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# Analysis of the *Chameleon Girl* Who Talks Back to Life and Defies Fate

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## Abstract

In this paper, we will look at the Independent Theater's 2018 production of the *Chameleon Girl*, and try to analyze it from the spectator's point of view. We will reveal what kind of important social messages and social commentary the monodrama we are discussing can convey. We will discuss the specificities of the genre while reflecting on the multiple meanings of the title and the specificity of the position of the recipient. In doing so, we try to link the production to sociological concepts of education [such as the springboard phenomenon (Ceglédi, 2017), resilience (Ceglédi, 2018)].

Our study aims to make the creators interpret or reinterpret the fruits of their labor through an outsider's perspective, and our not-hidden intention is to draw attention to the value-creating work of the Independent Theater. The dissemination of culture through academic forums can also be useful in national and international academic life, and we also aim to provide an interpretative "reading" for the audience or the lay reader interested in the play.

**Keywords:** chameleon girl, Roma culture, Roma theater, social commentary

## Origin of Stories

Independent Theater's plays are largely based on personal experiences, which provide a realistic portrayal and a realistic theatrical experience. The personal stories are presented with all their "nakedness"/naturalism in 1-1 theater play, which is not free from criticism, emotions, emotions - just like everyday life. Parts of each story can be made up of several stories. This happened also in the case of the *Chameleon Girl*, where the story was based on the individual and family stories of students from the Evangelical Roma College for Advanced Studies of Nyíregyháza, the Greek Catholic Roma College for Advanced Studies of Miskolc, and the Henrik Wlisslocki College for Advanced Studies, furthermore they used Zsanett Rontó's, Xénia Horváth's, Éva Lakatos-Balogh's scene performed at the Roma Heroes' Workshop Marathon of the Independent Theater as a basis, and the story of Andrea Hajdú and Virág Vucsics, also mentioned at the Independence Theater workshop marathon, helped to shape the *Chameleon Girl*. Other elements from other Roma Heroes workshops were also included in the production.<sup>2</sup> The play refuses to break away from reality, and what makes it enjoyable is that it does not want to. We can recognize everyday life situations whose peculiarity lies in the fact that they become empathetic to us. The piecing together of individual stories in the *Chameleon Girl* becomes very easy to play, and we are not surprised by the alternation of "episodes". The *Chameleon Girl* can adapt to anything, and we adapt with her.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Roma Heroes workshops organized by the Independent Theater, see the URL below: <http://romahosok.blogspot.com/> (Last downloaded 13.02.2022)

<sup>2</sup> Jesuit Roma College for Advanced Studies, RefoRom, The Roma College for Advanced Studies of the Reformed Church in Budapest (Protestant Roma College for Advanced Studies Budapest); Romaversitas Foundation, Pressley Ridge Foundation, Dr. Ámbédkar School, Lutheran Roma College, ELTE Department of Media and Communication, Roma Visual Laboratory. There was also a Roma Heroes workshop in Ghent.

## Background of the Artistic Creation titled *Chameleon Girl*

The monodrama *Chameleon Girl* is a one-man play directed by Tamás Szegedi, which premiered on 24 May 2018 at the "Roma Heroes" - II International Roma Storytelling Festival, organized by the Independent Theater of Hungary. It is interesting to note that the director is himself a Gypsy,<sup>3</sup> which on the one hand may have made it easier for him to identify with the subject and made the important social theme he presented (the situation of the Gypsies) even more authentic, but on the other hand it may have been a complicating factor in the sense that it made it difficult for him to carry out his creative work with the appropriate directorial detachment. Furthermore, the play strongly reflects the situation of Roma women, and its central protagonist is an adolescent girl, which is also a curiosity since the theme of women is not a popular phenomenon in various pieces of literature - a tradition that the Independent Theater has been breaking in several of its plays over the years.<sup>4</sup> The basic idea for the drama came from the accounts of Roma students, their views on identity, and what it means to be a Gypsy. They also talked about the prejudices and difficulties they faced in their lives, and what they are less or very proud of. In 2017-2018, the creators visited several colleges for advanced studies in search of answers, which we mentioned at the beginning of our study. During this time, the Independent Theater held several "Roma Heroes" workshops, where, thanks to the activity of the participants, many of their own experiences, stories, and memories came to the fore. They later gave life to the persona of the chameleon girl; for the diverse stories highlighted both the heterogeneity and diversity of the Roma. A lot of key expressions were also recorded by the participants, which later come back to the play verbatim.

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<sup>3</sup> In our study, the terms Roma and Gypsy are used synonymously.

