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Movie Review

Gypsy Caravan

2007

Director: Jasmine Dellal

Cast: Nicolae Neascu, Juana la del Pipa, Esmá Redžepova

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About two-thirds of the way through this documentary of a North American concert tour in the fall of 2001—the opening moments inform us concisely that it deals with four countries, five bands, 35 musicians, nine languages and 16 cities over six weeks—there is a short clip of the film's two real divas, sitting side by side in the cramped, lurching tour bus. On-stage, each has been a glittering, towering, singular presence, rousing sold-out, cheering audiences to their feet. Each is a commanding cultural figure in the far-flung, thousand-year-old Roma diaspora—Juana la del Pipa central to a legendary flamenco family ensemble from Spain's Andalusia, Esmá Redžepova a five-decade veteran of some 20 albums and six films in Macedonia and a Nobel Peace Prize nominee for her work with Kosovo's 5,000 Roma refugees.

On that bus, sitting together, glancing affectionately at one another, these two middle-aged ladies seem much like long-lost friends, albeit reunited after a millennium torn apart by the Roma's migration out of northern India and persecution nearly everywhere they went. Such delighted mutual discovery among the tour's musicians gets as much attention from filmmaker Jasmine Dellal as she gives to concerts. That is just what the producer of this tour and its 1999 predecessor, World Music Institute's Robert Browning, intended, hoping it would "encourage them to group together as a people." While the concert performances are often electrifying, some of the most telling moments occur as participants rehearse together, share steps and tunes and food, and recall their own struggles and losses. These moments in turn act as gateways to frequent cinematic excursions back to their homelands.

Often known simply as Esmá, Redžepova hails from Skopje, Macedonia. It's her rendition of the Roma anthem, "Djelem, Djelem" ("I went, I went") that opens the concerts. Her recording of "Čaje Šukarije" was the featured song in last year's film *Borat*, and Esmá's currently suing Sasha Baron Cohen for using it without permission.

Juana la del Pipa performs with her nephew, Antonio El Pipa, who runs a flamenco school in the city of Jerez de la Frontera. A massive woman with a raw wail of a voice that takes getting used to, Juana's description of her mother fits herself: "When she stood up, she was like a cathedral."

The string-based Taraf de Haidouks (literally, "band of outlaws") is one of two groups in the film from Romania. Formed in 1989, shortly before Ceaușescu's demise, their music largely supports their village of Clejani. Patriarch and senior violinist Nicolae Neascu first tapped his incredibly fast protégé, nicknamed Caliu, when the latter was too poor to afford a burial for his infant daughter. Sally Potter used them in her film with Johnny Depp about Nazi massacres of Roma in France, *The Man Who Cried*. Depp appears briefly in an interview about working on that film.

The 12-piece brass band Fanfare Ciocărlia (Romanian for "skylark") won the BBC Radio 3 World Music Award for Europe last year with their CD "Queens and Kings." Dellal takes us into the farm kitchen of one of these musicians after the tour, where a woman sits singing while she chops food and the tuba player cuts hay with a scythe. Filmmaker Emir Kusterica has used their music in the soundtracks of his *Time of the Gypsies* and others.



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Maharajah comes from Rajasthan in India's northwest desert. Here, in their original home, the Roma were members of the dancers' caste, says Harish Kumar, the group's dancer. His work on-stage involves cross-dressing and make-up as a traditional female character and a dazzling swirl across the floor called "the Knees Dance" that he says only two people can perform. As an outgrowth of the tour, this group is now collaborating on the Maharaja Flamenca project with Antonio El Pipa.

Footage of the 2001 tour traces that bus northwest from Manhattan to highlights in Toronto, Niagara Falls, Ann Arbor, the flight south to Miami and Austin, and return to the road to Oakland and up the coast through redwood forests and along the Pacific coast to Oregon. Dellal—with master documentarian Albert Maysles as her DP and a sizable camera crew—use this tour as the organizing frame. Each week's "chapter" features tour footage as well as individual profiles and leisurely detours to the musicians' home communities abroad. This structure does organize an unwieldy amount of material even if the chronology is occasionally confusing. For example, Dellal inserts the funeral in Romania of the elderly violinist Nicolae Neascu before the tour's closing concert in Portland, though Neascu died a year later in December of 2002. This suggests the considerable "background" footage was shot after the tour concluded, also accounting for the film's release occurring only now.

Once a student of the great Marlon Riggs, the British-born and New York City-based Dellal has spent the past decade immersed in filming Roma culture. In large ways and small, this makes *Gypsy Caravan* a film for newcomers and Roma alike. The lovely shots of birds wheeling through a peach-colored dawn sky that open the film and recur, for example, provide an image of lonely wandering, but they also evoke an ancient fable that the Roma were birds who turned themselves into people. This image echoes in a music teacher's lament in Harish's home that so many Roma today can't read when he adds, "In ancient times we had our own scholars—one transcribed the notes of birds." In a characteristic Dellal transition, his students' singing then fades to Harish performing the same delicate melody beneath stage lights. In another scene's gentle visual rhyme, the poking heads and necks of geese watching a speeding train on the Romanian horizon fade into swaying tubas on-stage.

Dellal's previous documentary, *American Gypsy* (1999), helps explain the enormous access she clearly enjoyed in making this film. That aired in August 2000 on PBS and has screened widely at festivals. For five years, Dellal followed the family of Spokane car dealer, Grover Marks, after police raided and trashed their home and son Jimmy embarked upon a lawsuit unprecedented for its sustained and very public challenge to Roma ill-treatment. For that film she also interviewed scholar-activist and fellow-Brit Ian Hancock, who introduced the term Porajmos ("the devouring") in the early 1990s to distinguish the Roma counterpart to the Holocaust.

In *Gypsy Caravan*, Esmá relates how her own father was the sole survivor of a mass execution in the town square. Still, it's a mistake to think that Roma persecution ended with the Nazis. Dellal specifically dedicates her second film to the Decade of Roma Inclusion, a compact of nine Balkan nations, begun in 2005 and supported by George Soros' Open Society, the World Bank and the UN, that addresses poverty, housing, education and health. Amnesty International continues to report burnings, police beatings and other violence against Roma as a significant problem in a number of countries.

Meanwhile, *Time Magazine* has compared the emerging growth and popularity of Roma music to the birth of jazz. Dellal's films should do much to fill in the background about the people and communities producing this music, and focus greater curiosity on Roma as cinematic subjects. Europe has produced a rich body of film about Roma, but this presence has been fragmented at best in the US and it will take more than *The Riches* to fix that. For example, Algerian-French director Tony Gatlif's pioneering 1993 documentary on Roma music, *Latcho Drom* (*Safe Journey*), is still hard to find here. However, several other of his films—the charming *Crazy Stranger* (1997), *Vengo* (2000), and *Exiles* (2004), fiction features which explore Roma culture and music in Romania, Spain and Algeria respectively—are available on Netflix, as are a few classics like the Russian Emil Loteanu's 1975 *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven*. *Gypsy Caravan* is a treat, an achievement, and it opens a world.

Gypsy Caravan opened theatrically in the US on June 15 and is still screening on both coasts. Dellal's first documentary, *American Gypsy*, releases on DVD in August.



By: Nancy Keefe Rhodes
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