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Movie Review

On the road with Gypsies, dispelling stereotypes

By John Hartl
Special to The Seattle Times

Jasmine Dellal's enjoyable if repetitive documentary, "Gypsy Caravan," follows several different Gypsy musical groups as they appear on a sold-out, six-week American tour.

It's a melting-pot road movie, celebrating the styles of musicians from Macedonia, India, Spain and Romania. It also acknowledges the lethal prejudices that wiped out many of their relatives during the Holocaust — and continue to haunt them even when they visit 21st-century California, where they're called "scary."

Persecution has made them defensive, proud and disciplined, and tied to each other in sometimes surprising ways. As they become tourists in America, moving from the Staten Island Ferry to Niagara Falls to Miami to the West Coast, they try to define what makes their music distinctive.

"Rhythm, language, but most of all feeling" is about as good as it gets for an explanation. There's a debate about whether Romanian music is best; a claim that flamenco is Gypsy music; and a declaration that "music is God's greatest creation." Of course, a good performance is worth a thousand attempts to summarize it, and plenty of those are captured here.

Among the standouts are the Macedonian diva Esma Redzepova (otherwise known as "the queen of the Gypsies") and the cross-dressing, whirling-

dervish Indian dancer Harish Kumar. If there's an overriding flaw in the film, it's that Dellal cuts away too quickly from these flamboyant scene-stealers.

The movie could have used more of their music, less backstage talk (some of it redundant), though frequent cutaways to scenes at the musicians' villages, where they play for weddings and funerals, are more than welcome.

The Romanian band Taraf de Haidouks counts among its fans Johnny Depp, who appears briefly in the film and worries that most Americans believe Gypsy clichés. It's estimated that there are 10 million Roma, or Gypsies, around the world; Dellal's film can't help demonstrating that stereotypes are useless.

Photographed partly by documentary veteran Albert Maysles ("Gimme Shelter"), "Gypsy Caravan" has been compared with Tony Gatlif's 1993 film "Latcho Drom," which took a dreamier approach to Gypsy culture. This one's more down-to-earth, but it's just as entertaining.

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Movie review ★★☆☆

Showtimes

"Gypsy Caravan," a documentary directed by Jasmine Dellal.

111 minutes. Not rated; suitable for general audiences.

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