

## Art house films

August 24, 2007

### BY BILL STAMETS

Opening this weekend on the art-house circuit:

#### 'Belle Toujours'

Portuguese auteur Manoel de Oliveira precisely tells an indiscreet tale of two elderly Parisians who toy with erotic secrets. Long ago Severine (Bulle Ogier) hid her illicit sex life from her beloved husband.

The secret's keeper is Henri Husson (Michel Piccoli), an intimate of both her and her late husband. She never knew if he told her spouse about her indiscretions, which merged fantasy and infidelity. It's 38 years later and Henri tantalizes her with that answer. Keeping the secret about her masochism is his sadistic pleasure.

De Oliveira, 98, intends "Belle Toujours" as an homage to Spanish auteur Luis Bunuel, his screenwriting collaborator Jean-Claude Carriere, and their 1967 film "Belle de Jour." That surreal treat (screening here with a discount admission price) portrayed Severine (then played by Catherine Deneuve) as a bourgeois housewife who finds fulfillment as a part-time prostitute. Michel Piccoli played Henri then as a supporting character. Now he's the film's lead, the unrepentant libertine who spots Severine at a concert and invites her to an intimate dinner.

"Belle Toujours" rewards with wise allusions to Bunuel: There's a fancy box that emits a mosquito sound when its lid is raised, and a rooster surreally struts down a hotel hallway. Yet they work if viewers have not first seen "Belle de Jour." Its U.S. trailer promised to "peer into the hidden world of the subconscious." "Belle Toujours" lets us peer at one master embroidering on the legacy of another master.

*No MPAA rating. Running time: 70 minutes. In French, with English subtitles. Opening today at Gene Siskel Film Center.*

#### 'Gypsy Caravan'

Jasmine Dellal directs, produces and writes this catchy documentary about a 2001 concert tour of five Gypsy bands. Onstage, backstage and on the road, the musicians are irresistible characters. Dellal detours to Romania, Macedonia, India and Spain to show her stars in their respective hometowns.

The camera work is always note-perfect. American master Albert Maysles is one of the shooters covering the "Queen of the Gypsies" Esma Redzepova, the traditional Indian folk troupe Maharaja, Romanian brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia, Taraf de Haidouks and the Antonio El Pipa Flamenco Ensemble. Bits of this music appeared in "Borat" and "The Man Who Cried," but here it takes centerstage.

Dellal dedicates her film to the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, an initiative by eight European countries to repair centuries of discrimination against Gypsies, more properly called Romani people. At one point, a Romani-American sound recordist shows the camera a log book from a motel where they stayed. The Nov. 4 entry reads: "Mo, watch out for the Gypsies. They barely speak English, and they are scary. They look at you kind of funny. I'm not sure what to think of them, except 'I'm scared.'"

"The truth is, most Americans believe the cliches about Gypsies," a less wary American tells the visitors. "Gypsy Caravan" peddles a new stereotype of earthy, vivacious, chain-smoking, paid-in-cash music-lovers.

*No MPAA rating (repeated instances of recreational tobacco use). Running time: 110 minutes. In English, Hindi, Macedonian, Romanian, Romani and Spanish, with English subtitles. Opening today at the Music Box Theatre.*

#### 'Summercamp!'

If you didn't get postcards or text messages from your kid at camp this summer, this delightful cinema-verite documentary may show you what your kid did. Thank goodness, these boys and girls are far more fun to watch than their counterparts in this summer's contrived "Daddy Day Camp."

Co-directors and co-cinematographers Sarah Price and Bradley Beesley score an easy upclose rapport with campers at Swift Nature Camp in Minong, Wis. Except for a few off-camera comments, the digital filmmakers could pass as imaginary friends, especially when on solo outings with their 11- and 12-year-old subjects.

Social skills are tested as kids deal with cliques, attention-deficit disorder meds and crushes. Some girls show remarkable curiosity about the animal kingdom. Critters seem to teach them coping skills. "I think most animals are a lot cooler than humans just because humans are just like pink blobs with no defenses," offers 11-year-old Bailey from Chicago. Holly from Aurora makes a very big deal out of turtle-counting forays vs. turtle-hunting forays.

The fun score features "Jesus and a Spider Are in My Sleeping Bag Tonight" and seven other songs by the Flaming Lips. Unlike the intense cadets for Christ and creationism in the recent documentary "Jesus Camp," the kids in the sweet "Summercamp!" have fun!

*No MPAA rating (prescription drug use by minors). Running time: 85 minutes. Opening Saturday at Gene Siskel Film Center.*

### **'Them' ('Ils')**

"This story is based on actual events," claims the opening title of this French-Romanian thriller set in Snagov, Romania. "Oct. 6, 2002, 11:47 a.m.": A mother and her teen daughter drive, argue and swerve to miss something on the dark country road. Then something gets them.

"Oct. 7, 2002, 4:32 p.m.": French schoolteacher Clementine (Olivia Bonamy) drives past the crime scene. For the next several hours, she and her lover Lucas (Michael Cohen) run for their lives -- around their old rented country house, through the woods and then in storm drains.

At first their tormentors seem supernatural. Later we see they wear sneakers and hoodies. The fright is crafted well enough, but the twist at the end calls for more originality than filmmakers David Moreau and Xavier Palud wield. When the ages and aims of the tormentors -- and who the title really refers to -- are revealed in the end titles, this last fright is a misfire.

This true story, according to the film's press notes, is supposedly based on a story the filmmakers heard from a cab driver. "Them" -- all about playing games with people who don't want to play -- plays games with its victims and its viewers. Moreau and Palud do not play nice.

*Rated R (some violence/terror). Running time: 77 minutes. In French, with English subtitles. Opening today at Pipers Alley.*

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