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MOVIES

Last updated July 19, 2007 3:12 p.m. PT

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Limited movie runs

GYPSY CARAVAN

The ebullient, proud and gifted musicians who embark on a six-week Gypsy Caravan tour that promotes Roma music are fascinating and as emotionally rich as they are true characters. They debunk the myths (even Johnny Depp makes a cameo and snarks over the false universal perception that they'll "steal your socks") that the Roma people have had wafting over them like moths to a summer flame for centuries. But director Jasmine Dellal can't quite let go of all her little darlings and the film feels endless, more endless and overly redundant. Nonetheless the music and the histories of these colorful musicians from four countries -- Romania, Macedonia, Spain and India -- who unite to bring their songs, quietly veiled political pleas, cultural truth and fire to the American masses (who attend their SRO tour in droves) are its no-contest appeal. Their stories tell volumes about a race, that despite being a prime target of Nazi cleansing, "never started a war" and jubilantly believe that "music contains all of life." (Paula Nechak)

GRADE: B

At the Varsity through Thursday. 111 minutes. Unrated.

SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY

A female doctor (Nantarat Sawaddikul) in a small country hospital interviews an army doctor (Jaruchai Iamaram) with such questions as "Do you prefer triangles, circles or squares?" Halfway through the film, after a meandering series of placid scenes and gentle conversations in and around this sleepy little complex, it begins all over again with the same interview and same cast, but this time in the white rooms and fluorescent lights of a modern urban medical center. Like the previous films of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "Syndromes and a Century" is a work of formal experimentation, his attempt to capture the quality of memory. His quiet sense of humor and colorful characters (like a dentist who sings Thai country music and a doctor who gets tipsy before going on TV) are endearing but the pleasures are less in the abstract story than the flow of his moods and the shades of his atmospheres. (Sean Axmaker)

GRADE: B

At SIFF Cinema through Thursday. In Thai with English subtitles. 105 minutes. No rating.

HALF MOON

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the legendary Mamo (Ismail Ghaffari), a fictional character based more on Mozart than any Kurdish musician, receives an invitation to perform in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Kurdish music had been outlawed for 37 years. "Half Moon" follows his sometimes supernatural journey through the mountains

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follows his sometimes supernatural journey through the mountains, deserts and villages to cross the border into the supposedly liberated country. Accompanied by his many sons who comprise the orchestra and a stowaway female singer (women being forbidden to sing in Iran), Mamo endures police shakedowns, dodges American bullets and meets an angel of death who promises to get him to the concert hall on time. Director Bahman Ghobadi ("Turtles Can Fly") ices his dark parable with a light frosting of humanistic humor. In one shot, a group of aging musicians aggressively toss their long white hair over their foreheads in a perfect parody of young headbangers. In another, 1,334 women sing together in celestial harmony along the rooftops of an Iranian village. As Mamo's journey continues, and the probability of his reaching his destination diminishes, we realize that the musical heritage of an entire culture is locked inside this old man, and is in grave danger of being blown away in a sandstorm. *(Bill White)*

**GRADE: B**

At SIFF Cinema through Thursday. In Kurdish and Persian with English subtitles. 114 minutes. Unrated.

**CASHBACK**

In 2004, Sean Ellis made a clever little film about the games the employees of a supermarket play to relieve the boredom of working the night shift. In expanding his Oscar-nominated short to a feature film, Ellis combines the vulgarity of a spring break farce with the clichés of a dippy romantic comedy. Protagonist Ben (Sean Biggerstaff), who in the short was simply an art student who imagined himself able to freeze time, is now burdened with the despair of being jilted by a merciless ex-girlfriend, an inevitable restorative affair with a co-worker, a best friend who has not yet graduated from the Playboy school of adolescent sexual awakening, and a case of insomnia. With Biggerstaff's breathless narration explaining every detail of the action, "Cashback" seems aimed at an audience that would rather be told a story than shown a movie. Certain shots (the still life painting that Ben sees in a broken package of frozen peas) evidence Ellis' skill at composing static images, but his messy staging of a soccer game, a painful piece of failed slapstick, proves he has not quite arrived as a feature film director. *(Bill White)*

**GRADE: C**

At the Varsity through Thursday. 90 minutes. Rated R for graphic nudity, sexual content and language.

**JUNE AND JULY**

One would think a tale of college-age fraternal twins dealing with the fresh loss of their mother would be characterized by the ups and downs of heartwarming to tragic scenes. "June and July," however, lacks all emotion. Though Seattle writer and director Brady Hall wins with familiar shots of the Northwest, the twin sister, June (Bernadette Culvo), has a depressing, anti-local personality, which takes away from the beautiful scenery. On a mission to move to New York, away from the small town she hates and the brother she loves, June has a sort of superpower that prevents her from feeling pain. Though the idea fits her cold character, it comes off as far-fetched and confusing. When the pair take a road trip to search for unknown family seen in a photograph, little is learned or explained about their past and why June possesses this strange strength and resilience. Similarly, transitions between scenes often are abrupt, making the film seem more like a collection of happenings than a story with a flowing plotline. *(Meghan Peters)*

**GRADE: C**

At the Northwest Film Forum through Thursday. 85 minutes. Unrated.

**THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN**

John Peterson isn't the usual Illinois farmer -- imagine Hunter S.

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ADVERTISING

Thompson astride a tractor, with Truman Capote's voice and the occasional feather boa. But he might become the only sort left. Drawing on footage collected over a nearly 30-year friendship, Taggart Siegel offers an enchanting, hopeful narrative of ruin and rebirth of both man and soil. Even as a college freshman, Peterson felt deep devotion to his inherited land. "I have a farm," was how he introduced himself to the first people he ever knew who didn't have one, artists he welcomed to his rural haven. Siegel had already chronicled, in a 1982 PBS film "Bitter Harvest," Peterson's loss of most of the farmland his grandfather had bought, illustrating the plight of many Midwestern farmers ensnared in debts that falling prices and poor harvests made impossible to repay. Here the canvas expands, with 1950s home movies by Peterson's late mother, and more current footage that documents Farmer John's mourning and celebrates his dogged transition to successful organic farming through community-supported agriculture (CSA). Not all change is welcome; false rumors of drug trafficking and devil-worship spark vandalism from his neighbors uncomfortable with the peculiar goings-on at the Peterson place. Siegel celebrates the growing CSA movement for reviving Farmer John and saving the land. But it's also a triumph of baby boomer ideals, that work and art can and ought to coexist. *(Gianni Truzzi)*

**GRADE: B+**

*At Uptown Cinemas and the Bellevue Galleria 11. 82 minutes. Unrated.*

*Director Taggart Siegel will take post-show Q&A Friday and Saturday evenings at the Uptown, and the Sunday matinee in Bellevue.*

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