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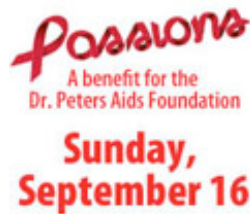
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## Colourful Caravan loaded with talent

**Shawn Conner, Vancouver Courier**

Published: Friday, July 27, 2007

GYPSY CARAVAN

Now playing at Tinseltown

Rating three



**Among the featured superstars of Romani music featured in the documentary Gypsy Caravan are Macedonia's Esmá Redžepova who's been dubbed the Queen of the Gypsies.**

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After several decades, concert documentaries have settled into comfortable, bland middle-age. No matter how exotic the subject matter, the inevitable mix of performance, behind-the-scenes and interview footage inevitably seems familiar. And so Jasmine Dellal can't be blamed if her doc *Gypsy Caravan*--crammed though it is with colourful costumes, traditional dances, strange and wonderful music and fascinating interviews--recalls everything from *Festival Express* and *This is Spinal Tap* to *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* and (with its Eastern European footage) the fictional comedy *Borat*.

Of course, the documentary asks to be taken more seriously than this. Produced and directed by Dellal, the film follows five gypsy (Romani) bands from four different countries as they embark on a six-week tour of North America. We catch glimpses of the musicians backstage, on the bus and in their hometowns. A few world music experts occasionally weigh in, but mostly the stories are told in the words of the musicians themselves.

All the acts are touring together for the first time. Among the featured superstars of Romani music are Macedonia's Esmá Redžepova who, after 40 years of singing, and with her operatic stage presence, has been rightfully dubbed "the Queen of the Gypsies"; the red turbaned and fabulously haunting raga act Maharaja, which also includes cross-dressing knee-dancer Harish; and perhaps most famous of all, *Taraf de Haidouks*.

Featured in the 1993 doc *Latcho Drom* as well as the Johnny Depp movie *The Man Who Cried*, *Taraf de Haidouks* is a rarity--a string-based Romani band. *Fanfare Ciocarlia*, which is a brass ensemble, is more typical in its instrumentation. (In one of the film's more *Borat*-like moments, we are told that, with the sales of its first CD, the Romanian group was able to bring electricity to its village.)

*Taraf de Haidouks* features septuagenarian Nicolae Neacsu. He expertly plays a violin with a broken string, which gives the band its distinctive sound. One of the most charismatic and interesting of the musicians interviewed, Neacsu states he hopes he stays healthy so he can keep earning money to support his family. He is also shown at home, teaching his grand-children to play music and giving a tour of his house. "I'm going to build a swimming pool like Johnny Depp," he tells us, and we're not sure whether he's making a joke or if it's just a pipedream.

Depp himself appears in an interview describing his experience sharing a trailer with Taraf de Haidouks during filming of 2000's *The Man Who Cried*. "Most Americans believe the clichés about gypsies, that they should beware of them, that they're thieves," says the actor. "These beautiful men have to carry that on their backs every single day... It would be great if people could understand, by experiencing the music, that what they believe about these people has been a lie."

Depp's testimonial doesn't hurt. But in the end it's the vitality of the dances, the emotion on the faces and the passion of the playing (all captured by cinematographers Albert Maysles and Alain de Halleux) that drives this caravan out of clichéd concert doc territory.

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