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NARRATIVES OF ACTIVITY IN TRAVELLER DRAMA LITERATURE

Examining the plays *It's a Cultural Thing* by Michael Collins
and *The Hardest Word* and *Today's Lesson* by Richard R. O'Neill

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The success or failure of every dramatic character depends on the quality of their activity. The play's reader or spectator learns about a character from that character's actions. The active person takes steps to make tomorrow better than today. When talking about Gypsy communities, it is common for people to think that due to lack of education, planning, and foresight, we live our everyday lives so intensely that we do not care about tomorrow. We focus on what we can obtain today for it is only the now that exists; who knows what we will have the chance to do tomorrow.

This, however, is a limited perspective on Roma culture based on stereotypes. There now exists plays that disprove these assumptions, several of which have been showcased at the annual [Roma Heroes International Theater Festival](#) over the years. As the artistic director of the [Independent Theater Hungary](#), I have not only taken part in initiating the Roma Heroes International Theater Festival, but also in discussing the festival's plays in the frame of nonformal education through a series of workshops in the past few years. Related to each play at the Roma Heroes International Theater Festival, the Independent Theater Hungary arranged for well-prepared peer trainers to devise an educational methodology to disseminate the dramas in primary schools, high schools, and university groups during three- to four-hour-long Roma Heroes Workshops.

*By working on this educational methodology, I was able to examine the actions of the characters and compare them to the Gypsy youth's reaction to the plays as they were learning about them. In doing so, I gained valuable insight into the plays' roles in education and their social impact. There were a few plays that I found to be particularly impactful in this program: *It's a Cultural Thing* by Michael Collins and the plays *The Hardest Word* and *Today's Lesson*, both by Richard R. O'Neill. The workshops on these plays shed light on the parallels between the plays' content and the way the youth we worked with interacted with the material, and illustrated the educational potential of drama and theatre.*

Before the workshop series, these students had no positive image of their future. It was a shocking experience when they got to know the play and, after fifteen minutes of preparation, presented their own versions of it.

It's a Cultural Thing: Winning the Day

In Michael Collins' *It's a Cultural Thing*, the protagonist is the author himself and it is mainly a personal presentation of his life path. His father worked hard for the family to move from a tent in the forest to a trailer and later into an apartment. Collins himself also tried many ways of making money, from begging, to collecting, to selling metal to fixing objects of everyday use. He explains the family's growth and development through their housing situation and he also shows the discriminatory situations (in education, healthcare, etc.) that Traveller communities have had to overcome in Ireland.

Travellers were recognized as an ethnic minority in Ireland in 2017. A 2016 census estimated the Irish Traveller community to be 30,000 people; Travellers themselves estimate it to be around 40,000 people. Many Irish Travellers breed dogs and trade horses and many of them live by reusing metal waste. Suicide rates are high in Ireland and particularly high in Traveller communities: they are 5 times higher than in settled communities, whereas infant mortality is 3 times higher. Unemployment is 95 percent, and 85 percent of adults are illiterate. In Ireland, 45 percent of Travellers are under 16 years old; their life expectancy is 55 years.

For me, the most touching scene in the play is when Michael Collins describes how sports presented the first personal contact with settled people for him, a young man living in a Gypsy neighborhood. He and his Traveller peers participated in the soccer championship organized as part of the local Finglas Festival, and they played brilliantly. The local settled team were eliminated from the tournament much earlier, so who else could they support if not them?

Their team ended up winning third place and one of the Traveller boys was announced Best Player of the tournament. The award ceremony took place in Reardon's Pub but the young players were Travellers and thus not allowed into the pub. Because of this, they were not allowed to receive their trophy as the others received theirs. Instead, they were generously offered space outside the pub in which to accept their trophy.

In 2018, the Independent Theater Hungary invited *It's a Cultural Thing* to the second annual Roma Heroes International Theater Festival. In November 2020, we

took scenes from this drama to the primary school in Tiszabura town, where the seventh- and eighth-graders got to know the story and processed it using creative methods such as creating theatrical scenes, short videos, or written text while also adding in their own personal experiences. In this way, they saw a piece of high-quality Roma theatre culture that was formerly unknown to them and they expanded their knowledge of Roma communities' values and challenges.

Tiszabura is the most disadvantaged town in Hungary. These youngsters living there face almost exactly the same difficulties that Collins describes in his play. In Tiszabura, it is common for families to have children at a young age and there are very few jobs available there. The youth there are underrepresented in education and culture. Moreover, malnutrition, early drug use, and school violence perpetrated by both teachers and fellow students are significant. Young people living there rarely use the healthcare services and rarely receive medication for their illnesses.

Before the workshop series, these students had no positive image of their future. It was a shocking experience when they got to know the play and, after fifteen minutes of preparation, presented their own versions of it. We saw how thrilled they were when they won the trophy. We saw the moment when they arrived in front of the pub and wanted to enter, have an orange juice, and be part of celebrating the team's success—but couldn't because the security guard did not let them in.

Still, the Tiszabura youth did not lose their good temper. They are used to much harsher ways of discrimination, so their response to the situation was the following: "We receive the trophy in a symbolic manner outside but we would like it to remain in the pub and be displayed on a shelf so that when we are finally allowed into the pub, there will already be something related to us Gypsy people. This way, even many years later, we or our children can be proud of our current success."

According to the Anglican church's 2008 census, 1,500 Traveller people live in Scotland; however, this data is not accurate. Travellers themselves estimate the Scottish Traveller community to comprise 20,000 people.

The Hardest Word: A One-Person War

One of the most productive figures of Gipsy theatrical self-representation is [Géza Csemer](#).

