Who can see through that iconic mask to discover an ordinary mortal such as Marianne Pearl ("A Mighty Heart")? Similarly, a good many stars in Hollywood's heavens possess looks that seem never to have been touched by real experience. We like it that way. Our gods and goddesses, laved in the golden light of cinema, allow us to savor the illusion that it's possible to be young and beautiful forever.



Photo Gallery

'CASHBACK' Emilia Fox, Sean Biggerstaff

Trouble is, such plasticine perfection tends to pall after awhile. You begin to hanker for faces that look lived-in, that show signs of emotional wear and tear, like the luminous visage of "Away from Her"'s Julie Christie. A rich life can season the flesh into less tranquilizing, more complex beauty that celebrates our brief but passionate passages. Sublime example: Marion Cotillard's 40something Piaf in "La Vie en Rose."

"GYPSY CARAVAN," a documentary directed, written and produced by Jasmine Dellal, is profligate with such imperfect beauty, along with the kind of gloriously passionate music that the Rom (gypsy) nation makes in India, Romania, Macedonia and Spain. The movie follows five groups of performers through a sold-out concert tour across America, from New York to the Pacific, interspersing interludes shot in the musicians' homes, from a cluttered Spanish kitchen to a primitive Romanian village.

As polished doc, "Gypsy Caravan" is no gem - the footage is actually drawn from two different tours, but maintains the fiction that this "caravan" has singular narrative unity; visually the film looks amateurish, a low-rent film and video hybrid; and there's far too much of a tour manager's banal commentary.

But none of that's really important, if you have a taste for proud, handsome faces that are both history and landscape, along with wonderful music that rises triumphantly out of racial and individual memory, joy and loss. "Diamante bruto," a Spanish dancer calls his aunt's raw, fiery flamenco - apt adjective for all of "Gypsy Caravan"'s stars and sounds.

That aunt, Juana de la Pipa, describes her mother, a legendary flamenco artist, as "a cathedral," and she herself is monumental, with a voice of hoarse purity, full of what she defines as "duende," the emotional fire that burns through all of the film's music. When she sings, Juana pours out pride, pain and redemption, the spoils of

her hard life with a drug-addicted husband and son. Homely, unadorned, de la Pipa is magnificent earth goddess, conjuring memories of rough-hewn Pilar, Hemingway's heroic Spanish rebel in "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

Decked out in a weathered little fedora and ancient suit, his cheeks gaunted by the absence of teeth, master

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Romanian fiddler Nicolae Neacsu might be 70 or 100. When this elder scrapes a loosened string over his violin, a wild metallic burr comes weirding out, a haunting wail that might be the cry of those brothers and sisters murdered by the Nazis. On stage, when Nicolae performs, he's as cocky as a man in his prime.

Here's a beautiful Indian man, who once studied to be a teacher, metamorphosing into an exquisite girl, all spangles and brightly colored muslin skirts, to perform the rare "knees" dance - whirling joyously about the stage like a human top. And, unforgettably, there's Esma Redzepova, a plump Macedonian woman of indeterminate age known as the "Queen of the Gypsies," for popularizing her Romani singing style over a 45-year career.

Once Esma turns that Maria Callas face into the spotlight and looses her magnificent voice, this diva is timeless, mesmerizing. At a benefit for Kosovo's gypsies, she sings from beneath a black veil, her expressive hands and voice weeping for the tribulations of blood kin. Piaf and the Macedonian "queen" - sisters under the skin.

In "Gypsy Caravan," you will meet artists who have immersed themselves in the creative-destructive element of passionate experience. It's an encounter that delights the eyes and ears - and the soul.

A British sweetmeat concocted by former fashion photographer Sean Ellis, "**CASHBACK**" piles on visual prestidigitation, "silly buggers" slapstick, and rom-com charm. But Ellis' featherweight tale of adolescent love lost and found pretends to far more seriousness about the nature of love, beauty and time than the movie's slight shoulders can carry.

"Cashback" may fancy itself a full-bodied portrait of the artist as young voyeur and time-bender, but its doofus hero Ben (Sean Biggerstaff) mostly resembles a sad-eyed cross between "The Graduate" and a slacker Hogwarts grad (Biggerstaff played Oliver Wood in the first two "Harry Potter" films).

Film opens on a young woman screaming angrily into the camera (Ben's and our POV). It's Suzy (Michelle Ryan), young Ben's girlfriend, and though we can't hear her words, it's clear she's dissing the art-school student bigtime - and punctuating her breakup rage by throwing things at him. During this scene - soundless except for dollops of classical music - Ben reflects overvoice on what's happening, his tone about as engaged as a Kevin Smith stoner.

When Suzy slings an Ikea lamp, it goes slo-mo, then hangs in space before Ben's eyes. Cut to CU of a scarlet sea of ketchup glopping on to an island of mashed potatoes. Too cute by half, a visual jape that milks ha-has out of our subliminal anticipation of Ben's getting bloodied by that flung lamp. We're clued in from the get-go that clever cutting-up with the camera will be a large part of "Cashback"'s raison d'être.

