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Roma Heroes in Contemporary Theater and Education

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Abstract The article discusses the history, goals, and practical application of the Roma Heroes Educational Methodology in Hungarian higher education. Developed by Independent Theater Hungary in co-operation with three European theater companies—Rampa Presentina (Italy), The Roma Actors Association, Giuvlipen (Romania), and the Asoc cultural por la investigacion y el desarrollo independiente del teatro profesional en Andalucía (Spain)—the methodology aims to bring together Roma and non-Roma students, to familiarize them with the history and empowering role of Roma drama, and to create safe space for classroom discussions about everyday heroism in Roma communities. The educational program is based on contemporary Roma plays, a concept first realized in Hungary, whereby students learn about dramatic heroes who, having faced various difficulties, make responsible decisions and bring progress to their communities. This approach is pioneering for two reasons. It responds to and challenges stereotypical representations of Roma communities in Hungarian and international media where Romani people are generally linked to prostitution, poverty, and crime; in doing so, it aspires to support Roma students and to empower them by improving their self-esteem and furnishing them with a positive identity. This article focuses on Márton Illés' monodrama *Chameleon Girl* (2018), based on the real-life stories of Roma students who participated in the Roma Heroes workshops organized by Independent Theater Hungary; the author outlines the ways storytelling in Roma monodramas can draw attention to the diversity of Roma communities.

Zusammenfassung Das Kapitel erörtert die Entstehung, die Ziele und die praktischen Anwendungen des Roma Helden Bildungskonzeptes in der ungarischen Hochschulbildung. Das Konzept wurde vom Independent Theater Hungary in Zusammenarbeit mit drei europäischen Theatergruppen, Rampa Presentina (Italien), The Roma Actors Association—Giuvlipen (Rumänien) und Asoc cultural por la investigacion y el desarrollo independiente del teatro

profesional en Andalucía (Spanien) entwickelt. Es zielt darauf ab, Student*innen von Roma- und Nicht-Roma-Herkunft mit der Geschichte und den Werten des Roma-Dramas vertraut zu machen und Unterrichtsdiskussionen über das alltägliche Heldentum in Roma-Gemeinschaften zu ermöglichen. Das Bildungsprogramm soll helfen, Roma Helden sichtbar zu machen, die als Protagonisten auf Herausforderungen stoßen, Gewissensentscheidungen treffen und den Fortschritt in ihrem sozialen Umfeld inspirieren. Dieser Ansatz ist aus zwei Gründen wegweisend. Er stellt die stereotypischen Darstellungen über Roma in Frage, die in den ungarischen und auch internationalen Medien oftmals als gewalttätig, vulgär und ungebildet dargestellt werden. Typischerweise werden sie unhinterfragt mit Prostitution, Armut und Kriminalität in Verbindung gebracht. Zum anderen hat dieser Ansatz die Aufgabe, Roma-Student*innen zu stärken, ihr Selbstwertgefühl und ihre positive Identität zu verbessern, und das Ansehen in der Studentengemeinschaft positiv zu beeinflussen. Dieser Beitrag fokussiert sich insbesondere auf Márton Illés' Monodrama „Chameleon Girl“ (2018), das auf den wahren Begebenheiten von Roma-Student*innen basiert, die an den „Roma Heroes“-Workshops des Independent Theater Hungary teilgenommen haben. Es erörtert, wie das Erzählen von Geschichten in Roma-Monodramen die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Vielfalt der Roma-Gemeinschaften lenken kann.

Introduction

Independent Theater Hungary is one of the few contemporary Roma theater companies in Hungary. Since its establishment in 2007, it has been running without state or municipal support, mainly funded by private donations and grants, which fosters its independence from the ruling cultural politics in the country. Its mandate is to make socially engaged theater, introducing a new generation of audience to contemporary social issues, encouraging dialogue, and highlighting the importance of personal involvement and responsibility.

In 2017, Independent Theater Hungary organized the First International Roma Storytelling Festival, featuring four monodramas by Roma artists: Alina Serban's *I Declare at My Own Risk*, Michaela Dragan's *Tell Them About Me*, Dijana Pavlovic's *Speak, My Life*, and Richard O'Neill's *The Hardest Word*. Coincidentally, these dramas are about women who stand up for themselves and their communities in the face of social and political difficulties. This event marked the beginning of the annually organized Roma Heroes International Theater Festival, the only international gathering of Roma theater companies in the world. It has been

followed by the EU-founded project “European Roma Theater—Contemporary Cultural Heritage Shapes Our Future,” designed in partnership with the theater companies Romano Svato (Austria), Asociatia pentru Promovarea Artelor Contemporane (Romania), and National-cultural association “Amala” (Ukraine). The aim of this project is to strengthen cooperation between European Roma artists, to support new theatrical works, and to safeguard the visibility of Roma theater in Europe. In the long term, the project should build a common professional base in the field of education and arts, together with international Roma theater companies, and lay out the professional foundations of a European Roma Theater.

