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MOVIE REVIEW | GYPSY CARAVAN

Documentary dispels myths about Romani

Friday, November 2, 2007 3:40 AM

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BY KEVIN CRUST
LOS ANGELES TIMES

The term *gypsy*, often used pejoratively, conjures images of wastrels, vagabonds, fortunetellers and thieves, not to mention a distant memory of Cher belting out: "I was born in the wagon of a traveling show . . ."

The label has dogged the Romani people -- thought 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.

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 characterize the Romani music in the everyday lives of the musicians who play it.

The film starts with a Romani proverb -- "You cannot walk straight when the road bends" -- and, through the six-week North American tour that features five disparate musical acts from four countries, the film follows a bending road, indeed. Amid the performances and heavy traveling schedule occur some of life's more dramatic moments, including a wedding and a funeral.

Dellal allows her audience to observe from the wings, with an all-access pass that grants intimate entree to the rehearsals, tour bus, hotels and ultimately the homes of the artists.

As compelling as the music and concert footage is, the vitality of the performers as characters is what enables the movie to transcend the music-documentary genre. No dramatist could create a figure as charismatic as Esma Redzepova, known as the "Queen of the Gypsies," who along with her husband adopted 47 children and founded a music school.

GYPSY CARAVAN

Directed by Jasmine Dellal.
Photographed by Alain de Halleux and Albert Maysles.

MPAA rating: unrated

Running time: 1:50

Now showing at the Drexel East theater



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The film records a vibrant diaspora that exists despite centuries of persecution. The one thing all the members of the tour seem to want to convey is the absurdity of the stereotypes.

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