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Gypsy Caravan' film feels good, lacks substance

Friday, October 12, 2007

John Petkovic
Plain Dealer Reporter

When asked what these disparate Gypsy musicians on their rambling, multinational caravan have in common, one of them says, "Rhythm, language . . . and feeling."

What "Gypsy Caravan" lacks in rhythm or language it makes up for in feeling -- which makes it an enjoyable if flawed portrait of Gypsy singers and musicians on tour.

Veteran documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles' film follows five very different Gypsy bands -- from Romania, Macedonia, India and Spain -- on a 2001 North American tour. The objective, of the tour and film, is to not only entertain audiences but also to expose them to the breadth and life of the Gypsy soul.

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With electric performers such as Esma Redzepova on his bus, Maysles doesn't have to do much to achieve his goal.

The Macedonian singer who carries the title of "Queen of the Gypsies" delivers a ululating, emotive performance. She's also a colorful character: Redzepova became a teenage sensation in the former Yugoslavia in the 1950s and married a non-Gypsy Macedonian musician with whom she adopted 47 children.

Maysles touches on this but quickly leapfrogs to his next musician -- a process that makes for an interesting intro to the cast but never fully explores what it is that separates them from other Gypsy musicians.

Ditto for Nicolae Neascu, a violin player in Romanian Gypsy group Taraf de Haidouks. He seems to be a treasure of stories and color, yet Maysles jumps back to the bus again -- where he captures some chit-chat before documenting the next show.

(He also includes an interview with Johnny Depp -- the only nonmusician, non-Gypsy interviewed in the film -- who discusses how Gypsies are long misunderstood and were persecuted by the Nazis in a brutal genocide.)

There's nothing wrong with providing background or focusing on the music. After all, the story

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of the people, like their music, is riveting.

But it does undermine the rhythm and poetry of "Gypsy Caravan."

That's not to say you won't want to sing and dance along to the musicians in Maysles' loving valentine, though.

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