Also in 2017, the stage performances and international theater contributions led to the creation of the Roma Heroes educational methodology. Based on interactive workshops with the participation of Roma and non-Roma university students, it is the first international educational methodology focusing on Roma drama and theater. The motive behind this methodology is that, although the number of young Roma people pursuing university education is small, their proportion on an international scale is significant (cf. Szabóné; Illés et al. 21). As first-generation intellectuals, they enter a university environment that represents the majority society and its narratives. Their lives become divided between their own minority communities and the academic world, and often, neither feels like home for them. The largest challenge for these students is not to stay social outcasts, even when they experience their identity as a “counter-culture” in the academic world (Illés et al. 22). As Katalin Kardos notes, nurturing the Roma identity takes place mostly in these university colleges, where special sessions are devoted to Roma origins and culture (Kardos 66). Therefore, the main goals of the Roma Heroes educational methodology are to instruct about the history of Roma theater, to create understanding for the challenges that the various Roma communities in Europe face, and to present the Roma heroes as active members of society with their own dilemmas and failures, as people who make responsible decisions for themselves and their communities. In doing so, the methodology aims to dismantle negative stereotypes associated with the ‘gypsy’ phantasm in mainstream society, portraying instead diverse characters and communities. As Rodrigo Balogh, the founder of Independent Theater Hungary, says:

When I was a drama student, I was looking for Gypsy plays and works in which my identity was valued and had positive

connotations. I did not find any plays by Roma writers at all. And what I found in mainstream drama literature and theater about us was not too impressive either. If theaters put on plays with Gypsy characters in them at all, my colleagues portrayed ungrateful children, fathers impregnating their daughters, soulless mothers, blokes who humiliate themselves for a few cigarettes, characters who talk like ‘gypsies’ and loiter around. When I saw this, I felt both ashamed and as if I did not exist. As if the values and the heroes that were important in my life were invisible [...] Now I know that the Gypsy youth of the future will be able to find plays of Roma theatre companies who worked far away from them, in different parts of the world. They will have heroes of their own, presented on stage, in video and in books, just as we do now. (Balogh “Foreword,” 3–5)

During the workshops, students watch tape-recorded performances from the International Roma Heroes Storytelling Festival and analyze the hero’s character and motives and the social circumstances behind each story. After that, students present and discuss their personal stories of heroism in various creative ways. These workshops are vital for creating a positive identity for young Roma people, allowing them to find various connections between the recorded dramatic stories and their own personal lives. At the same time, these stories can have a transformative effect on non-Roma students, encouraging self-reflection by acquainting them with the different manifestations of racism. Thereby, the educational methodology helps students find their own heroes; it encourages self-representation, creativity, and critical thinking, and improves the dynamics within the groups.

Drawing on the results of these workshops, in 2020, educational material was developed by Independent Theater Hungary in cooperation with the Rampa Presentina (Italy), The Roma Actors Association, Giuvlipen (Romania), and the Asoc cultural por la investigacion y el desarrollo independiente del teatro profesional en Andalucía (Spain). This material is particularly useful in higher education. It considers the social and historical issues that are facing Roma communities and Roma theaters in Europe. Furthermore, theater education offers practical tools for classroom interaction and intragroup communication between Roma and non-Roma students.

In the following pages, I discuss the classroom topics, the concept of heroism, the classroom activity, and the plays used during the

workshops by Independent Theater Hungary. I end my article with a discussion of *Chameleon Girl*, a monodrama based on the life stories of participants in the first Roma Heroes workshop. The play is written by Márton Illés, a non-Roma author, who is also the project manager of Independent Theater Hungary. I have chosen to expand on his play, since it not only aims to combat antigypsy attitudes but also breaks with the exoticized portrayal of ‘gypsies.’

