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Budapest Klezmer Band set to tour Toronto, Montreal

Touring with a large klezmer band has its adventures but none as challenging as crossing borders between former Communist bloc countries.

"It was back in the '90s when there were still lots of border crossings and the band was travelling on a bus with all of their instruments," recounts Steven Kiss, president of Celebrities Entertainment, who is bringing the Budapest Klezmer Band, under the show title Klezmer Magic, to the Toronto Centre for the Arts on May 8 and Montreal's Outremont Theatre the following day.

"The customs officer came on board, accused them of smuggling instruments and made them unload. So they started to play as a whole band at the border crossing to prove they actually are musicians and the people from the waiting cars and buses all started to dance. What the guards thought was a smuggling incident turned into a big party!"

The BKB, as they are known, have that same effect on audiences in theatres around the world. It started with and revolves around one man, Ferenc (affectionately known as Fegya)

Jávori (formerly Jakubovics before his move to Budapest). Jávori grew up in Munkács, a Hungarian city now part of southwestern Ukraine. In 1944, it boasted 15,000 Jews, but the area was decimated by the deportations to Auschwitz.

"Fegya was fascinated by the few surviving, old-time musicians who from father to son passed on klezmer music," says Kiss. "He documented it and rearranged it, along with songs he researched from the collections of Moshe Beregovski, Michail Stuchevisky and Gyula Galambos, a gypsy musician who preserved many klezmer melodies before he was killed in the Holocaust.

"Fegya also collects fragments that didn't survive as whole tunes, and out of these, he creates new songs. He founded the BKB in 1990 to promote this kind of music to the world," says Kiss.

So complete is Jávori's immersion in the sound of klezmer that he introduced it to the arts of ballet, musical theatre and the classical concert hall. He collaborated with the Gyori

National Ballet Theatre of Hungary to produce a modern-dance piece set to klezmer music.

Jávori's and the ballet company's efforts in Hungary are especially commendable, since they had to swim against the current of anti-Semitism that is still strong there.

In 1999, János Rolla commissioned an opus titled Klezmer Suite to be jointly performed by the BKB and his Liszt Ferenc Chamber Orchestra. It drew classical music lovers into the circle of klezmer, as well, and was recorded onto CD in Budapest, at the world's second-largest synagogue. Jávori easily fit his music into this realm, having been classically trained at the Music Academy of Ungvár in Ukraine.

For the world's first klezmer musical, The Wedding Dance, Jávori composed all of the music. In it, a Transylvanian orphan betrothed to a gentile farmer's son finds out she is Jewish and is caught between the two communities. It premiered at the Budapest Operetta House in 2006 and is still running between the BKB's tours.

"This musical is sold out half a year in advance and there are 950 seats," says Kiss.

The variety of the BKB's artistic participation is groundbreaking and noteworthy, yet the BKB itself is the basis of that success. Jávori is their keyboard player, composer, arranger and vocalist. He also narrates between sets to colour the music with historical notes and anecdotes.

For this tour, his Russian and Yiddish commentary will be augmented in French and English by Hungarian actor-clarinetist Tamás Dunai.



Clarinetist István Kohán and violinist Bence Gazda feel the music with the Budapest Klezmer Band. [BKB photo]



The other BKB members are Gábor Kiss (no relation to Steven) on the double bass, Gábor Tamás on trombone and vocals, István Kohán on clarinet and bass clarinet, violinist/vocalist Bence Gazda, drummer Balázs Végh and accordionist Anna Nagy. Joining them for the tour will be Helena Holl, a Moscow-trained opera singer.

Their sound is pure joy with an infectious beat. "I'm backstage with the musicians during their shows, taking care of them so they can do their best," says Kiss, "I look out at the first few rows of the audience and see the faces, totally out of their regular world. They are floating with the music."

The BKB has already recorded seven CDs, covering many tunes that will be offered at the concerts, including Le Chajem Rebbe and Yiddische Blues.

Of course, there's nothing like hearing them live and getting the same vibes as those lucky folk at the border crossing.

For tickets, call 790-1111 or go to www.ticketpro.ca.

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