The Hardest Word by Richard R. O'Neill, presented in Hungary in 2017, also poses many important questions and conveys moral lessons. As it happens, the play was directed by me, and it is continuously performed in the theatre. The focus of the drama is the political activism of [Jess Smith](#), a real-life contemporary writer who lives in Scotland.

This story highlights the discrimination against, and lack of understanding of, Traveller people in Scotland. According to the Anglican church's 2008 census, 1,500 Traveller people live in Scotland; however, this data is not accurate. Travellers themselves estimate the Scottish Traveller community to comprise 20,000 people. Scottish Travellers differentiate themselves from English Gypsies, as they traditionally occupied themselves with different professions: primarily woodworking, collecting metal and fixing metal objects and only rarely earthworks.

In the play, Jess's character decides that she will ask the Scottish first minister to apologize for the centuries of persecution that Traveller people had to suffer in Scotland. She builds up a thorough media campaign in order to do this. She engages actively for her message to be heard and to initiate a discussion about this topic, and even though her final battle seems to end in defeat, she retains the moral high ground after her one-person war.

The most powerful scene in the show is when Jess has a debate with the first minister on the live discussion program, Scotland Speaks. When the first minister doesn't want to apologize, she is overcome with anger and throws a glass of water in his face.

While the protagonist of the play is a real person, the play itself is a piece of fiction. In reality, Jess Smith told her friend Richard R. O'Neill that she would like to undertake a campaign to that of her character's in the play. O'Neill offered to instead write a play about her with that as the premise because he believed it would have a more powerful effect and he turned out to be right. Previously,

Travellers could go to court over the discrimination they face because they were not regarded as a vulnerable group or a recognized national minority. But due to this drama and its performance, Travellers were recognized as an ethnic minority—and thus a protected group in Scotland—and the church apologized for their discriminatory practices against them.

This play is probably the most often presented work in the history of our Roma Heroes Workshops. The young people discussing the drama had varying responses to Jess's actions in the play. Some shared the story proudly with their family and said: "Finally, a player who doesn't step into the long line of suppressed Gypsies, licking her wounds. Instead, she takes her fate into her own hands and finishes what she started, no matter what it takes."

In a segregated school in Budapest, a sixth-grade boy came to us with sparkling eyes, wanting to know if Jess Smith is a real person. We explained that she was and asked the student if he'd like to send her a message. "Tell her that she is my hero," he responded. "Tonight I'll tell my mom about her and she'll like it, for sure."

However, some students took a different stand. Many of them (for example a group of Roma university students in Miskolc) saw what the character Jess did as "violence" and thus not an efficient means of advocacy. "That's exactly what the social majority wants us to do; to behave like animals," they expressed. "Many top- or medium-level managers approach us with the idea of, 'We will educate you, so that you leave your barbarian ways, and we will turn you into decent Hungarian citizens.' This play is a weapon in the hands of such scum."

In these workshops, the youth we worked with got the opportunity to learn about the values of Roma theatre and dramatic heroes while also finding the heroes in their surroundings and in themselves.

Today's Lesson: Roma Employee's Rights

Richard R. O'Neill's other play, *Today's Lesson*, was performed by him at the Roma Heroes International Theater Festival in 2018. In it, O'Neill plays a professor who presents English inclusion's hypocrisy at an educational conference through the case of Robert: a teacher who studied diligently at university and proved very loving, attentive, and devoted to children during his internship.

Robert goes to a job interview for a teaching position. During the interview, no one asks if he is Roma so he does not state that he is. Two days later, he gets the job because he is the best applicant. As a teacher, he takes great care of the students, without regard for their origin. The children like him, the parents are happy with his work, his colleagues appreciate him, and the headmaster recommends him for a special educational award. Often, Robert goes above and beyond as teacher, doing things he doesn't have to like procuring training equipment for a poor student and organizing a festival about diversity.

While Robert is settling in nicely to his new job, there's a larger issue happening in the city. A Traveller family applies for the right to develop caravan homes on their land for other Travellers. However, this piece of land is next to the hotel and golf course of one of the leading city councilmen, Councillor Curtis, who does not give his consent for the development.

Eventually, Robert decides to organize Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month to present Gypsy history and culture to the students. On a leaflet advertising the event, Robert reveals he is Roma. Because of this, Councillor Curtis, pressures the head teacher to put a stop to Robert's Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month. The head teacher questions Robert on why he did not tell her about his Roma origin at the job interview and asks him to stop the series of events in the school due to the city issue involving Councillor Curtis. Robert resists this and insists on organizing the history month despite all the pressure and threats.

For the Roma Heroes Workshop related to this play, we aimed to bring the story to communities of mainly young Roma graduate university students who would soon enter the job market. We were curious to see what they would think about sharing their identity at a job interview, their opinions on the protagonist's relationship with the head mistress, and how much they knew about employee's

rights.

During a workshop with a student organization from a Roma university in southeast Hungary, most students came up with almost exactly the same alternatives as Robert, without knowing the full plot of the play. They said that they would turn to the trade union and to the public if anyone tried to hinder them from doing their job. Many claimed that regardless of whether or not their racial features are visible, their Gypsy origin should not be a topic at their job interview. Several students reasoned that this is not only Robert's problem, but a problem that concerns the whole school. Moreover, they believed that stopping the event would convey a negative message to the students, parents, and other schools.

In these workshops, the youth we worked with got the opportunity to learn about the values of Roma theatre and dramatic heroes while also finding the heroes in their surroundings and in themselves. Through the education we provided, the stories of Roma dramatic characters inspired the participants to open up to each other, helped initiate their critical thinking skills, and fueled their own creativity and activity. The students we worked with left these workshops with a greater awareness of Roma theatre and a sense of empowerment. This experience exemplifies how if we present heroes, if we look for heroes in ourselves, we will find them!