

## *Do Roma Communities Only Get to Deal with Suffering?*

**Book Review: *Roma Heroes II. Five European Dramas* Kindle Edition by Independent Theater Hungary Rodrigó Balogh (Author), M. Drăgan-Z. Moldovan-L. Ceterchi-M. Lukács (Authors), Richard R. O'Neill (Author), J. Nikolić-R. R. Seidović (Authors), Igor Krikunov (Author), Rodrigó Balogh (Author) Format: Kindle Edition. September 28, 2021.**



This volume is a sequel to the first *Roma Heroes* anthology of monodramas and contains stories from five different countries. The chamber dramas bring us to Germany, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, and into the virtual theatre world: a play created online was also included in the book.

Although in the current conjuncture one can feel the effort made in various forums to ensure equal opportunities for different ethnicities, however, the book *Roma Heroes II* is only the second volume in the world containing plays related to Roma culture. It should be made clear from the outset that the endeavour to provide space for a marginalised culture is understandable. But the value of a work is not and cannot be given by the simple fact that the participants, the creators belong to one ethnic group or another. It should be stressed that, although there are differences in value between the plays in this volume, the editors of the book do not fall into the trap mentioned in the commentary above. The plays are interesting, with subjects that are often familiar to people of any ethnicity, but which in the case of the Roma take on new nuances. Equally true is the fact that sometimes we wonder how this problem is even a problem. The answers, at least in part, can be found in the plays in the volume.

The first play, *Who killed Szomna Grancsa?* is written by four authors. Ceterchi Liana is an actress and theatre director. She has worked with both state and independent theatres. She graduated from „I.L. Caragiale” Institute of Theatrical and Cinematographic Arts in Bucharest. She is general manager at the Teatrul pentru Puțini. Mihaela Drăgan is an actress and playwright who lives in Bucharest and works in other several countries. Since 2014 she is the cofounder of the Roma feminist theater company Giuvlipen. Mihai Lukács is a stage director, performer, theorist. His last performative practices talk about the relationship between the Roma people and the gadje, public humiliation, sexual liberation, faith and exclusion, forced evictions and homelessness. Zita Moldovan, as a graduate of the Faculty of Theater and Television in Cluj, co-founded in 2006 the Giuvlipen Theater Company. During her 15-year career, she has been actively involved in the Roma feminist and antiracist movement, working as a theater trainer in Roma communities and in various campaigns for Roma rights.

Their play, *Who killed Szomna Grancsa?*, is based on the true story of a Roma girl who committed suicide after her parents stopped sending her to school, and explores the many complex reasons behind the tragedy. Their theatrical approach is a direct challenge to the more simple version of events told on Romanian television – that a young woman died because her parents,

from one of Romania's traditional Roma communities, denied her an education. The play instead explores the other daily pressures she had faced: anti-Roma racism in Romanian schools, rural poverty, women's oppression in Romanian society at large.

The next play, *European Family*, is written by Richard O'Neill with six co-authors. Richard O'Neill is an internationally acclaimed performance storyteller, author and playwright. He was born and brought up in 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.

The other authors had also an important contribution to the conception of the play. Sebastiano Spinella is an Italian musician, art-educator, clown, actor. Sonia Carmona Tapia, who studied a Bachelor fine arts in theatre in the USA, started in 1996 her own independent theatre company. Bohórquez. Jaime E. Vicent is a Spanish writer and television director based in Seville. Márton Illés is a trainer, dramaturge and operational manager of the Független Színház. Lucia Lakatos is a student of sociology at Corvinus University of Budapest, trainer of Független Színház Magyarország.

*European Family* is about members of a Roma family, who are living in different parts of Europe when the lockdown associated with the Covid-19 epidemic begins. They can only communicate on video chat and must face losses and challenges in their isolated lives. Conflicts and secrets are also revealed. It seems that only magic can help. The story is based on real stories that the Roma people faced during the time of the lockdown in diverse countries of Europe and also the personal stories and improvisations of the artists who created this text together from their home countries connected only by the internet and their common passion for theatre.

*The Leader* takes us from the present back to the time of WW2. The author is Igor Krikunov (1953), who was an actor. He died on May 11, 2021 in Ukraine.

*The Leader* takes place during the Second World War, and presents a Roma community whose leader makes every possible effort to save his people from impending death. This play was written in memory of the Roma victims of WW2. *The Leader* does not only tell about the Roma and is not

exclusively for the Roma. The play depicts the inner life of people and reflects on the battle of good and bad powers. There are positive stories about feelings, right actions, self-sacrifice, since love and sympathy can serve as a refuge in the most difficult times, too.

*Kosovo Mon Amour* takes us to another war, that ended not long time ago. Yashar and his wife, Elvira are running a pub in Kosovo during the South Slavic war. The hate campaign against the nations creates more and more corruption, violence and absurd life situations among people who are relatives and once were friends but became sworn enemies of each-other all of a sudden. The play illustrates a society suffering from propaganda of hatred, nationalism, lies and manipulation in a shocking way. *Kosovo Mon Amour*, subtitled „war tragicomedy“, tells the fate of a Romani family trying to escape to Western Europe from Kosovo in 1999.

The text has two authors. Jovan Nikolić (born Belgrade, 1955), is a Serbian Romani writer, currently resident in Germany. His parents moved around Yugoslavia, following his father's work as a musician. Nikolić moved to Germany following the NATO bombing of Serbia. Ruždija Russo Sejdović is a poet, dramaturge, translator and activist who was born into a Čergarja family in the Ubli settlement near Podgorica, in the then Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Montenegro in 1966. In 1989, he emigrated to Germany.

*Village Day* is written by Rodrigó Balogh (1978), who graduated in 2001 at the Shakespeare Academy of Dramatic Arts in Budapest. He worked at Roma and non-Roma multiethnic companies. He has written and directed numerous performances for disadvantaged young people.

Lápos can be any village in Hungary today: with inhabitants who struggle for their daily living, better or worse, but they are lovable residents. Misery-tourists visit the “village day” every year and the participants of the gastro-theatre performance meet real human tragedies in the pokey but inventive village. How much chance does a Gypsy woman have if she raises her child on her own without any opportunity to work? Where is hope when the biggest goodwill turns the most important people of our lives against us? What is needed when we take the road of unscrupulousness because we cannot get out of the woods? Where is the boundary between humanity and inhumanity? Similar questions arise when we read *Village Day* and imagine a very real, impoverished world.

Volume two of the *Roma Heroes* series therefore contains plays that talk about the problems faced by an ethnic group found throughout Europe. It seems that this minority is everywhere exposed to suffering, either because of miserable living conditions or because of the lack of basic rights. Although the fate of the Roma – as shown in the two volumes of *Roma Heroes* – in different parts of Europe is not identical, or even similar, it can be said that in general this ethnic group is suffering in most of Europe. But the question arises whether there are really no positive moments in the lives of these people, or whether no great deeds worthy of being recorded and made known to the world are linked to the name of any Roma? In a future volume I would like to read as well about humour, great deeds, people integrated smoothly into society, into a society made up of mosaics of different minorities.

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