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Home > Features > Lifestyle Unlocking The Secrets Of The Gypsies

By SUSAN DUNNE | Courant Staff Writer July 27, 2007

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Traditionally, Roma (Gypsies) do not become filmmakers. George Eli did not know the origin of this cultural restriction. He obeyed it anyway.

"Gypsies have these traditions. Nobody knows where they came from, and they honor them," Eli says. "Gypsies' worst enemies are Gypsies. They don't research why they don't become filmmakers, or don't do anything else that isn't allowed. I didn't research. I was a victim and a predator."

Eventually, his love for cinema came roaring back when he heard about courses offered by the New York Film Academy.

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Eli was scared of being rejected by his Roma community, but he was still determined to follow his dream. "I talked to a few of my friends and they told me their secret passions, things that were not allowed," he says. "They said, 'Go ahead, George, do it.'"

So he applied. But at that point, another Roma custom stood in his way. Roma parents traditionally shun school, so Eli had no formal education. The academy required a high school diploma.

Eli wangled his way past the diploma requirement and began classes. Years later, Eli is now an up-and-coming documentary filmmaker specializing, so far, in Roma culture.

Tonight, Eli will be at Real Art Ways in Hartford to introduce the documentary "Gypsy Caravan," on which he worked as a sound man. He also will do a Q&A after the 7:30 screening.

As a Roma, and a Romani-speaking member of the crew, Eli was an important link between non-Roma director Jasmine Dellal and the subjects of her film, a group of Roma musicians touring the United States with a musical show.

"She hired me to do sound, and me and the other Gypsies bonded," says Eli, 35, a Norwalk resident who lived in Meriden for many years. "Gypsies don't bond to non-Gypsies. It's just their way. ... I really broke the ice for Jasmine."

Eli's life story sounds like a glimpse at a time long gone.

"My grandfather was the big head of a Gypsy clan in New Jersey. Growing up, I spent most of my time with him, with Gypsy people coming over with various problems," he says. "We don't go through the American judicial system, never have. They would go to my grandfather to sort through all the problems. He'd hear both sides of the story and make a decision. ...It's not legally binding, but as far as they were concerned, this was it."

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"With my type of Romani people, that's what we do. The men help the community with the laws and stuff, and the women do psychic stuff. ...Non-Gypsy people see it as sidewalk fortunetelling. We live by it. It's our religion."

Figuring out the origin of traditional Roma ways is the driving force behind Eli's directoral debut, "Searching for the Fourth Nail," which is now in rough-cut form.

"I wanted to know where the traditions came from. I would ask, 'Why, why, why?' And the only people who would talk to me were activists," he says. "I don't want to talk to activists. I want to talk to the people these things are happening to."

He came to a conclusion, which has become his motto: "Tradition through oppression."

"Everything comes from prejudice and persecution, even our traditions," he says.

He gave an example: Gypsy tradition requires that a baby's parents do not attend their child's baptism. They must be represented by a different couple.

"In Europe for hundreds of years, Gypsies could not baptize their babies. Nice Christian people would take the child in for baptism and say the baby was theirs," he says, "Is that tradition, or oppression?"

"[Gypsies] refrain from reading and writing to look that up and find that out. That also happens because Gypsies were enslaved. ... Another tradition through oppression."

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Dellal - who met **Eli** seven years ago at a New York screening of her first film, "American Gypsy: A Stranger in Everybody's Land," and who is executive producer of "Fourth Nail" - says this oppression and misunderstanding were the germ of her interest in Roma culture.

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