The Roma Heroes Workshop: Classroom Topics

The pilot methodology was tested on more than 20 groups with nearly 400 participants. The assessment showed that the methodology can be applied effectively in the framework of non-formal training: two workshops of approximately 120 minutes with the participation of 12 to 20 students who are at least 13 years old. Every workshop is held by two trainers, a Roma and a non-Roma, a man and a woman, to give an inspiring example for interethnic and intergender teamwork. Before holding classes, each trainer is required to take part in a preparatory program to acquire skills for creative classroom activities and to gain knowledge of the plays presented.

Every class begins with the trainers introducing themselves, the topics, the tools, and the goals. The classroom discussions focus mainly on the development of European theater and European civil society, the social function of theater, Roma theater, and the histories of European Roma communities. The discussion of these topics depends largely on the timeframe and is always preceded by a general presentation of the history of European Roma theaters.

Three major aspects are particularly important to highlight to the students. Firstly, theater and drama have always contributed to and concurred with the development of civil society. From the history of Ancient Greek theater performances to contemporary performing arts, the stage has always been a space for responding to and subverting ruling ideologies, as well as for inspiring social change. Secondly, it should be noted that the first play written in Romani language was performed in 1887 in Moscow, and the first Roma theater company, the Romen Theatre, was founded in 1931—yet Roma authors have always struggled to assert authorship over their work against the reigning political systems and to effectively counteract the overall stereotypical ‘gypsy’ representations (Ristić and Ristić; Drăgan; Illés et al. 75).

Consequently, although there are several independent Roma theater companies today in Europe, they mostly work in isolation from one another and without sufficient state and municipal support; these companies are largely unknown to the public. A third aspect concerns the social and historical issues of European Romani communities, including the history of enslavement of the Roma in Romania, the sociopolitical injustices against Traveller communities, the Roma Holocaust, current forms of intersectional discrimination, abuse of police power, and the socioeconomic realities within Romani communities. With the help of recorded stage performances and written excerpts of dramas from the two published collections of *Roma Heroes* (Balogh 2019; 2021), a discussion can be started between the participants about how Roma drama and theater respond to these issues and what impact the heroes in these dramas have. The role of the dramatic hero is particularly significant here, since it determines how the audience relates to him/her and, through him/her, to people of other ethnicities and cultures.

The Main Question: Who Is a Hero?

All classroom activities start with a brainstorming session around the question: “What makes a hero a hero?” Students note down with one word or a phrase all the character traits that they believe a hero should possess. Then, they read their notes out loud while the trainers write down the traits on sticky notes and place them on a board. The trainers then comment on and summarize the main points made.

The main distinguishing traits of heroes are that they respond to difficulties according to their values and make responsible decisions, thereby bringing about important changes in their own lives and in the lives of their communities. If any of these traits are not mentioned in the group, the trainers should lead the students to them in the first round with questions. If the students fail to identify these traits, the trainers should add them to the board, presenting them as their own view. Some differences in conceptualization might crop up in the group, such as superheroes versus everyday heroes or failure as being crucial for a heroic act, yet these differences are essential for complex and insightful debates about the main characteristics that define a hero.

As I have argued elsewhere, a heroic narrative in Roma drama and educational methodology is the most effective strategy for countering antigypsyist stereotypes (Szőke 7–8). There are two major narratives

that transport these stereotypes. One of them is a so-called “own-fault” narrative, portraying Roma people as uncooperative, lazy, vagrant; as people who prefer to live on social welfare, the support of their relatives, and illegal income; who have extreme criminal tendencies and are dangerous for society (cf. Illés et al. 21). Additionally, there is another narrative concentrating on structural discrimination, segregation, and the responsibility of institutions to support members of the Roma community. The differences between Roma and non-Roma are given a special emphasis in this narrative, along with the general perception that Roma are unable to make effective changes in their lives (cf. Illés et al. 29). Both narratives are highly dangerous, since they prevent Roma from countering the intersectional discrimination in mainstream society. Racism, sexism, and the patriarchal system in the Roma community are hindering forces which prevent Roma women from speaking about their social circumstances. On the one hand, Roma women are emotionally and financially dependent on their fellow members due to family traditions and lack of independent earnings. On the other hand, these women are silenced on account of the majority society’s prejudice against Roma, whereby they are excluded from receiving adequate legal and police protection, but they also continue to incite stigmatizing attitudes from their own community (Kóczé 23; Szőke 9). As is argued in the *Roma Heroes Foundation Bricks*,

