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A musical journey tells the story of the world's gypsies

Documentary follows five Roma musical groups on a tour of North America, showing the full range of their culture

Jay Stone, CanWest News Service

Published: Friday, July 27, 2007

GYPSY CARAVAN

Directed and written by: Jasmine Dellal

Parental Advisory: No problems

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Running time: 111 minutes

Rating: 3 1/2

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In 2001, a group of five Roma musical groups -- that's Gypsies to most of us -- toured America, bringing with them the usual Gypsy music. You know: raucous Romanian brass bands with their nasal klezmer beats, a flamenco ensemble from Spain, a group of Indian musicians that included a cross-dressing dancer who is one of only two people in the world to do the madly spinning "knee dance," and last, and possibly most, Esma Redzepova, the Queen of the Gypsies and the pride of Macedonia -- or at least the Roma part of it.

Gypsy Caravan is a documentary film made of that tour, and one of its aims is to show North Americans the full reach of the concept "gypsy" (a name given by an outsider, or gadjo, to the people who originated in India and went on a 1,000-year voyage that turned out to be to nowhere in particular). From the raja music of India to the strident guitars of Spain, Gypsy Caravan is not so much a full-fledged movie as a sampler package of Roma sounds.

And that is one of its problems: director Jasmine Dellal moves her camera from the North American stages to the home countries of the performers with an abandon that keeps cutting us off from music that is both plaintive and joyful, and deserves to be heard in a single gulp, as it were.

The reason for the side trips is that part of what the movie is trying to do is to educate us about the Roma people, who have suffered a long history of discrimination. Gypsy Caravan does this by humanizing the performers and telling their stories: in the case of Nicolae Neacsu of the Romanian group Taraf de Haidouks, for instance, this means showing us how he supports his whole family by playing the violin, while at the same time keeping a constant eye out for attractive women.

It's worth pointing out that Neacsu is 78 years old and does not appear to have a tooth in his head. "I'm going to build a swimming pool like Johnny Depp," he announces, and with some good reason: the actor shared a dressing room with Taraf during the filming of the movie *The Man Who Cried*, and he appears in *Gypsy Caravan* to speak up for "these beautiful men."

The hopscotching storytelling aside, *Gypsy Caravan* fills the screen with colourful costumes, passionate music and a wide-ranging history. We go back to native villages in several countries to meet the families and friends of the musicians -- many of them living hand to mouth -- and live along with the agonies as we discover, for instance, that the Romanian violin player Cailu must finance the marriage of his son to a 13-year-old girl to protect the honour of both families. His reminiscence about the tragedy of another child -- "She died in an accident," he says. "Boiling water" -- is unsettling, to say the least.

But as they used to say in the old Hollywood films, "We are Gypsies. We dance," and the movie finds its fullest expression of the culture in the music it creates.

If there's a star, it's Redzepova, the Macedonian woman who raised 47 children, all of them adopted, and says with no little pride, "I never assimilated for anyone."

Her voice is raw and filled with yearning: when she sings, you hear echoes of the Buena Vista Social Club, another group of musicians who had to fight past poverty and obscurity to find their proper place in our estimation. It also helped that they got a better movie.

jstone@canwest.com

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