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ROMA WOMEN ON THE WAY TO SELF-REALIZATION

Roma Women on the Way to Self-Realization

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The [Roma Heroes International Theater Festival](#), which has made available about twenty performances of Roma plays since 2017, is one of the most important series of events in the past decade related to the social and cultural self-representation of highly marginalized social groups. One of the most important values of the festival is that it makes visible theatre performances, workshops, and other art activities about Roma people, by Roma people.

In doing this, the wider society can access and learn about Roma culture and a discussion between the cultures can begin. Each performance raises very interesting questions, however, I'm choosing to focus on four plays that show individual decisions and destinies through the Roma heroines' life stories. Through these stories, we get to know how these Roma heroines feel about Roma traditions and the repressive mechanisms of the social majority. These plays not only present the situation of Roma communities but especially focus on Roma women's lives. The plays I examine depict the stories of real Roma heroines who manage to bring positive change not only to their own lives, but also to their communities.

Roma Women and Marriage

Roma women's role and "rights" in marriage are especially important in Roma traditions. Marriage is an institution full of clichés. A woman's will is almost always subordinate to Roma traditions and customs that often override the free will of Roma women. A part of Roma tradition is early or arranged marriage, which often hinders young women from building a career. In the institution of marriage, Roma women are almost completely at the mercy of their community's traditions; thus they are deprived of the chance to make their own decisions regarding their own lives.

Roma women's opinion on marriage is excellently shown in [Mihaela Dragan's](#) play, *Del Duma*, which she performed at the first annual Roma Heroes International Theater Festival in 2017. Her documentarist and ballad-like play presents the life

and possibilities of Roma women in Romania. The play is based on various interviews with Roma women and focuses on arranged marriages, thus making their fate visible.

In an interview, Dragan shared that she has several female role models in her family who she considers heroes for their strong, rebellious personalities. For this reason, Dragan consciously prepared to be an actress, which provided a great opportunity for her to embrace and reinforce her Roma and female identity. At the same time, she could realize her old idea of producing plays about Roma people with an independent company of professional Roma actors. That is how the Bucharest-based company [Giuvlipen](#), which means feminism in the Romani language, was formed. The formation of this company provided Dragan with the opportunity to start a resistance in her own Roma community so that marginalized Roma artists could take their rightful place by presenting their own stories.

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In *Del Duma*, Dragan showcases various female characters. The first (positive) life story is that of Maria, who speaks about her marriage with her husband, Sergiu. Maria and Sergiu met in Hotel Marriott, at a meeting for Roma associations which Maria attended as a journalist. They fell in love and soon married. The wedding was simple, without any traditional Roma ceremony. Meeting Sergiu made Maria and her family happy, as she married a man who she loves at a time which they felt appropriate.

Maria is a journalist and a career-minded, intellectual Roma woman in her twenties who, from a traditional Roma perspective, is too old for marriage and having children. She thus cannot convince the thirteen and fourteen-year-old Roma girls in her class about the importance of education and career because Maria's life and career went against Roma traditions and is therefore not a relevant example for them.

In another life story, Dragan presents an example of how traditional cultures, like Roma culture, cruelly punish women who break with tradition—especially if she commits adultery. Through Calafiro, the daughter-in-law of the Gypsy leader,

Dragan shows the traditional Roma views on dressing and cleanliness, and we learn that women have to follow the dressing traditions more than Roma men do. Men can dress freely while women must keep the Roma dressing traditions by wearing traditional clothes when they leave the house. This difference in expectations clearly shows the inequality that is prevalent between Roma men and women.

One of the play's most touching stories is that of Roxana—a rebellious girl from a traditional Roma family. After having her first period at the age of thirteen, she tries to hide it from her parents because they would want to marry her off so that she can start her own family. To avoid this, she converts to Adventism with the help of her aunt. This helps Roxana because according to her new faith, she can only marry a man of her own congregation. She finds shelter from the burden of family traditions in religion and faith. In the beginning, her Roma origin is a burden to her, as her origin and her family's traditions deprived her of education, freedom, and self-realization. But later on, when she works with Gypsy children, she realizes that Roma children are equally as smart and talented as their non-Roma peers if they receive adequate education.

One of the most important common denominators of the female stories collected and presented by Mihaela Dragan is access to education, as school plays a central role in all the stories. The tradition of Roma children's early marriage seems to be in sharp, irreconcilable conflict with attending school and building a career. Unfortunately, these days, there are several Roma children in or out of school who become victims of exclusion by the majority or drift further and further away from a successful career and life path due to the burdens of an inverted tradition. The clear goal of these stories is to bring change to Roma women's and children's lives so that they have the courage to oppose the burdens of tradition and rebel against the system.

The same message is reinforced by the monodrama *Chameleon Girl* by Márton Illés, which premiered at the second annual Roma Heroes International Theatre Festival in 2018. Illés wrote this play based on interviews with Roma high school and university students and the stories are mostly based on the shared experiences of Roma youth having to always do more than their non-Roma peers. This is due not only to negative discrimination but also due to the fact that Roma children often have to fight disadvantages inherent in their sociocultural

background. Nevertheless, it is a positive narrative which deals with Roma women's common dilemma: having to choose between building a career or starting a family.