<sup>4</sup> Operating since 2007

## Social Context - The Dual Horizon of Depth and Height

The drama is therefore based on real stories and puts the lives, prospects, and challenges of the young generations in a different light. It presents young people with many life situations that may sound familiar, especially to a Gypsy schoolgirl today. One such recurring motif is the key phrase "I have to be twice as clever, twice as smart, twice as skillful as the non-Gypsies". Roma students feel the burden of overachieving for the same result, i.e. the level of energy invested is dramatically higher for those who come from less favorable family backgrounds, and thus the playing field is uneven; i.e. first they have to compensate for the deficiencies, and once that has been overcome, then they can only try again to achieve the same goal from the same level and with the same conditions. As long as there are no fair-fair basic conditions, there is no guarantee of a positive outcome, but rather a downward trend, and one advantage can even increase the disadvantage of the other: in other words, not understanding the mechanism of why everything is easier for the other can lead to unhealthy self-esteem. According to Pusztai (2004), Gypsy intellectuals, who were typically marginalized alongside their non-Roma or even Roma peers, are characterized by multi-stage social mobility (Pusztai, 2004) and have to follow a more struggling and arduous path, requiring more effort to succeed, compared to children from families with favorable conditions. Ceglédi (2017) calls this difficult state a springboard phenomenon, from which it is not easy to escape, but which can still be a driving force in the individual that helps him or her soar from the depths to the heights. Depth can be captured in the specificities of socio-economic statuses, such as factors related to the subsistence or housing conditions, but it can also include toxic climate resulting from damaged family relationships, conflicts, the desire to escape, housing disadvantages, lack of education (Ceglédi et al., 2018). Moreover, some disadvantages, by their very nature, may attract many "co-disadvantages", so that they can be cumulative and it is difficult to break the transmission from one generation to the next. But alongside the depths, if there is some height, it can be able to move the individual out of their situation, and the negative vision of the future predicted by many can be overwritten, bringing a new scenario to life. Others call it "releasing power" (Blaskó 2002); which can also be captured in cultural activity (Ceglédi et al., 2018:22). Belonging to the Roma community is an important identity construct, which can be viewed with pride and dignity - if the

individual learns to detach himself/herself from pejorative connotations and the harmful feedback of a stereotypical environment. It is difficult to have a balanced sense of self-identity in the face of discrimination-ridden reactions. Wherever one is, one encounters cultural traces, footprints, which become so accepted that little or no thought is given to questioning them; and these can include both advantageous and disadvantageous ideologies.

In the drama, there is a confrontation between the individual and the social environment;

- on the one hand, by reflecting the negative environmental reactions that the protagonist has experienced and lived through often by replaying those (repeating the tone, tempo, volume, etc. used by the person concerned)
- on the other hand, this happens in a dialogical situation between a man and a woman

It all feels a bit "confessional", but not quite - even if there is no male representation in the play. We only see the female character, who fills the entire stage with her appearance, her being, her charisma, and her message in a play that lasts almost 50-60 minutes. The adolescent questions a lot of conventional wisdom and shows that the hypothesis that poor people cannot be happy is far from natural.

## Profile of the Chameleon Girl

The hero herself is extraordinarily multifaceted; she might not be a bogus-typical character, but embodies a figure of everyday reality. This can evoke sympathy in the viewer, and he/she does not feel the distance between him/her and the artist. In the case of a Roma girl, the audience member may even have the feeling that she sees herself on stage - with whom she can easily share a common fate, because she can be a "miniature mirror" of her own life, highlighting a scene from it. It is also clear from her narrative that the life path that may seem ordinary to others is far from natural for some families, and for some students obtaining a degree is a long way out of reach if there are no patterns or traditions. The educational background of parents can determine a child's career choice or future prospects, but it is not impossible to override the scenario of their own destiny. In the sociology of education, Ceglédi (2018) calls those who can achieve a successful school career (e.g. obtain a degree) despite their disadvantages resilient. On stage, the actress uses the technique of "running" to symbolize the difficulties of this. According to Loury (1998 cited in Sík 2012), the position of the individual can be seen as socially embedded, and the individual's position in the system in itself limits or increases one's possibility to access resources. The protagonist is a marginalized person from a rural community, who is also: an adolescent, a mother, a student. So she has many roles to play. Based on what has been told on stage, the play ultimately unfolds a life path that is strongly dependent on the individual's perceived behavior, on the perspective in which one is able to reflect on his/her own situation: the protagonist brings some humor to buffer the edge of each dramatic situation. It is also important to emphasize the unrepeatable, one-off nature of the life course. The main character herself is extremely complex: her behavior reflects joy, sorrow, humor, and irony. She parodies negative criticism, feedback, and stereotypes. She talks back to those with whom she disagrees, **"talking back to life" and defying fate.** She recognizes value and goodwill and condemns malice. She is not afraid of confrontation and difficulties, she has her goals and plans. She's a teenager, but she is also a woman; full of creativity and lust for life. Multifaceted, versatile, with variability - just like a chameleon. Her speech, her movements are permeated with emotion; wherever she dances, runs, sits, and walks. There is a lot of dynamism in a seemingly one-act play. Tamás

Széles (2020)<sup>5</sup> emphasizes that it is not a sufficient condition for a monodrama to have only one participant. It only appears to be a one-act play, because there are invisible participants as well: even if we take the audience, who in some way shape the play itself. The audience also communicates, even if not directly verbally, but by sending messages through non-verbal signs and activating themselves; so they participate in the stage play itself. Some say that there is such a strong personal connection between the viewer and the actor that it gives the experience of "being in dialogue". Unlike in multi-act plays, in this case, the spectator is not merely a bystander, but testifies for or against what is happening, like a jury (Széles, 2020).

