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FILM REVIEW

'Gypsy Caravan'

Jasmine Dellal's 'Gypsy Caravan' captures the Romani spirit.

By Kevin Crust, Times Staff Writer

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The term "Gypsy," often used pejoratively, conjures images of wastrels, vagabonds, fortunetellers and thieves, not to mention a distant memory of Cher (the Sonny & version) belting out, "I was born in the wagon of a traveling show ..."

The label has dogged the Romani people — believed to be descendants of nomads who left India a thousand years ago and fanned out across Europe — throughout their history. Yet they bear the name with a certain defiant pride, eager to prove their detractors wrong. In recent years, the Gypsy Caravan concert tours have brought the musical culture and flavor of these people to American audiences to great acclaim.



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WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY SEAN PENN

Filmmaker Jasmine Dellal, recognizing a rich subject when she saw one, assembled a crew that included famed documentarian Albert Maysles ("Gimme Shelter" and "Grey Gardens") and chronicled the fall 2001 tour. The result is the intoxicating documentary "Gypsy Caravan," which uncovers the same joy and sorrow that characterizes the Romani music in the everyday lives of the musicians who play it.

follows a very bendy road, indeed. Amid the performances and heavy traveling schedule occur some of life's more dramatic moments, including a wedding and a funeral.

Rather than putting the audience in the front row for the concerts, Dellal allows us to observe from the wings, with an all-access pass that grants us intimate entrée to the rehearsals, tour bus, hotels and ultimately the homes of these artists. Hailing from Romania, Macedonia, Spain and India, the five bands are, at first glance, as dissimilar as can be, yet they share rhythmic and thematic similarities that can make the differing languages meld into one.

The playful cacophony that marks the beginning of the tour evolves into lively collaboration by the end. The passionate dancing of the Spanish flamenco group, Antonio el Pipa, from Andalucia, shares the stage with the traditional Indian folk troupe Maharaja, which possesses the mischievous rambunctiousness of the Flying Karamazov Brothers and the rock-star swagger of the young Rolling Stones. Romanian brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia competes with Macedonian diva Esmá Redzepova for the adoration of the audiences, which pack each venue along the way. Taraf de Haïdouks, a Romanian band of violin virtuosos (who count Johnny Depp among their devotees) tie everything together with their magic strings.

As compelling as the music and concert footage is, it is the vitality of the performers as characters that enables the movie to transcend the music documentary genre. No dramatist could create a figure as charismatic as Redzepova, known as the "Queen of the Gypsies," who along with her husband adopted 47 children and founded a music school. A woman of ample proportions and verve, she commands the stage and was once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in advancing Romani rights.

Equally memorable is Nicolae Neacsu, one of the founding members of Taraf. A seemingly frail old man, his face sheds 20 years when he tucks the violin beneath his weathered chin and begins to play. The charm he emits onstage belies the observations on loneliness and growing old he makes offstage.

In addition to capturing precious footage of the musicians and dancers during their down time



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on tour, Dellal returns to the musicians' and dancers' homelands as she profiles them. Seeing them with their families leading simple lives in modest surroundings adds a dimension to understanding their perseverance that goes far beyond anything that could have been said in an interview.

The film records a vibrant diaspora that exists despite centuries of persecution. The one thing all the members of the tour appear to want to convey is the absurdity of the stereotypes that precede them. In discovering the commonalities they share with one another, they communicate a powerful search for a group identity that they can continue to pass on to future generations.

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"Gypsy Caravan." In English, Romani, Spanish, Romanian, Macedonian, Hindi and Marwari, with English subtitles. Unrated. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes. Exclusively at the Landmark Nuart, 11272 Santa Monica Blvd., L.A., (310) 281-8223. Filmmaker Jasmine Dellal will attend the 7:15 and the 9:50 shows tonight and Saturday.

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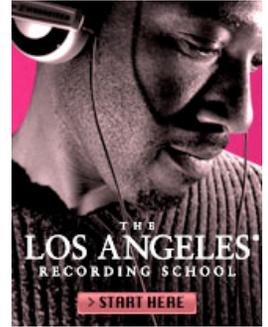
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