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Thursday, September 27, 2007

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GYPSY CARAVAN

Rated:NR

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Admit it: Your basic idea of Gypsies is probably a negative one, stemming from cliché-ridden old movies and certain bad tourist experiences abroad. Jasmine Dellal's vibrant documentary goes a long way in correcting such assumptions, covering the 2001 "Gypsy Caravan" tour, which amassed a group of Romany musicians from various countries to perform across America.

"My music contains sadness, happiness, tradition and culture without any assimilation," proudly affirms Macedonian Esmá Redzepova, "Queen of the Gypsies," whose magnificently powerful, plaintive voice makes her perhaps the most electrifying performer in the cast. The Nobel-nominated Redzepova adopted 47 children, whom she has trained to earn a living through music, while broadcasting a 24-hour Romani TV station out of her basement.

Dellal, with the cinematographic aid of veteran documentarian Albert Maysles and Alain de Halleux, thrillingly captures the heat and passion of the live performances. The flamenco ensemble of Antonio El Pipa reminds us that this stirring, percussive music and dance originated with the Gypsies. Romanian Fanfare Ciocărlia, with its festive horn playing, is an aural testament to the indomitable spirit of Gypsies, from their original migration from Northern India a millennium ago. And from the desert of Rajasthan, India, Maharaja pulsatingly brings together in *raga* performers of different castes, which even include a cross-dresser, Harish, who flamboyantly spins across the stage in a brilliant sari and veil. Taraf de Haïdouks, featured in the films *Latcho Drom* and *The Man Who Cried*, serve up their seductive, string-based fare which actually supports their village. Johnny Depp, star of *The Man Who Cried*, speaks eloquently about the centuries of prejudice and persecution, as with the Nazi genocide, these people have endured.

Dellal records the burgeoning camaraderie among the diverse groups of musicians as they are exposed to one another's art, which, in turn, joyously begins to influence their own. The sell-out American crowds react with appropriate, vociferous bliss, a far cry from a Gypsy concert I attended a few years ago in Prague, which had to be cancelled due to the bricks that were being thrown from neighboring buildings down at the courtyard where the poor musicians were attempting to perform.

Critic: David Noh

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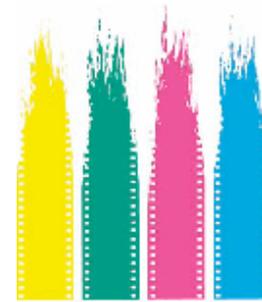
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