## Chameleon

The quality of the chameleon is in its diversity, conveyed, in this case, by a tiny girl who is a source of great value for her small stature. Apparently, one wouldn't believe the fate that can lie behind certain people and faces. The hero with a thousand faces conveys a range of emotions, sometimes with words, sometimes with facial expressions, gestures, and also with proxemics itself, i.e. the use of the spacing. The sequence of her memories is not always dictated by a logical, straightforward "line", but in the end, there is a lot of information value in what she says, and it contributes to the viewer's overall picture of the protagonist. Her personal name is replaced by an aptronym, which refers to her whole being, her character, and identifies the chameleon with her, even though her sex as well. In Roma communities, girls play an important role, and maturity does not start later in life, but much earlier than the average, with the menstrual cycle being an important milestone. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the title refers to a girl, which does not exclude reaching the age of majority. The meaning of the chameleon also includes that the protagonist girl can speak to others through her own story, also able to convey the reactions of her environment with tolerance and empathy - would like to understand, not to alter them. She can see into the mind of others, sympathize with them, and reflect with social sensitivity on the social context that surrounds her. Overall, although she may seem transparent or

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<sup>5</sup> Széles Tamás: *Mi a monodrámá?* [What is the Monodrama?] 03.12.2020 URL: <https://szelestamas.hu/mi-a-monodrama/> (Letöltés ideje: Last downloaded 01.02. 2022)



neutral, the protagonist becomes a more and more colorful and interesting character as we get to know and unravel her through his/her memories and stories.

The other member of the dialogue (the questioner) could also be an advocate for the curious audience, a kind of a helper, trying to understand why the girl did what she did, what actions and motivations were behind her decisions. That questioner is the one who, without judgment, tries to ask the questions that will ultimately reveal to the audience a life path that is far from over. Life does not stop, the Gypsy girl continues to wander on and on and on... (the Gypsy wheel also appears as a motif in the play).

In a broad sense, there can be an important symbolic meaning in seeing only one party in the dialogue: people often don't ask face-to-face questions - and prejudices are also fuelled by guesswork and lack of personal contact. They know little and only superficially of the person they are judging - rather than wanting to experience a relationship with him or her in-depth. Communication is a cornerstone of this. It is also an important message that, just as our protagonist, people cannot be labeled, because we live among chameleons - who are often invisible to us because we do not know them - and so we overlook them.

## The Beauty and Value of Life

The work shows that life is also strange, full of twists and turns, and so is man: one's future and actions cannot be predicted with absolute certainty: a human is not an object whose every taste is predictable, nor a machine that can be programmed in advance, and therefore it is worth being careful about judging. And let us not be too quick to judge someone we do not know! Instead, we can focus our energies elsewhere, or in a direction where we dare to ask questions and inform ourselves because it is important to be informed by the right, credible sources. Be critical, but not judgmental!

The play also reflects a belief in the usefulness of education, and the protagonist's value preferences reflect a future-oriented approach; she plans, she foresees, she thinks - she creates and produces goals. Is she a useful member of society? Starting a family helps the reproduction of society, and it is not necessarily reprehensible to be able to grow up to have children. As we have seen in the work, this is what the "chameleon girl" managed to do. Valuable and special people diversify and enrich the population of our country; one of many was the character presented. Could your story be "dramatized" as well?

The important thing about the play is that it is uninfluenced and unbiased: the director does not make any judgments or draw conclusions at the end but leaves it to the viewers to stimulate their thinking. It is not possible to leave the play unimpressed.

## Summary

This work, based on a qualitative approach to scientific needs, is an essential instrument of culture transmission, contributing to the transmission of the values of the Roma and shedding light on the relationship of the individual and his/her environment, which can be interpreted in a broader sense as the relationship between the individual and society. One of them is reflected in the following statement: „A good Gypsy is as if he/she were not a Gypsy”. Often, society thinks in extremes and turns rigidly to the Roma, so the word combination (syntagma) of good + Gypsy is still not integrated into the public opinion organically, although it is not possible to assimilate an individual by self-abandonment, by denying his/her identity. Instead, it is much more important to recognize the potential of the individual and to ensure a level playing field in access to various rights and services (education, health, etc.) by reducing barriers. This is an important social task.

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