



A gypsy's wish

Actor and writer Dan Allum is also director of the Romany Theatre Company. He spoke to **Liz Bestic** about both his gypsy heritage – and his Hollywood film part

IT'S hard to imagine a more unlikely theatrical 'luvvie' than Dan Allum. He may be an up and coming writer and director with some serious backing from the Arts Council and Big Lottery but perched on the edge of his desk nursing a polystyrene cup of coffee he appears more trendy academic than media mogul. "We have just moved in here so it's a bit of a mess," he explains waving his arms around a sparsely furnished room with a couple of posters on the wall advertising some of his most recent works. Dan is director of the Romany Theatre Company (RTC) and is pleased as punch because his latest drama, *Atching Tan*, has just been running as a 12 part series on six local BBC radio stations. "Atching Tan in Romany means 'where fires are lit' and it explores the people and conflicts among Romany Gypsies and non traveller communities. Through this type of drama we want to try and raise awareness about Romany people, our culture, history, heritage and language," he explains. In fact the RTC is so much more than just a

theatre company. Its aim is to create rich, powerful and inspirational theatre and radio productions which have their roots in the Romany people, their culture and their centuries-old struggle for equality. Something Dan knows rather a lot about since he himself is a full

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blooded Romany Gypsy.

"Our work gives the same importance to action and image as it does to words and dialogue with a strong visual element. I wanted to challenge negative views of Romany people and the lives we lead. At the same time I want

to set up an Academy which provides professional supported training programmes for young Romany people in the performing arts. There are very few Gypsy performers in Britain and it is important to create role models to show younger Romany Gypsies that they can achieve in the arts," he explains. He hopes the scheme will also provide opportunities for both Gypsies and non Gypsies to learn and understand more about each other.

The productions are based on Romany stories and folklore which makes a lot of sense since storytelling has always been a huge part of the Romany tradition, culture and history. "It may sound a cliché but when I was a child I loved to hear the old stories that would circulate around the fireside in the evenings. I didn't know it then but those stories sowed the seeds of a passion which I would only discover later on in life," he says.

Dan is rightly proud of his heritage but is sad that most people have no idea about Romany history. According to the earliest written history Romanies originated in Northern India and ended up in Persia where they

stayed until the 10th century. The wars between the Turks and Arabs drove the Romanies further West into the Balkans and finally across to Britain.

"Most Gypsies then were travelling troubadours who made a living entertaining the troops. Most of had very dark skin and wore lots of jewellery and when they arrived in Britain the British thought they looked Egyptian and nicknamed them Gypsies – a derivation of the word Egyptian. Some of us prefer to be called travellers, others Romanies. I prefer to be called a Gypsy," says Dan.

It was a teenage crush on Felicity Kendall which first brought Dan to the theatre. "I got the chance to see her onstage in the West End and I was totally blown away. Not just because it was her because I had never seen a live performance before. I loved the whole atmosphere and the way the cast engaged the audience. Here were people live onstage doing things I had only ever seen in film – I was totally hooked," he says.

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