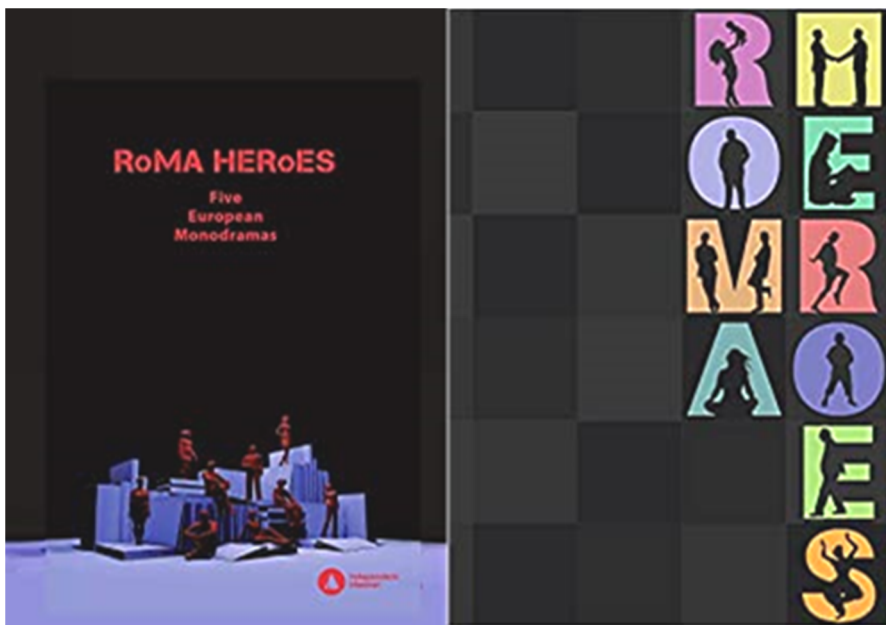


Let Us Look at People Without Passing Judgment

**Book Review: Independent Theater Hungary, Michael Collins,
Franciska Farkas, Dijana Pavlović, Richard R. O'Neill, Mihaela Drăgan –
Roma Heroes: Five European Monodramas, Publisher: Women for the Future
Association/ Independent Theater Hungary, May 29, 2020.**



Although it has been argued that the Roma theatre has existed in Europe for over a century, this phenomenon is still an enigma today due to lack of data. According to other opinions, this tradition dates back to 1930 and is linked to the former USSR, where the Romeni Theatre was founded, serving the political ideology of the time. Whatever the origin of this cultural activity, Roma plays were never collected, much less printed in a volume.

Currently, the only international Roma theatre festival in the world is held in Hungary. The readers of the volume hereby reviewed, are fortunate to see the first collection of Roma plays ever published in the world. *Roma Heroes: Five European Monodramas* is an exceptional collection of dramas and a special cultural history volume. The drama collection was compiled with great care and a lot of work. In the collection we can read five different dramas written by five European authors.

Before writing anything about the five monodramas listed in the volume, it is worth carefully studying a very important aspect pertaining to it. This, together with the Introduction and Preface, is so rich in content that an entire review could be written about it alone. In Eastern Europe, and particularly in Transylvania, it is highly unlikely that anyone is unfamiliar with the Roma. Depending on our way of life, our relationships, our interests, we may have been relating to these people in various ways, from total indifference making friends and all the way to starting a family together. The book, and therefore this review, is also about people who may not get enough attention, and if they do, it may not be for the better.

Among others, Rodrigó Balogh himself writes about these things; even after twenty years of work, he cannot sit back, and as this volume proves it, this struggle – in which he is not alone – has not been in vain. His words convey not a plea as much as an expression of his concern with the future of the next generation in his community. He managed to find collaborators of different ethnicities to achieve his goals, and to get support from the authorities, so he feels that this struggle, the struggle of the Roma, is not a hopeless cause.

In the *Introduction*, the writer and journalist Szilvia Sisso Artner states that this is an exceptional collection of plays, a landmark of cultural history. She then goes on to summarize the plots of the plays, and concludes: “It was only the most important reading experience of my adolescence, Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird!” that struck me as powerfully as this volume.” So, let’s see the authors and their works!

Actress and playwright Mihaela Drăgan, born in 1986, is a multifaceted artist with an education in theatrical performance, living in Bucharest and Berlin. In 2014, in collaboration with other Roma actresses, she founded

Giuvlipen Theatre Company, where she works as an actress and playwright. In 2015, she played in the feature film *Aferim* directed by Radu Jude, and in 2018, she was a resident artist in Hong Kong at Para Site Contemporary Art Centre. She was one of the six finalists for the 2017 International Theatre Award in New York and a 2020 nominee, an award which acknowledges the exceptional work of 20 theatre women around the world. Over the last years she has been working in Berlin as an actress for Maxim Gorki Theatre, Heimathafen Neukölln, and Theater Aufbau Kreuzberg. She is also a trainer at the Theatre of the Oppressed, where she works with Roma women on their specific issues in Romania. In addition, she has worked with refugee girls in Germany as a theatre trainer.

