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Review: Gypsy Caravan

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GYPSY CARAVAN

Reviewed for CompuServe by Harvey S. Karten

Shadow Distribution

Grade: B+

Directed by: Jasmine Dellal

Cast: Taraf de Haidouks, Esma Redzepova, Fanfare Ciocarlia, Maharaja, Antonio El Pipa

Flemenco

ensemble, Johnny Depp, George Eli

Screened at: Review 2, NYC, 6/4/07

Opens: June 15, 2007

I must have been asleep when the five bands from four countries hit New York six years ago, belting out a concert as part of a cross-America tour in a series of sold-out concerts, as I was not aware of their presence here or anywhere else they traveled. No matter. Thanks to Jasmine Dellal, a British director, I got a taste of what I missed plus a CD sampler of their music (some glorious, others middling), while other music lovers will get a chance to get a taste of what they missed when the caravan rolls into their theaters. "Gypsy Caravan" opens in New York on June 15, in L.A. on June 29, and while I'm not familiar with the national rollout, you can check the usual magazines for information on their CD's. The music is as varied as the countries of origin, but music is not the sole point of the film. As many performers tell us—not that we weren't prepared for the spiritual message—while there are many differences among the musicians who come from the distinct cultures of Macedonia, Spain, India, and Romania, the men and women who traveled together by plane and bus across the wide expanse of the USA are united as members of the Roma, many or most of whom speak the Romani language.

While flamenco remains my own favorite style of Gypsy music (and incidentally, the word "Gypsy" is apparently a politically correct term to use, as the folks who entertain us use it regularly), the music is varied. We're treated to Fanfare Ciocarlia's eleven-man Romanian brass band that sounds more like Germanic oompah than anything from Southeastern Europe; Indian Raga that brings back memories of the early-seventies when everyone was studying the sitar under Ravi Shankar's influence; Romanian violin, played so fast that fiddlers might be accompanying the hot-dog eating contest at Nathan's; and jazz.

Despite the big bucks the musicians are making—we see twenties being exchanged like transactions at "Ocean's Thirteen"—the fellows seem not to be living large back home. For one scene, photographer Albert Maysles takes us to a village in southern Romania that could have been used for the filming of "Borat" where the entire village is supported by the group Taraf de Haidouks.

If any individual could be called the lead, that would be the Macedonian "Queen of the Gypsies" Esma Redzepova, seen in flashback as well about thirty pounds lighter, a woman who brags that she has never assimilated, though she admits that her late husband was a gadjo, or non-gypsy. Esma strides through the admiring crowds, a charismatic individual, one who might be compared to Portugal's Amalia Rodrigues, queen of the fado singers. Antonio El Pipa's flamenco dance contrasts beautifully, the most disciplined and classic form of the concert, while one performer from India's Rajasthan province traditionally dances in drag in accord with his country's mythology.

Much is made of the point that Gypsies have been accused of being thieves and worse and

have been marginalized by societies, even murdered by Nazis. The film is one means to show audiences that these stereotypes are false. What we see on the screen are happy people and joyful music that only the Taliban could possibly dislike.

Not Rated. 111 minutes © 2007 by Harvey Karten Member: NY Film Critics Online