The narratives of most of the Roma organizations focus on the differences between the Roma and the majority, and the helpless situation of their own communities. The negative/passive/victim image is not attractive enough to the young people to believe that they can be tools for a change, and it does not motivate them to identify themselves with a positive Roma identity. This identity could be different than the one dominated by stereotypes related to the Roma characters disseminated by the commercial media contents (focusing on extreme poverty, gangsters or media stars having a superficial life). We are convinced that another narrative is needed, which highlights the problems and at the same time the values, too, and which presents Roma heroes who make conscious decisions based on their own values and decisions [sic] they are able to shape their future. (Illés et al. 21)

The conceptual basis for the “heroic narrative” is provided in Joseph Campbell’s book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949); there Campbell

describes the hero's path as a journey with three stages: under the influence of some external forces, the hero embarks on a journey, descends into the unknown, triumphs over various crisis situations, and, spiritually transformed, returns home. From Campbell's theory comes the narratological pattern of the "hero's journey." This story-pattern can be described in the following way. The hero(ine) sets off from the safety of his/her world into the unknown. His/her call to go out stems from a crisis in the unknown. During his/her journey, the hero(ine) is provided with help, usually a mentor, sufficient for his/her survival by supernatural forces. Crossing the threshold of the unknown world, the hero must face the fact that his/her experiences and abilities are not enough to overcome danger, and that to win, (s)he must learn the laws of the new world. (S)he faces various challenges, and since (s)he usually has little strength to face these challenges alone and withstand the temptations of evil forces, (s)he needs an ally, a weapon-bearer. After (s)he descends into the underworld, at the bottom of the abyss, the hero(ine) experiences the death of his/her old self. Shadows hold a mirror to the hero(ine), showing him/her the (wo)man (s)he can become, if (s)he allows the evil to triumph over him/her. To overcome danger, the hero(ine) realizes that (s)he must break with his/her old self. The hero(ine) is reborn and transformed by this realization. (S)he understands that (s)he has learned something new through the challenges, stands the test, fulfils his/her duty, and, finally, returns home a completely different person (cf. Campbell 224–225).

The dramas performed at Roma Heroes International Storytelling Festival are built on this narrative. Drawing on these dramas, students develop their own hero concepts and reflect on the performances.

Roma Heroes Workshop: Classroom Activity

In the first part of the workshop, four video clips of stage performances are shown to the students. After watching the video clips and reading the written material, the participants are divided into four groups, each group discussing one play. Each group receives written material from the published collections or the drama manuscripts, as well as background information with images. During this group work, the participants are asked to summarize the stories, make their own interpretation of the themes, and answer three main questions: what difficulties does the hero face? What are his/her reactions to them? What impact does

(s)he have on his/her community? In addition, some further questions related to the plays can be asked by the trainers. After elaborating on these questions, each group presents their own reflections on each performance and shares what they found the most interesting in the plays.

In the second part, a special emphasis is placed on personal storytelling and creative team effort. After a short summary of the conclusions from the previous session, the trainers share their personal story of heroism and name one person they regard as the hero in their life. Divided into small groups, the students recount one moment of their life when somebody they knew or they themselves performed an act of heroism. Then, as project work, each group shoots a short film or draws pictures, writes essays, or performs music and theatrical improvisations related to their chosen story. In the closing session, the students share their ideas on each other's work, discuss their experiences during the creative work, and share their thoughts and feelings about the workshop.

As noted in the *Roma Heroes Foundation Bricks*, the feedback from Roma university students demonstrates that the dramatic stories around Roma heroes, the interethnic cooperation, and the richness of material on Roma theater and culture improve their self-esteem and help them develop a positive Roma identity (Illés et al. 22–23). Non-Roma university students generally highlighted the partnership, the creative teamwork, and the often-shocking historical and political background of some of the plays, as well as the personal stories of heroism.

Five Contemporary Plays by Roma Authors

In 2019 and 2021, two volumes of Roma dramas were published by Independent Theater Hungary, both under the title *Roma Heroes*. Both collections consisted of five contemporary European monodramas by Roma authors, selected from the stage performances at the Roma Heroes International Storytelling Festival. The first collection contains monodramas, focusing on personal confessions and individual narratives. In contrast, the dramas in the second collection are composed of several acts and characters. All these plays have been recorded and used by trainers during the workshops. In this section, I provide a brief account of five plays: *The Hardest Word* by Richard O'Neill, *Speak, My Life* by Dijana Pavlovic, *Letter to Brad Pitt* by Franciska Farkas, *The Leader* by Igor Krikunov, and *Kosovo Mon Amour* by Jovan Nikolić and Ruždija Russo Sejdović.

