



DIGITAL COLLECTION OF EUROPEAN ROMA THEATER AND DRAMA

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Perkucigo

written by Zsolt Fekete-Lovas, Csaba Székely

translated by Marie-Josée Sheeks

(excerpts)

I come from a poor Székely family—ethnic Hungarians living in Romania. But the way I look, I could easily convince you I'm an Arabic doctor. People trust them too. Especially if they're called Arafat.

If I'd show up in a white coat and say (*slight accent*), "Good morning, I'm Dr Mahmud Arafat, endocrinologist", you'd believe me, right?

But I'm not Arabic, as I said, I'm from a poor Székely family. A really poor family. My folks were so poor, they had to borrow clothes from the neighbours for the moths to eat, otherwise they'd have starved to death.

In those days, the best way for a girl to escape poverty was to marry someone with a good job. That's what my mother was hoping when she met my father.

(...)

My mother—of course then she wasn't my mother yet—was a cleaning lady, mopping the floor. There was a ladder nearby, and on the ladder, my future father was dancing.

Not because he was a circus acrobat—he was an electrician and had just been jolted by an electrical shock.

Later, he said that when he saw my mother, he felt like he'd been struck by lightning.

My future mother knew that in the case of electrical injury, you shouldn't touch the person and you have to get them away from the source of live current as fast as possible. So she did: she immediately kicked the ladder out from under my future father.

My future father crashed down onto the hospital floor, but he survived both accidents: the electrical shock and the fall too. Thanks to the location! A hospital is the perfect spot for accidents—highly recommended. I think the next time you want to have an accident you should do it in hospital corridor.

It's like if you going to take a leak and suddenly get diarrhoea while you're there. It's not pleasant, but at least you're in the right place at the right time.

So my future father was lying there on the ground and my future mother ran over, called for help and slapped his face to rouse him. And my future father fell in love with her.

My future mother felt the same, and so it happened that, very soon after, in one of the hospital storerooms... I was conceived.

What an amazing experience I must have been!

Pause.

But their love didn't last long, because it soon turned out that my father had a family. I mean another one. Wife, kids, dog, cat.

So my mom didn't manage to get married and on top of it, now she had me in her tummy too.

Nine months later, a nurse picked me up in her hand and cut my umbilical cord.

That was my first contact with the Romanian healthcare system.

Let me tell you, we were off to a bad start. I'd barely been born when they cut me off from my mother, flipped me upside down, shaking me and smacking me. Gee, thanks a lot! Here I am in a hospital for the first time in my life, and they're already making me cry, the way they treat me.

But my mother was happy. Her only child had just been born.

Pause.

They put my father's name on the birth certificate. That was the last thing I ever got from him: my name.

A birth certificate. I never understood that. Why do I need a paper to prove I was born? It's pretty obvious. What other proof of my birth do I need besides the fact that I'm here?

Whatever.

My mother took me home and raised me alone for a while. We were poor. We didn't even have toys. I was glad I'd been born a boy, at least I had something to play with.

So the years went by... I was about six or seven when I happened to hear some kids talking in front of the school. My classmates were putting together a football team, and all they needed was a goalie.

So I said: "I'll be the goalie!"

I was crazy about Duckadam, the Romanian goalie, and wanted to be just like him.

But one of the boys said: "You can't play with us, you're a Gypsy."

Believe it or not, that was the first time I heard that word.

Gypsy.

I didn't know what it meant. All I knew was it was something disgusting and awful, and that I can't play because that's what I am: disgusting and awful.

I was filled with this bitter sense of shame. I was ashamed of something without even knowing what it was.

I ran home in tears and told my mother what had happened. She reassured me, saying: "Gypsies are stinky and they steal. You're not a Gypsy."

I was glad I wasn't a Gypsy. Because Gypsies are stinky and they steal. That's what my mother told me. But then I started thinking. Maybe I'm not stinky at the moment... but there were times when I had been. Like once when I was walking to school and I stepped in some... But my mother didn't smell it, because she wasn't there. I really don't steal usually, but I did steal an apple once, and I didn't tell my mother. Hmm. Once I was stinky, once I stole something...

Maybe I really am a Gypsy, just my mother doesn't know?