At one point in the play, the main character Emília shares, in her very honest, good-tempered, and almost suggestive way, that she felt like a real chameleon for the first time when she set out with her grandfather to visit her grandmother's grave in a heavy winter snowfall. During the snowfall, Emília suddenly felt the whiteness of the snow on her skin and thought that she had become invisible—as if she did not exist at all. At the same time, she became capable of identifying with her grandmother's thoughts and emotions. This is the moment which best shows the essence of being a reclusive or empathic chameleon, which is a central dilemma in the monodrama.

Being a chameleon, on one hand, means to completely blend into one's environment, and on the other hand, it means that one can identify with other people's feelings and ideas. This opens up two possibilities: hide and become invisible in front of the Other or identify with the Other's personality and understand their feelings. Emília's two sisters exemplify these two extreme options.

Emília's city sister is a real role model; the "good Gypsy." She is talented so she studies well, goes to university, and has a promising career ahead of her. However, this comes at the price of never being herself openly. In school, she has to prove her skills and aptitude more than her non-Roma peers so that she is accepted as the "good Gypsy." Thus, she becomes the favorite; the everything in her family. At the same time, Emília feels that her city sister, the "good Gypsy," is not really a Gypsy anymore because she assimilated so much through studying and working to the point where it's as if she does not even exist.

The option that the city sister represents is social mobility through education and work which she has to achieve while "hiding" behind her mimicry of the career-focused young Roma student who wants to change her life. Emília thinks that her city sister's chameleon-ness means imitation, hiding, and invisibility. However, for her sister, being a chameleon comes with empathy; she is able to see into the Other's mind, feel with the Other's heart, think with the Other's brain, and sympathize with them. This is a quality that is key to understanding loved ones, as one has to become one with the Other, like a chameleon.

Emília could better identify with her country sister's more traditional life situation, where the Roma girl does not keep studying because she marries young and starts a family life. Her country sister stays at home, manages the household, raises her children, and takes care of her parents. In a way, this is an old-fashioned, outdated way of life, but it is also important to note that this family life is equally as valuable as building a career, which conveys a positive message for those young Roma who married at a young age.

At the end of the play, Emília is in high school, one year away from the final exams and expecting her boyfriend Keven's baby. Because of this, she tells the headmaster that she would like to temporarily cease her studies, even though she is talented enough to successfully graduate from high school. This serves as a good example to her Roma peers at school by helping them to maintain their motivation for studying successfully.

Chameleon Girl gives us the chance to get to know an everyday hero who believes it is more important to give birth to, care for, and raise her child than it is to build a career. In her opinion, motherhood does not seal her destiny but rather provides her the opportunity to become a real role model and hero for her family and her wider environment, as she did not follow other people's examples when deciding about her own life: "A chameleon can join any queue and can fulfill any expectations. But sometimes she has to decide for herself, otherwise she'll never live her own life." The nice, chatty, young girl becomes a mature Roma mother-to-be; a real everyday hero. She makes a decision about her own life of her own free will, thus showing that becoming a mother does not predetermine your life.

The Successful Roma Woman Archetype

The above-described plays show that Roma women are not in an easy situation, as they are disadvantaged not only in society at large but also within their own community. However, the play *Bambina, The Queen of Flowers* formulates an encouraging message and presents an excellent example of how a Roma woman can achieve significant social influence and acceptance with persistent and impassioned work.

Bambina, The Queen Of Flowers by Alex Fifea, Zita Moldovan, and Andrei Serban, is a documentarist play that was presented at the fourth annual Roma Heroes International Theater Festival in 2020. This show follows the historical stories of Romanian florists leading up to the story of Lina Georgescu, also known as Bambina, and the birth of her floral empire. [ARTHUB company](#) discovered several details about the real-life experiences of Bambina through an interview with one of her sons, Florin Georgescu, in order to shed light on the importance of Bambina's career in the history of Romanian florists. The performance is made magical by the colorful, floral set which emphasizes the diversity of Roma culture. This effect is further created with the music and singing of the Gypsy musician from Bolden, Mamiru and his team.

Throughout the play, we witness Bambina successfully adapt to the changes of the flower market and build a significant empire during the challenging decades of her career. Bambina starts selling flowers at the early age of seven, initially selling flowers that other people threw away at restaurants. She is very agile and by the age of fourteen, she is running her own stall.

During the communist era, she becomes [Nicolae Ceausescu's](#) official buyer. In 1994, after communism ends and when flower selling crashes in Romania, Bambina imports the best quality of flowers to Romania from the Netherlands, which boosts her business; she sells eight trucks worth of flowers. All this clearly shows that her (business) courage makes her a better and more successful florist than others. Moreover, she is a person of goodwill and is forgiving and generous, thus making her very popular with Romanian Gypsy communities. When she dies in 2014, as many as two thousand people bid her farewell in the Romanian Resurrection Cemetery where she finds her final resting place among famous artists.

