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Magic Of Gypsy Music, Life, Nobility Of Their 'Queen'

"Gypsy Caravan" ★★★★★

By SUSAN DUNNE | Courant Staff Writer
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Esma Redzepova grew up in Skopje, Macedonia, the daughter of the only survivor of a Nazi massacre of Roma. She began singing at age 11, appearing on stage and TV nationwide, and after decades of recording and touring throughout the world, she became known as "Queen of the Gypsies."

By the time she joined an American tour of Gypsy musicians in 2002, she had married and buried the love of her life, who, scandalously, was not Gypsy; opened a music school; and raised 47 adoptive children.

The audience members watching her live performances don't know any of this. Maybe they hear the pain and joy and love in her voice and wonder where it came from. We, watching "Gypsy Caravan," do know, and that gives Redzepova's extraordinary voice and presence much more emotional resonance.

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"Gypsy Caravan," Jasmine Dellal's chronicle of a tour of five of the world's greatest Roma performing groups, gives these bands the chance to make their music known worldwide. But it does more: By following members of each ensemble home, Dellal's crew delves into what it is to be Roma, or Gypsy, in Spain, Macedonia, Romania and India.

What emerges is a kaleidoscopic vision of a people scattered around the world, a shattering of the pervasive negative myths about Gypsies, and, of course, a lot of beautiful music.

It could be said that the concert film is the form of documentary that is easiest to swallow, and not just because these films get the toes tapping. There is no "reality show" feeling. These people spend their lives performing, so being in front of cameras is a natural extension of who they really are. Legendary documentarian Albert Maysles, who made the Rolling Stones film "Gimme Shelter," has spent the last several years helping young filmmakers get their careers started. His camera work for Dellal makes these stage moments come alive powerfully.

But the performers' life stories are as fascinating as their stage work, and these moments, too, ring true. Harish grew up in Rajasthan, India, a member of the "carpenter caste." He escaped that fate by learning a complicated whirling dance performed on the knees, and he now performs it throughout the world, in gorgeous drag. Juana, of Andalucia, Spain, is a devout Christian and an illiterate, beleaguered mother and wife who sings flamenco with stunning, earthy vigor, while her handsome nephew dances. Nicolai Neauescu is a lonely widower from Clejani, Romania, who finds solace in his fiddle. One of the performing groups brought electricity to its members' hometown with the proceeds from its first album.

One of the most charming segments involves a wedding, which caught the touring father-of-the-groom off-guard. With both resignation and happiness, he throws a big, generous bash, during which the 13-year-old bride can be seen blithely smoking a cigarette. Another segment, very sad, involves a funeral. This isn't just a celebration of music; it's a celebration of life in all its stages.

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The performers start out trying their best but are still a bit touchy; they are seen bickering about who gets the most prominent role in the show's closing number. But as the weeks go by, they become a unit, despite the language barriers. A lot of the translating was done by George Eli, one of the film's sound men, a Roma who grew up in Connecticut. (He can be seen about a half-dozen times on screen, wearing a headset.)

There are a few other things you should know about Redzepova. She has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize, for her humanitarian work benefiting the Roma people. She has been lauded by UNICEF for the same reason. She has a heart as big as her talent, and she is as wonderful as this movie is.

GYPSY CARAVAN is a Shadow Distribution release directed by Jasmine Dellal. 110 minutes. In Spanish, Romany, Romanian, Macedonian and Hindi with subtitles, and also in English. Unrated, with little to offend. Opening today at Criterion Cinemas in New Haven, and July 27 at Real Art Ways in Hartford.

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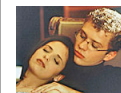
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