I couldn't shake that idea. I kept mulling it over.

In the end I decided I'd better tell my mother something she hadn't realized yet: I actually am a Gypsy.

But it was never the right moment. Plus, I didn't want to let her down. Here she is, working her fingers to the bone, raising me, and after all these years, she'd find out she's been raising a Gypsy.

As I got older, I gradually forgot about the whole thing. People didn't mention the topic in front of me. I didn't know what they were saying behind my back, but no one ever said anything to my face. I think that worked out fine.

Up until the day when the father of my first girlfriend said: "Tell that Gypsy lover of yours not to walk you home, because I don't want the neighbours to see you're dating a Gypsy!"

When I heard that, I felt like my throat had been slit open.

I can't be with the one I love because people see me as a Gypsy. In other words: I can't be a real man because people see me as a Gypsy.

But I'm not a Gypsy! I'm Hungarian. I've got enough problems because of that. Why make it worse?

Or am I a Gypsy? No, I'm not.

Can I help it that I look like this? I can't. I'm a Székely man, that's all there is to it.

But meanwhile, does it matter who I think I am if people see me as a Gypsy anyways?

In this world, others decide who you are, and once they do, they've already decided what they think about you.

It's so unfair!

Pause.

Though once, this problem almost worked in my favour.

I was applying to university, and the admissions officer asked me: "Excuse me sir, but might you possibly be a... I mean... do you have any Roma ancestry?"

So I said: "Not that I know of. I'm Hungarian."

The teacher said: "I'm only asking because of the quota. As you may know, we keep two spots each year for Roma students. But they never apply. If you could prove that you're Roma... it would be easy for you to get in."

I really wanted to go to that university.

So I went back to my home town and went to see the priest. I asked him if he'd help me do a bit of research and figure out who my ancestors were. And seeing as we're here anyways, couldn't he give me a paper proving I'm of Gypsy origin? For my university application.

He gave me one.

I was so glad I was going to be admitted!

Only then my mother asked why I'm as happy as a pig in mud, so I told her.

Well, she sure hit the ceiling.

She said she'd already told me: we're not Gypsies, we're Hungarians. And where is that paper anyways?

I didn't want to tell her, but she found it. Found it, and ripped it to bits.

I was really mad at her for ruining my chances of getting into university.

So I applied, only not for the two spots reserved for Roma. I wrote the entrance exam with all the others. I was thinking—I don't have a chance, not a chance.

But they took me anyways!

On my own steam.

That's right.

I was admitted, and I graduated too.

Pause.

Seeing as I'd started researching my family tree, I thought I'd keep going. I went and looked through the birth registry records, asked my relatives...

In the end it turned out that one of my great-grandfathers actually was a Gypsy.

But the family had gradually been assimilated by the Hungarians. Bit by bit, his children, his descendants forgot their original language and identity.

So in that sense... I *do* also have Gypsy heritage.

I tried to see if I could feel it somehow.

They say that if you're Hungarian, you can feel it. And that no one can take that away from you. Either you feel it or you don't.

Well, I don't agree with that. If people are able to feel who they are, then I should be able to feel my Gypsy side. Like I'd get out of bed in the morning and say: "Ouch, that Gypsy vertebra sure aches this morning! My Hungarian knee is OK, but that Gypsy knee... And my Romanian shoulder is acting up."

But I don't feel anything like that. Identity isn't something you feel, it's something you're taught.

What you feel is pride. That the red-white-and-green is the best flag.

Or shame. Because you couldn't be a goalie or date who you wanted.

(...)

Every night I come out on the stage, I pretend to be someone different. I've been a Hungarian, a Gypsy, a Brit, an Italian, a Pole, a Russian, a Frenchman, and Lord knows what else.

Maybe I chose this profession because when I'm onstage, it isn't society that decides who I am: Hungarian, Romanian, Gypsy or Székely... Instead, the people in the audience just believe, for that evening, that I am who I claim to be.

Because we like to trust people. We trust everyone. If their skin is white. Mine is darker, but when I'm onstage, no one ever says, "Hey, you're lying!" Finally they believe me.

And that cheers me up. It gives me the energy to be who I want to be in life.

I'm a musician too. A drummer. A percussionist.

Thank God there's no skin colours in music.