Richard O'Neill is an acclaimed Roma storyteller, playwright, and activist. He has been involved in several projects aimed at nurturing Roma culture and integration. In partnership with the British police force, he took part in the conference "Pride not Prejudice." Moreover, he is often invited to hold keynote speeches at international events and works in schools with children from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, promoting positive multicultural cooperation. As a writer, he is called by his peers the Roma Andersen and the Roma Wordsworth of his generation. His upbringing in a large, traditional, nomadic 'Gypsy' Traveller family in the north of England and Scotland is reflected in his books, plays, and children's stories (cf. Cisneros). His monodrama *The Hardest Word* tells the story of a campaign by Jess Smith, a Scottish Traveller woman who demanded that the Scottish government apologize for the injustice and persecution of the Traveller community. The drama was instrumental in the Church of Scotland formally making an apology to the Scottish Travellers for their centuries of persecution and recognizing them as an ethnic minority in Scotland (cf. Cisneros).

Franciska Farkas is a well-known Hungarian film actress and Roma activist who fights for equal opportunities for Roma women. Her monodrama *Letter to Brad Pitt* is a personal confession, a letter to the movie idol, in which Farkas recounts her own story of heroism: how she rose above deep poverty, drug addiction, and the hell of psychiatric institutions, and how she countered the stigmatizing gaze of Hungarian mainstream media. This play is instructive, as it not only tells the intersectional discrimination in mainstream society but also the way Roma women can stand up and take control over their own lives (Szóke 8–9).

Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life* is a stage adaptation of Mariella Mehr's novel *Stone Age*. Mehr is a survivor of the child protection project "Children of the Country Road Program." Run from 1926 to the 1970s by the Swiss foundation Pro Juventute, this project focused on the assimilation of Yenish Travellers by forcibly removing Yenish children from their parents and putting them into psychiatric institutions, state homes, or prisons, or giving them to foster families, where they were exposed to mental and physical abuse. Mehr's novel was one of the first to memorialize the crimes committed against the Yenish children in this project from the perspective of a survivor. Mehr's novel deconstructs the stigmatizing language of the Swiss authorities, the split identity of several Yenish women resulted from this cultural persecution, shedding new light on the questions about institutional power, racialized identity,

home(lessness), and survival. In *Speak, My Life*, Dijana Pavlović revisits Mehr's life and work as a heroic narrative, which has allowed the Yenish community to represent itself and re-establish its positive identity.

Russo Sejdović and Jovan Nikolic's *Kosovo Mon Amour* recounts the genocide of the Roma communities by Albanian military forces during the Kosovo war through the ordeals of a Roma family. The play expresses harsh criticism of the attitude of the Balkan states towards the Roma, describing the loss of identity and social alienation triggered by mass destruction. With its authentic portrait of inhumanity, the play also includes the themes of intercultural and inter-ethnic understanding, solidarity, and friendship, whereby the Mon Amour nightclub serves as a place where differences dissolve and people can have good time together regardless of their ethnic background.

Igor Krikunov's *The Leader* is called by many a postmodern reimagining of *Fiddler on the Roof* (cf. Herczog) recounting the Roma Holocaust in Romania and Ukraine. Adapted from Zaharia Stancu's novel *Gypsy Tribe* (1971), the play deals with themes of intergenerational conflicts, the questioning of old patriarchal values in Roma communities, and the history of oppression of the Romanian Roma community and its struggle for survival. The purity of love within the community is set against the brutality of the external world. The leader is a moral person torn between his loyalty to traditional values and the demands of the new generation for change, while making responsible decisions to guarantee the survival of his people.

As these examples show, the plays performed at the Roma Heroes International Storytelling Festival are rich and diverse in terms of topic and artistic conception. Yet they offer some complex questions for the classroom, including: how do the topics of the plays impact our notions of exclusion and racism? In what ways do the descriptions of persecution and genocide change our perception of national and European history? How and under what circumstances does the identity of the heroes change in the stories? What conflicts do they have, and what changes do they effect in their communities? Many of these questions constitute the core concept of the play *Chameleon Girl*, which I discuss in the next section.

