



DIGITAL COLLECTION OF EUROPEAN ROMA THEATER AND DRAMA

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# Today's Lesson

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(excerpts)

(...)

Where to begin? At the start, because it all started so well, a nice elementary school on the edge of a countryside town in England, Robert the Roma young man goes for an interview. He takes his diploma, he takes his references, most of all he takes his personality. The head teacher Mrs Bainbridge... (*Angrily*) Yes, I am using the real names of these people, and the name of the school, outing them for what they are and where they are, the head teacher asked him why he wanted to work at Tan Hill school.

'So, Robert, what makes you want to work in our school?' she asks, Robert replies 'I saw your website and your dedication to inclusion, all of the other things you mention about doing the best for every child.'

Just then one of the other people on the interview panel, the patron and local politician Councillor Curtiss cuts in and says, 'Oh yes, we're very big on that inclusion; we had African dancers here last week, and we've had a Chinese New Year.'

Mrs Bainbridge the head teacher asks Robert a few more questions, but the one question she does not ask is: are you Roma? Robert does not look or talk Roma, but he is, and has learned you do not volunteer this information, and whilst he wonders if he should, he thinks that this being a school that is all about inclusion and diversity and now what we are in the 21st century it's no longer an issue.

(...)

Over the next couple of months Robert became the hardworking and well-liked teacher I knew he would be. He would phone home and with great enthusiasm update his parents on the things that had happened at school, his mother always loved to hear from him, but could never get as excited as she still thought it was all too good to be true.

(...)

As Robert lived out of the town, he wasn't aware of something that was bubbling away under the surface that would affect his job and his faith in education. At the town hall they had received a planning application from a Roma family to build some caravan homes on a piece of land they owned, unfortunately this piece of land was next to a large hotel and golf course part owned by Councillor Curtiss, and he was determined to stop this happening, as he felt if it did happen it would lower the value of the hotel and even worse he would not get re-elected as a councillor and then be able to fulfil his next dream of being an Member of Parliament, the people would never forget it was he who had let the Roma move in to their town, near their houses, near them.

(...)

Robert was halfway through a maths lesson when Mrs Bainbridge stepped into the classroom; 'Mr Smith I need to see you in my office immediately.' Robert did what any of us would do and followed her, worried that he had either done something wrong, or was going to receive some bad news about a loved one. Once in the office it soon became clear it was neither.

Mrs Bainbridge who had just come off the phone to Councillor Curtiss whose exact words to her were 'I don't care how you do it, get Robert to stop now!'

'Robert' she said handing him a leaflet (*holding leaflet*) Do you know what this is?

And Robert told her enthusiastically, 'Yes, it's a publicity leaflet for Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month.' 'Yes, I know that, but can you explain this here?' she said pointing to a leaflet and reading aloud. 'Robert Smith a teacher at Tan common primary, a Gypsy himself says I think the month is an excellent idea...'

(...)

'Oh, Robert, why didn't you just mention it when you applied!' she said.

Robert shocked replied 'Mrs Bainbridge are you saying that you wouldn't have hired me if I had?'

The tension between them started to rise, anger wasn't far away.

'No, no of course not, you are an excellent teacher. The children and parents like you, respect you.'

So, what's changed then?

Nothing's changed Robert, but you know Councillor Curtiss is powerful. Could you perhaps say it was a mistake and that you want them to withdraw the pamphlet?

(...)

'Sit down Robert' she says.

'I'll stand' he says, he is not taking this sitting.

She's holding the leaflet again and says, 'This isn't easy for me you know that, but I have to talk to you about this history month thing. Counsellor Curtis isn't happy...It's very bad timing for this plan to build a Gypsy site; it's just very bad timing that's all. Do you think you could perhaps just tone it down a little?'

Robert is getting angrier all the time, 'You mean stop coming to school on my horse, playing the violin in the corridors and telling fortunes at lunchtime.'

'There's no need to be sarcastic Robert, this is serious and I'm trying to help you.'

'Oh really, how about you help me by simply just speaking up for me and tell Counsellor Curtis and whoever else is behind this that I'm a good teacher who has done nothing wrong?'

She either can't understand or doesn't want to because she replies with 'I'm trying to run a school, in very difficult circumstances and this is just a bloody leaflet. I really expected more from you than this.'

Robert answers straight back, 'And I expected more from you, and this is not just about a leaflet this is about recognising and validating my culture, just like the signs on the walls say we do in this school... Does it really mean that every other culture is OK apart from mine?'

(...)

'Oh Robert, what are we going to do?'

'I don't know or in fact, care what you do, I am going to do my job as a teacher, and I am going to celebrate Gypsy Roma Traveller history month, I am going to share my history and my culture with my class and the rest of the school, and if you or Councillor Curtiss try and stop me I'm going to my union, and the media, because I am a Roma person and I have rights! Oh, and by the way there will be music and there will be dancing.... Opre Roma!