



Film

August 2, 2007

Short Takes

This week in local theaters

TALK TO ME As Ralph Waldo "Petey" Greene, a crafty ex-con who found an improbable calling as a radio star at the height of Washington, D.C.'s civil-rights unrest, Don Cheadle elevates this formula-bound pop biopic into an event—a chance to watch a terrifically engaging actor in a part that calls for, and gets, immediate audience rapport. Make that two actors: as Dewey Hughes, the buttoned-down young exec at white-run soul station WOL who gets Petey his break, the excellent Chiwetel Ejiofor brings seething and substance to what could have been a dull straight-man role. The director, Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou*), positions them in the frame as mirror images: the rascally "regular-ass nigga" sees somebody capable of buying in without selling out, while the assimilated "Sidney Poitier motherfucker" sees the unleashed id who'll speak truth straight-up to power. The movie, written by Rick Famuyima and Michael Genet (Hughes' real-life son), loses much of its spark as Petey chafes under his newfound celebrity and Hughes tries to live out his own dreams through the struggling star. But at best *Talk to Me* gives off the spirit and energy of the 1970s post-blaxploitation vehicles that gave gifted black actors room to stretch, and the vibrant cast almost bursts through the frame, including Taraji P. Henson as Petey's cherry-bomb baby and Vondie Curtis-Hall and Cedric the Entertainer in brief roles as old-school DJs. But the party here is Cheadle, a strutting but inwardly shaky rooster who turns into Superman before a mic, just by speaking his mind. It's worth seeing the movie with a huge audience just to hear Petey's intro of one illustrious talk-show guest: "My guest tonight is a pimp I wouldn't trust to wash my car—but y'all done elected him city councilman!" —*Jim Ridley* (Opens Friday at Green Hills)

GYPSY CARAVAN Don't wait for Jasmine Dellal's doc to end up broken between pledge-drive pitches: this joyous portrait of the 2001 "Gypsy Caravan" tour—a stateside showcase of Romani musicians representing their culture as splintered across Romania, Macedonia, Spain and India—deserves to have its brilliant colors, lavish costumes and vivacious musical numbers seen on the big screen. More than a vibrant experiment in ethnomusical cross-pollination, it's just great fun, tempered by loss but rippling with gusto. And that's even before a climactic appearance by Esmá Redžepova, the Macedonian "Queen of the Gypsies" (and you'd dispute her?), an Etta James-meets-Edith Piaf force of nature who displays the performing zest of a Catskills tumbler. Legendary documentarian Albert Maysles was one of the cinematographers; watch for the cameo by a Big Hollywood Star, as if his swashbuckling

plumage of late and laissez-faire cool hadn't already outed him as a wannabe Rom. —*Jim Ridley* (Opens Friday at the Belcourt)

JOSHUA Any parent who's spent a red-eyed night trying to calm a wailing infant will see how acutely George Ratliff's psychological thriller captures that sense of sleep-deprived panic—best expressed by the thought, "Holy crap, *this* is the rest of my life?" Whether parents will choose a once-a-year date night to sit through this masterfully unnerving film is another story. As mommy Abby (Vera Farmiga) and daddy Brad (Sam Rockwell) welcome their new baby into their upper-crust New York household, 9-year-old sibling Joshua (creepily blank-faced Jacob Kogan) begins to act out in subtle ways—introducing sinister off-notes into his piano recital, coolly playing his devout Christian Grandma (Celia Weston) against his Jewish mother. He couldn't possibly have anything uglier in mind—right? There are no fake scares from director Ratliff (who made the Christian-haunted-house doc *Hell House*), just a mood of imminent doom that refuses to relent. And the leads enact the pressures of child-rearing so empathetically—Farmiga in exhausted near-madness, Rockwell in sex-starved, stuck-in-the-middle befuddlement—that the cumulative chills leave your teeth chattering. Not since *Rosemary's Baby* or the original *The Omen* has a movie so successfully exploited the taboo fears of parenthood and family life: the ache that Mommy and Daddy may love the new sibling more; the terror that other moms and dads will see what a rotten job you're doing—and the worry that despite your best efforts, your child may grow into a complete stranger. By that point, you can only hope that, unlike Joshua, your kid hasn't developed a newfound interest in mummification. —*Jim Ridley* (Opens Friday at Green Hills)

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