It is clear that this is a classic success story: a story of a Roma woman who starts from the bottom but, due to her hard work and perseverance, builds and leads a real empire, thus acquiring significant social influence. At the same time however, it is more than a classic story of success because Bambina proves that she, as a Roma woman, can also be successful—even though she comes from a multiply disadvantaged social standing. As a Roma and as a woman, she has to face many more difficulties in a competitive world that is basically dominated by white men and restrains women so they rarely—and only in exceptional cases—succeed in

the business world.

Bambina redefined herself despite the social challenges and difficulties that Roma women have had to face. One of her main goals was to support the social mobility of Roma women who came from situations similar to her own. In this manner, she disproved every stereotype about Roma women: she was a successful businesswoman, a loving and responsible mother, and a devoted wife who helped her community as a matriarch.

A Futuristic Picture

One of the bravest plays at the fourth annual Roma Heroes International Theater Festival in 2020 was *Romacen, The Age of the Witch*, written by Mihaela Dragan and performed by the company Giuvlipen. In this play, a few Roma women ambitiously dream about Roma women's future global power—though their plan does not become reality.

Romacen is a most exciting experiment that presents an unprecedented, forward-looking, rebellious, and strongly utopistic Roma feminine perspective. This density is an innovative strength of the play. The playwright creates a modern theatrical visual world, sometimes using magical, mystical sounds to do so. At the same time, she uses an unusual structure, as two-thirds of the performance are set in a static and stiff virtual world before moving from the virtual space to reality, where the intentionally rigid and clumsy acting becomes more vivid.

The show first takes place in a futuristic virtual space called *Romacen*. At the beginning of the performance, the female characters repeat various IT commands. These Roma women are called “techno-witches” because they are good at dealing with information technology. With the help of technological devices, the witches—Kali, Ramona, Nevi-Carmen, Phuri, Deja, and Cassandra—observe non-Roma people's strengths and weaknesses. They initiate several cyberattacks against populist politicians, rendering whole societies inoperable.

The witches also contemplate options for time travel because they want to go back in time to prevent the historic injustices that happened to Roma people. They recognize that the present racism against Gypsy people is rooted in the past

and they want to stop this hatred. However, they cannot realize their goals because they get caught. In the last part of the performance, the sci-fi-esque set disappears and we see an interrogation. The members of Romacen are taken in as suspects for the cyberattacks and in the end, the techno-witches' community is eliminated. At this point, the play reveals that the cyber world, previously presented as reality, is fictitious and that Romacen is actually an online forum; a virtual space for Roma women living in London.

The characters of this play utilize modern technology to fight white male rule, overthrow the world of *gadjos* (non-Roma people), and create Romacen, a world without oppression. The name itself is evocative; it references the Anthropocene period, which started when human activities began to have a significant, global effect on the Earth's ecosystem. Romacen envisions a period of world history in which Roma people are in power and Roma women's actions and decisions have a global effect on the happenings of the world. The play thus shows a world ruled by white men where rebellious Gypsy women appear and try to reverse the power structure and introduce a new world order: Romacen, the rule of Gypsy women. Despite the fact that this experiment fails, the play nonetheless presents a very exciting and meaningful narrative and world.

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Rethinking Roma Women's Roles

All of these plays deal with career building as a cardinal question. We see in these shows that Roma traditions often determine Roma women's life paths, but these individual stories present specific viewpoints which challenge the idea of Roma women's predetermined existence.

Del Duma shows various female Roma life stories, presenting the complicated relationship between marriage and building a career and, at the same time, depicting Roma women's roles and destinies in the institution of marriage. *Chameleon Girl* discusses the dilemma of a young Roma girl who must make her own decision about her life: Should she assimilate for the sake of a career and

social mobility but remain invisible to the Roma community? Or, should she proudly choose to start a family, be a responsible parent, and become a useful member of society?

Bambina manages to synthesize the extremities of Roma women's supposed fates: motherhood or a career. *Bambina* was a loving mother, wife, and an immensely successful and socially influential Roma woman. Her story is a good example of how Roma women do not have to choose between motherhood and a career. *Romacen* is subversive and powerfully communicates that the Roma women must be freed from oppression; they must take their fate in their own hands and use every tool for advocacy in order to deconstruct or reinterpret the role their community has bestowed upon them for centuries.

These four plays exemplify how theatre is an excellent platform to stand up for Roma female identity and individual life paths. At the same time, theatre is also a powerful tool to fight racism and stigmatization. That is why it is especially important to have channels other than Roma theatres represent the Roma's voice and interest. Roma people have the same right to self-representation as any other minority. Unfortunately, discrimination is still present in the art world and the world at large. Even today, Gypsy people struggle with various forms of oppression like racism and discrimination. Gypsy representation is loaded with stereotypes and burdened with distorted images.

In the past four years, the performances at the Roma Heroes International Theater Festivals presented us with—sometimes sad, other times humorous—plays about Roma heroes' honest and powerful human stories which have raised important social questions and topics. In this way, these plays excel at reinterpreting, among other things, the misconceptions about Roma women and thus offer a great opportunity to provide a critical point of view. By presenting the otherwise silenced Roma women's statements and exemplary stories, these plays are reshaping society's stereotypical opinions about Roma women.