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ROMA HEROES, SUPERPOWERS, AND HUMAN AGENCY:

Exploring Taboo Topics In Independent Theater Hungary's Festivals

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The theme of human agency in relation to taboos emerges across several of the works in the Independent Theater Hungary's Roma Heroes International Theatre Festival. Since 2017, Independent Theater Hungary has been organizing this festival, which is the European Union's only international Roma theatre festival, every year. Independent Theater Hungary invites Roma companies and artists from many European countries to contribute. The Roma community is [Europe's largest ethnic minority](#), with an estimate of ten to twelve million Roma across the continent. [The European Fundamental Rights Agency \(FRA\) suggest](#) that the Roma are still being deprived of their basic human rights in Europe. With this backdrop, a central goal of the Roma Heroes International Theatre Festival is to draw attention to the situation of Roma communities, focusing on the challenges of people and dramatic heroes.

The Roma Heroes International Theatre Festival has curated a series of plays that brings out the superpowers of each of the individuals who contributed to the works included in the festival. I had the privilege of interviewing various festival artists, directors, dramaturgs, actors, and playwrights. Through these interviews, I gleaned that central characters in the plays were often reflecting on their social realities, and many overcame adversity. In the works there was always a certain vulnerability that was transformed into a positive outcome. As I prepared for each interview, watched the plays, and discussed them with their creators, it became clear to me that risk-taking and the resilience of the individual are transformational. It was also clear that theatre plays an important role in exploring these aspects.

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The bravery of each of the individuals involved in the festival left me reflecting on “taboo” topics in some of their work. Several of the actors, playwrights, directors and dramaturgs drew on the lives of local Roma populations in their countries and communities. The artistic teams created characters and scenarios that went against the grain or were challenging traditions and expectations from parents, their community, or even society. The interviews also revealed that there is a tension that often emerges between “traditional” and “modern” concepts of what a Roma person might look like and how they should act. Many of the artistic teams wanted to honor the voices from their communities and not dictate or

place expectations on the final theatrical outcome. In several interviews, there is also a celebration of the fact that the Roma families can choose and have the right to follow traditions that feel suitable to them. To venture into unknown or perhaps contested territories despite notions of “appropriateness” or “taboos” takes real courage, and the creatives involved in the Roma Heroes International Theatre Festival faced these issues in a respectful manner. In doing so, they exhibited a bravery akin to modern-day superheroes.

These plays pushed boundaries and ventured into taboo territory but did so in a way that carefully held delicate ideas, stories, and situations. For example, *Village Day* and *Shoddies*—both directed by Rodrigó Balogh with Márton Illés as dramaturg—boldly looked at the experiences of figures who could be labeled as outcasts. However, Balogh and Illés chose to write a story that humanized and presented those perspectives from a place of survival, thus encouraging compassion for these characters. *Village Day* is a gastro-theatre work that took place outdoors and asked audience members to break bread together and travel from scene to scene. During the play, we meet unscrupulous characters, and the topic of moneylending in relation to the Roma community is explored. The experimental work and its content drew from academic findings on moneylending—a complex, taboo topic—and spent months in the development phase to ensure that credible characters would emerge organically.

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In *Shoddies* various characters meet in a hospital ward and are forced to interact, revealing stark differences while highlighting the similarities that unite them. The work reflected on the discrimination Roma people face in the health care system in Hungary, which includes the sterilization of Roma women, and it also drew on real-life personal stories that emerged during the research and development stage. Blood donation, which is also seen as a taboo within the community, was brought onto the stage in an accessible manner. In our interview, Balogh and Illés reflected on post-show audience discussions, mentioning one example of someone donating blood directly after watching the theatre piece. In *Shoddies*, as in *Village Day*, taking action and the importance of remembering humanity are discussed, even though taboo topics—such as money, blood donations, health

issues, and personal family stories—are explored.

Moving from the Hungarian context to the Italian one, Roma artist Sebastiano Spinella, whose family hid their Roma origins from him, speaks about his own life in his play *Children of the Wind*. The work carefully explores modern-day topics of migrations and children living in ghettos. *Children of the Wind* directly confronts the taboos linked with migration issues, notions about borders—be they physical or metaphorical borders—and how migration is discussed in public discourse. Spinella's play is informed by Roma children who migrated from the former Yugoslavia and are residing in camps in Italy. His work reflects on the past, which allows a childlike quality to comment on modern-day issues that Spinella and today's youngsters face. It is not popular to criticize the government in such an overt way or discuss these violations of human rights in relation to the Roma. Spinella confronts and draws on his firsthand experiences to describe the social realities these families live in and the way the authorities have isolated the families from society. *Children of the Wind* is a play that honors Spinella's personal history and fearlessly fights to protect all youngsters from any suffering.

Another heroine, actress Sonia Carmona Tapia from Spain, presents *Profound Dignity*. This surrealist work includes two parallel lives: one is a simple Roma woman and the other is a world-renowned Roma performing artist. The two strong Roma female characters, both played by Carmona Tapia, are suffering, living in difficult circumstances, and navigating deeply complex love stories. The play pushes Carmona Tapia to extremes physically, mentally, and emotionally, but it also represents a level of daring sophistication by politically commenting on Francisco Franco's regime and communism. The work, written by Jaime E. Vicent Bohórquez and performed by Carmona Tapia, brazenly offers the audience an existential journey and comments on current and historical taboos.

Due to this care and nuanced approach, the trust and respect for the individuals' stories emerged, and community members opened up and shared intimate, personal stories.

It is important to note that the pieces that dealt with such taboo topics also spent a great deal of time in a research and development phase. There was a team of people co-creating each work, and the artists allowed the time and space for focus groups, interviews, and explorative devising sessions to direct the process. Due to this care and nuanced approach, the trust and respect for the individuals' stories

emerged, and community members opened up and shared intimate, personal stories.

In *Village Day*, *Shoddies*, *Children of the Wind*, and *Profound Dignity*, taboo topics are explored in a very respectful way. The manners in which the artistic works frame various taboo issues are sometimes gentle and other times direct and unapologetic. The works were performed by modern-day Roma superheroes and used the stage to reflect on the Roma community, anti-Gypsyism, and other heavily charged topics, but they never sacrificed the individual voices and respect for individuals. Each play dealt with taboos by removing judgment and offering to see the question, predicament, or issue from multiple angles. Through eliminating binary ways of seeing and offering an inclusive conversation or monologue, these artists produced compassionate and respectful plays, thus facilitating an effective critical lens to contemplate society and its people.

The willingness to explore taboo topics is necessary and forward-thinking, as these topics are embedded in the fabric of society and its communities. Whether we see the world through one lens or another, we all have blood flowing through our veins. The quest to be seen, heard, respected, loved, and valued is therefore necessary. The Roma Heroes International Theatre Festival instigates thoughtful conversations by curating works where the characters explore social critiques and the complex human realities of people. Sometimes it takes a Roma superhero to hold up a mirror to remind us that we are all human.