Tell Them About Me by Mihaela Drăgan deals with the topic of early marriages through personal stories of various Roma women in Romania. The play is composed of the stories of four Roma women who talk about the truth of early marriage, what it means to belong to a traditional community, and what happens when you are no longer there. Their stories depict the so-called “exoticism” of the Roma woman, about stereotypes that remind us that acceptance and diversity are still far from reality. *Tell Them About Me* must be read and performed so that these women’s message can be passed on. But the question remains: should these women’s stories be known for compassion, or so that others, who are not Roma, may understand them better? As in any community, in the Roma world there are tragic stories and there are stories with a happy ending. The Roma, a community based on strong traditions, need hope as much as anyone else.

The following story is told from a male perspective and centers discrimination. Michael Collins, a member of the Irish traveller community, has been an advocate of traveller human rights for over 20 years. He is an actor and a writer. Michael has been developing the idea of establishing a Traveller Theatre Company which would work with Travellers and other socially excluded and ethnic minority groups to allow them to tell their stories and issues in an artistic way.

It's a Cultural Thing. Or Is It? shows the past of Traveller people, in the '60s, '70s, and '80s in Ireland. The Irish Traveller artist talks with his own daughter who wants to drop out of school. To dissuade her, he recalls childhood memories and through these sometimes funny, sometimes difficult stories, he shows his daughter the importance of education. He describes his family's journey to Dublin to join the other Travellers who started the exodus to Dublin as a result of changes in the social welfare system and the end of the traditional way of life. The strength of Michael Collins' story is that it is completely devoid of hatred. As he grows and sees more and more of the world, he suddenly realizes the injustice of the system they live in. He hopes that if people in his community are better educated, they will have a better life.

Franciska Farkas also had to fight hard to achieve her goals. She was born in Gyöngyös, Hungary, on November 5, 1984. She is an actress and drama teacher. She performs in several theater productions. She's one of the few Hungarian Roma actresses who reveal and openly discuss their origin. Upon finishing high school, she studied as a social worker. She worked as a model, a housekeeper in a hotel, a waitress, a bartender and a number of other jobs and, for lack of means and time, could not enrol in an acting school. Later, she attended drama teaching school and graduated successfully in 2017. She was awarded Best Actress in several movies.

Letter to Brad Pitt by Franciska Farkas is a painstakingly honest confession about the actress' own life, with a touch of dark humor. The protagonist is Franciska Farkas herself, who speaks on her own behalf. It reveals to us the darkest hells of being a woman. She talks about the hell of prostitution, drug use, homelessness, dropping out of school, mental hospital, and family breakdown. The play is an uplifting story of survival and becoming a heroine. The story shows a keen picture of what it means to escape victimhood as a Roma woman. It talks about what it means to make decisions and set an example for others in a society characterized by various manifestations of discrimination. The fact that the play ends on a positive note encourages everyone facing a similar predicament to dare to dream big.

The next author, Dijana Pavlović, is a Roma Italian-Serbian theater and screen actor, activist and media personality. She has campaigned for language rights for Roma and Sinti and against forced evictions in Italy, and has also worked with disadvantaged youth in and around Milan. She is one of the founders of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture that opened in 2017 in Berlin.

Speak, My Life by Dijana Pavlović shows the long years of Yeshiva genocide in Switzerland that ended in the '70s, as depicted by the Yeshiva novelist Mariella Mehr. In her book, Mariella Mehr writes about the inhuman treatment and the biological genocide of the Yeshiva people in Switzerland. The story faithfully portrays the state of mind of the powerless, oppressed people and the cruelty of those who serve the system. Based on historical facts, the book provides insight into the process of how the Swiss state and the church subjected the members of the nomadic community to forced treatments and sterilization. The writer Mariella Mehr also experienced this horrendous treatment and her works contributed to preserving the historical memory of these events.

Richard O'Neill (1962) is an internationally acclaimed performance storyteller, author and playwright. He was born and brought up in a large traditional, fully nomadic Romani Gypsy family, travelling throughout the North of England and Scotland. His roots are also to be found in the coal mining communities of the North East having family members who worked down the pits. This co-cultural upbringing is reflected in his creative work. Storytelling has been a constant in Richard's life for as long as he can remember. Learning his craft as he sat round camp fires at the feet of some of the best Travelling and North Country storytellers, he developed a passion for stories, something he is keen to share nationally and internationally in a range of settings from schools and universities, to the workplace and at a diverse range of festivals.

The Hardest Word by Richard O'Neill presents the campaign of Jess Smith, the Scottish Traveller writer who demanded the first minister to apologize for the injustice and persecution of the Traveller community. *The Hardest Word* performed by Jess Smith broke new ground by enabling the change of the law in Scotland.

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In summary, the book *Roma Heroes* is a very thought-provoking collection of dramas. It discusses social problems that we are unfortunately facing even in the 21st century. Its reading is recommended both for those interested in theater and those interested in sociology.

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