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'Gypsy Caravan' good introduction to musical force

Rob Thomas — 8/30/2007 2:02 pm

GYPSY CARAVAN Rating: 3 out of four stars. Rated: Not rated. Stars: Esma Redzepova, Antonio de Pipa. Length: 1:51. Where: Sundance

The Romany people, better known as gypsies, have to deal with several layers of prejudice and misunderstanding from the world as gypsies. The most obvious is the persistent stereotype of gypsies as untrustworthy thieves and unwelcome travelers in other countries.

Another is that gypsies all live in Eastern Europe. In fact, as the colorful and entertaining documentary "Gypsy Caravan" shows, gypsies have become part of the culture throughout the world, from Spain to Yugoslavia to India, and have enriched the musical traditions of every place they've gone.

And they didn't get much thanks or credit for it, until the "Gypsy Caravan" world tour brought together musicians and dancers from across the Romani diaspora for a major six-week Western tour. Jasmine Dellal's entrancing film follows the musicians on the American leg of the tour, from New York to California, watching as Spanish flamenco dancers, Indian raga players and Yugoslavian singers all bond together on stage and off.

It's a large and diverse group, and if Dellal's film has any flaws, it's in his attempts to include everybody in the film, both footage of them (often truncated) showing them performing on stage and visiting them in their native countries. The result is an entertaining survey of Romani culture, but one occasionally wants to spend more time with certain characters.

Esma Redzepova, for example, is the mother figure of the tour, a former Yugoslavian pop star who adopted a total of 47 children. You can hear the echoes of her long, sometimes sad life in her singing, and you can easily see an entire film being made about it. The same goes for the astonishing Indian male dancer who performs in drag, particularly as he tells the story of how he took up dancing to make extra money for his family after both his parents died.

It's that mix of joy and heartbreak, and how one springs from the other in their music, that marks so many of the character portraits in "Gypsy Caravan." Dellal has a good time showing us life on the road for these musicians, the late-night jam sessions in motel lobbies, and the amusing cultural differences, such as when a few musicians decide to try fishing in the pond outside the Ann Arbor Arts Center where they're performing later that night.

"Gypsy Caravan" could certainly have been shorter and more tightly focused, and the inclusion of some performers' backstories feels almost dutiful. But it's beautifully photographed (particularly in the musicians' homes in India and Eastern Europe) and shot through with humanity, and serves as a good introduction to a major force in world culture that too often doesn't get its due.

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