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Hungarian Gypsy and Black American Musicians Collaborate For An Explosive Performance of Music, Dance and Spoken Word

***Fire + Fire* Presents the Sounds and Stories of Two Cultures Bound by Rhythm and Race
at Symphony Space, November 19 & 21**

October 23, 2009 – Hungarian Gypsy and Black American musicians will share the stage for *Fire + Fire*, an innovative production exploring the synergies between the Black diaspora and Hungarian Gypsies. Part of the yearlong *Extremely Hungary* festival, *Fire + Fire* is a collaborative performance that delves into the dual experiences of political oppression and musical expression of Black and Roma peoples in the U.S. and Hungary. Ensembles of performers from both cultures will meld their musical traditions—infused with jazz, rock, rap and folk influences—to create an experimental fusion incorporating dance, jam sessions, and spoken word. *Fire + Fire* will be presented at Symphony Space on November 19 and 21.

Produced by the Hungarian Cultural Center in collaboration with noted essayist and cultural critic Greg Tate, *Fire + Fire* will feature an historic meeting of cultures and music, as nine Hungarian musicians and singers take the stage on traditional Gypsy instruments including cimbalom and violin, alongside seven Black American performers on instruments ranging from banjo to blues guitar to African drums. The development of this project began in August 2009, with a three-day visit to Budapest by the Black American musicians. There they had an opportunity to meet—and jam—with their Hungarian Gypsy counterparts, establishing the electric experience that is the root for *Fire + Fire*.

In addition to music, the performance will also include contemporary and traditional Gypsy and Black dance. The end result is an unprecedented collaboration that explores experimental music and dance traditions rooted in each culture's vernacular, contesting racism by revealing the commonality of seemingly disparate communities and genres.

“There are compelling parallels between the Gypsy and Black American experience,” said Tate, curator of *Fire + Fire*. “That energy and struggle is reflected in Black and Gypsy musical traditions—both are intense, explosive, individual and raw.”

Jakab Orsos, the director of the Hungarian Cultural Center, added, “Now is a crucial moment for Gypsies in Europe, as wide-spread discrimination and racism proliferates in Hungary. The synergy between the Gypsy and Black American musicians is electric. Both have mined musical strength from experiences of racism and political oppression.”

“They journey, we journey. They struggle, we struggle. They dance, we dance. We’re overcoming, they’ll overcome,” added Musical Director Melvin Gibbs, a New York composer, producer and bandleader celebrated for his work with a diverse range of artists.

The project is directed and choreographed by Curaçao-born dancer and filmmaker Gabri Christa, and is based around a narrative developed by Eisa Davis. Davis is an acclaimed playwright, musician and actor

recently seen on Broadway in *Passing Strange* and whose 2007 play *Bulrushers* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Most of the Hungarian musicians and singers come from traditional Gypsy families and have worked to preserve Gypsy heritage and music traditions at the same time that they integrate contemporary influences like jazz and rap.

Fire + Fire artists include:

Nine Hungarians, the majority in their U.S. premiere:

- Béla Szakcsi Lakatos – piano
- Ági Szalóki – vocals
- Fatima – vocals
- Mihály Farkas – cimbalom (dulcimer)
- Richard Farkas – bass
- Robert Farkas – violin, accordion
- Zsolt Farkas – percussion, dance
- Gusztáv Balogh – vocals, guitar
- Kiegészítő Izzók – visuals

Seven Americans:

- Melvin Gibbs – bass
- Valerie June – Delta blues guitar, banjo, vocals
- Mazz Swift – violin, vocals
- Latasha Nevada Diggs – vocals
- David Pleasant – percussion, drums
- Ayodele Maakheru – guitar, banjo, kora
- Marilys Ernst – visuals

Symphony Space is located at 2537 Broadway, at 95th Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Tickets are available for \$30 in advance and \$35 at the door. For ticketing information, please call 212.864.5400.

About *Extremely Hungary*

Extremely Hungary is a yearlong festival showcasing contemporary Hungarian visual, performing, and literary arts in New York and Washington, D.C., throughout 2009. The festival reveals the roots of Hungary's thriving contemporary culture and its impact on American society through a broad spectrum of events at leading cultural institutions in the two cities. *Extremely Hungary* is organized by the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York, which sponsors a range of programs celebrating Hungary's past, present and future. The festival is made possible in part by funding from the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture. www.extremelyhungary.org.

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