The Play *Chameleon Girl* (2018) by Márton Illés

Márton Illés's *Chameleon Girl* tells the story of a Roma teenage girl who makes responsible decisions at important moments in her life against the expectations of the outside world. The play is written by a non-Roma author based on the heroic stories of participants in the 2017 Roma Heroes Workshop. The fact that the text is authored by a non-Roma writer is controversial, since it raises questions about authenticity and the lack of self-representation for Roma people. However, the author's attempt to dismantle the literary tradition of stereotyped representations of the Roma should be emphasized here. Distorted representations of Roma have been dominant in the history of European literature and culture. In the works of Miguel de Cervantes, Victor Hugo, Charlotte Brontë, or Virginia Woolf, 'gypsy' characters appear as mysterious, wild, and sensual creatures, who possess extraordinary musical and artistic talent and pose a threat to civilized society with their exotic character and nomadic lifestyle (cf. Toninato; Janoska; Blair). By merging the various narratives worked out by the Roma workshop participants, Illés decries antigypsyist depictions and opens windows to interethnic understanding.

The heroine of the play is interviewed by an educational counsellor to understand her story, her character, and her decisions. The invisible eyes of the counsellor are the eyes of the audience; his questions are the questions we probably would ask her. It is from this perspective that the story of the heroine unfolds in front of the audience. Thus, we learn about her family background, the history of her great-grandparents, and the expectations and stigmas that she was burdened with by her teachers in kindergarten and at school, where the general slogan was that "only fools tend to imitate others, those who are unaware of their identity" (Illés 4). She is given the nickname 'Chameleon' by a kindergarten teacher because she wears a Sailor Moon T-shirt with a blonde, blue-eyed white girl on it; the teacher says to her:

"Do you think you can be like them? That it is worth being hypocritical and two-faced? That you don't have your own culture, your color, but just imitate your environment like a chameleon?" He liked what he said. "Yes, you're not a Roma, you're more of a chameleon, little girl." (Illés 4)

What is truly engaging in this drama is that the heroine's failure to fulfil the expectations of others leads to her ultimate liberation. She learns to embrace her identity in a way that "a chameleon can join any queue and can fulfil any expectations. But sometimes she must decide for herself, otherwise she'll never live her own life" (10). This chameleon-like existence endows her with a loving attention and adaptability, whereby "a true chameleon, in contrast to most people, has the power of seeing into other people's head, feeling with their heart, and thinking with their mind" (7). However, attentiveness and empathy are not on par with following suit, and the highlight of the play is when the heroine decides to give birth to her child, leaving her high school studies before graduation. Thus, the play highlights the ability of Roma women to make decisions about their lives independently of social pressures, and it does so by reshaping the stigmas from the outside world into a positive experience and identity. As the heroine says:


Oh, and as for the lower grade girls, I think they're beautiful when they're black, but if they feel better about being blonde, that's okay too. It's okay if they want to learn, but it's also okay if they want to be home with their kids. It's okay to build a career, and also to look for adventures in life. (Illés 10)

In the face of the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against Roma women, which make them vulnerable to social exclusion, economic hardships, and various manifestations of mental and physical violence, platforms that empower them and raise their awareness about the importance of self-representation are highly needed. Consequently, while the play encourages a self-critical attitude from the non-Roma audience, it celebrates the lives of Romani people, and especially those of Roma women. Thus, against the widespread stereotypical narratives about the 'gypsy,' the play offers new perspectives, allowing an intimate look into the lives of Roma communities, revealing their courage to make decisions and the complexities of circumstances in which these decisions are made. The play stimulates critical thinking in the non-Roma audience while helping a young generation of Roma people to find their own role models.

Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of the tools and practices developed by the Roma Heroes educational methodology. The main aim of the methodology is to familiarize the younger generations with the history of Roma theater and to equip them with skills for critical thinking and interethnic cooperation. Central to the methodology is the dramatic hero, the model of the active citizen who brings change to his/her environment with his/her decisions. The plays in the two Roma drama collections present Roma heroes who must act responsibly and make difficult decisions in various social and historical circumstances. Thus, the plays challenge antigypsyist stereotypes, providing a wide array of complex characters whose heroic acts shape the future of their communities. Such narratives are essential for several reasons. Firstly, they raise awareness about social issues concerning Roma communities, including healthcare, the histories of persecution, and contemporary socioeconomic problems. Secondly, they help the audience recognize the heroes in their own communities and value their acts of heroism. In doing so, the “heroic narrative” of the plays empowers Roma students, furnishing them with a positive identity model as it encourages a critical reflection of contemporary social realities, opening windows for interethnic dialogue and understanding.

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