Post-breakup, Ben can't sleep, so he takes a night-shift job in a supermarket. (Ellis "grew" this feature from a 19-minute, Oscar-nominated, 2004 short that chronicled supermarket workers' battle against boredom.) There, he finds that he can freeze time, long enough to pull down blouses and bloomers and sketch gorgeous, half-naked women shoppers. In between these half-creepy, half-dreamy interludes, the droopy lad's bemused by the cartoonish hijinks of his Benny Hill boss and co-workers.

And, not infrequently during those long, boring evening hours, the camera drifts seamlessly sideways from supermarket environs to places in Ben's childhood, marking the moments when the budding artist learned to "see beauty" - in a naked Swedish au pair, dirty magazines, his busty biology teacher and under the upraised skirt of a neighborhood girl.

Soon, his interest is piqued by Sharon (Emilia Fox), one of the supermarket cashiers. Ellis does a lovely job of shooting Sharon as a dull, clockwatching drudge, barely able to muster the energy to change expressions. Then, imperceptibly, Ellis' camera "frames" Sharon - as Ben does, when he begins to actually "see" his subject - so that she slowly blooms into delicate radiance. Sharon soon evolves into a full-fledged beauty as Ben stops time to fully appreciate and compulsively draw her. (These slick fashion-mag sketches are tapped for a gallery exhibition - "A Frozen Second" - that launches his career.)

Is there a moral afoot? Takes time to see real beauty? Hard to tell whether fashion photog Ellis is having a postmodern guffaw at his artist hero's expense or thinks this is a hip aesthetic, but either way "Cashback" pretty much skates on the pretty surfaces of love and art.

In fairness, I must tell you that a number of critics have found Ellis' first feature erotic, polished, delightfully playful with time and memory. And some reviewers are entranced by his technical flash, utilizing slo-mo, freeze-framing, and speeded-up action. I cannot account for these opinions, since, as I've said, this stuff seems like half-baked adolescent angst, a bit precious and sometimes just plain twee. And a good many film-school types are wont to fall in love with and overdo this kind of camera trickery.

That said, "Cashback" is a pleasant, sporadically amusing summer entertainment, garnished by two undemandingly endearing leads. Two moments you're not likely to forget: Ben, abroad in a frozen world full of human statues, spies a mysterious figure in a hoodie ... who suddenly moves! Full-on scary - and we never learn who Ben's fellow time-traveler is or what he's doing in our sketch-artist's fantasy. "Cashback" ends on a high, magical note, a lovely image that puts the icing on this romantic confection.

You should not miss "**RESCUE DAWN**," arthouse auteur Werner Herzog's most mainstream film, which opened just last week. As Dieter Dengler, an American navy pilot shot down in Laos before hostilities in Vietnam formally began, Christian Bale is nothing less than stunning. Like Klaus Kinski, the incendiary actor Herzog directed so frequently and called his "beloved fiend," Bale is a master at conveying grinning dementia, an intense existential hubris that can literally consume flesh. (See "American Psycho," "The Machinist.")

Locked up in a hellhole prison camp, after horrendous torture, Dengler, his eyes glittering, his body humming like a high-tension wire, never wavers in his commitment to escape, from the Viet Cong jail and the venomously green jungle that surrounds it.

As crazy and obsessive as Herzog's megalomaniacal Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo and "Grizzly Man," Bale's Dengler lives to fly. When fellow prisoner Duane (superb Steve Zahn) asks him why he became a pilot, Bale seems almost possessed as he recounts his coup de foudre: during WW II, when an American bomber flew past his attic window, the pilot looked in at the German boy, sparking epiphany: "Little Dieter needs to fly." (Herzog made a documentary, "Little Dieter Needs to Fly," starring the real Dengler, back in 1997.) In that mystical exchange of gazes, Herzog mines a rich vein of movie memory and a perverse form of psychic, even metaphysical, transference!

Twenty years ago, Steven Spielberg's terrific "Empire of the Sun" chronicled a British boy's (a prepubescent Bale) fight for survival in a Japanese POW camp during World War II. His imagination is transfixed by the dashing, white-scarfed Japanese pilots in an adjacent airfield. They seem invincible, like gods, to the starving child. Like young Dieter, Spielberg's beleaguered lad sees the enemy as the face of freedom, a way to soar up and away from earthbound horrors, a way to get to heaven.

As pilot Dengler drops bombs on fields and houses beneath him, Herzog makes him a death-dispensing god, no longer a victim - the red-and-gold flowers blooming in Laos' sea of green are part of a beautiful visual composition, uncomplicated by death. Thus, the German-born flyer finds his most authentic sense of self as a citizen of a nation eternally engaged in divinely inspired invasions. Surely, some complex variation of the Stockholm syndrome is in play here.

Dengler's relentless, demented cheerfulness (he grins and says "Howdy" to a guard who's got a rifle pressed to his forehead) marks him as the kind of Herzogian madman ("everyone for himself and god against all") who will cart a ship over a mountain, who will soar out of one species into another, the grizzly, another indifferent, godlike killer. Still, this Herzog hero is also "for" a friend, the weaker Duane. Dengler stubbornly carries his dying charge, even giving up a tattered shoe to the man's ghost.

"Rescue Dawn" recounts the harrowing story of a man who maniacally refuses to surrender to his own mortality. By sheer will, Dieter Dengler survives - to fly again. He has much in common with his maker, Werner Herzog.

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