

Legacies of Enslavement: Theatre Review of *The Great Shame*

Oana Rusu

oanarusso@gmail.com

Actor and PhD student, University of Arts, Târgu Mureş; research assistant at Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu, Romania

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5522-2861>

Oana Rusu is a PhD student in her third year at the University of Arts in Târgu Mureş, and she also works as a research assistant at Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu, Romania. In addition to her research activity, Oana Rusu collaborates with independent artists and Romani feminist NGOs in various socio-cultural projects in underprivileged areas. In 2019, the Government of Romania awarded her the Distinguished Artist prize for artistic performance and the promotion of Romani culture.



Critical
Romani Studies

Abstract

In this article, I review *The Great Shame*, a play by Alina Șerban, a Romanian Romani playwright and actor. My analysis focuses on the central theme of the play, namely the enslavement of Romani people in the historical Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. While telling a contemporary story about academic engagement with the theme of enslavement, the play sheds light on reminiscences of the past in society, particularly institutionalised and interpersonal racist behaviour, censorship, and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

The Great Shame goes beyond the mere exposition of a painful historical theme, becoming a deep meditation on the continuing impact of the system of slavery on contemporary artistic identity and expressiveness. Therefore, I also discuss the interpretation of the actors of Romani ethnicity in the show – including myself. I address several questions: how does a past of enslavement for hundreds of years affect a contemporary Romani actor? Is an actor's connection to their ancestors visible in their expressiveness. (For example, the character Oprea says, "Our cells carry memories, memories of experiences that our parents and our parents' parents went through.") Does the actors' expressiveness evolve as they better understand and accept their past?

The choice of cast is by no means accidental. Interpreting Romani roles on Romanian stages is a form of restorative justice (Matache 2021) currently conceived and applied in Romania by Romani public figures. In this play, the performances of Romani actors not only evoke a collective memory but bring to the surface the complexity of transgenerational experiences, emphasising the power of art as a form of restorative justice and self-affirmation.

The Great Shame asserts itself as an essential artistic and political act, which provokes both social and personal conscience, offering a mirror through which the past and the present enter a dialogue to build a more conscious and empathetic future.

Keywords

- Ancestors
- Expressiveness
- Slavery
- Theatre

Once Upon a Time...

Actor Alina Șerban created a show-lesson, *The Great Shame*, in which she makes a documented foray into the history of Roma and a scan of the racist mentality of today. The artistic investigation follows both the public discourse and the self-limitations within the ethnic group, because, under the discriminatory pressure of the majority, the minority censors itself. Thus, the show has two episodes: the questioning of the present through a story that illuminates the character of contemporary Romanian society with regard to Roma and the “lesson” of history itself, with performed documents (Stoica 2017).

To fully understand *The Great Shame* and its profound impact, it is essential to know the historical context of the liberation of Romani people from enslavement, which involves linked political, economic, and social factors that influenced decisions regarding the status of Roma.

Romani people in the historical Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia were enslaved by the Crown, boyars (feudal landowners who formed the dominant noble class, exercising both economic and political authority), and the Orthodox Church during the Middle Ages. The beginnings of this system of slavery arguably can be traced back to the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242 (Achim 1998, 28). It may have begun as a practice of enslaving prisoners of war in Eastern Europe, initially applied to Tatars but which evolved to target solely Romani people. During the Byzantine Empire, from whence Roma came to the Romanian Principalities, they were enslaved by the Crown and registered in a special tax register. We can assume *that the two Romanian Principalities took over Romani people as enslaved already*, as here the institution of slavery was older, dating to the time of the battles with Tatars (Livadă-Cadeschi 2015).

Enslaved Roma were divided into different categories, such as princely G*psies, boyar G*psies, and monastic G*psies, each with different obligations and living conditions, but all lacked personal freedom and faced labour exploitation. The economies of the principalities were based primarily on subsistence farming and the forced labour of enslaved Roma and Romanian serfs and peasants.

Enlightenment ideas and emancipation movements that were spreading in Europe impacted the elites of the Romanian Principalities. Ideas about freedom, equality and human rights began to take root in this space as well. Mihail Kogălniceanu, a renowned abolitionist, historian, and politician, recounted the strong impression that enslaved Romani people, dragging their chains through the streets of Iași, made on him in his youth (1892, 266). It seems likely that Enlightenment ideas fuelled a growing dissatisfaction with systems of slavery and other local forms of social inequality in his young mind (Chiriac 2020).

International pressure, especially from Europe, as well as the example of other countries that had abolished slavery, played a role in changing local mentalities and policies. In 1837, Alexandru Ghica, ruler of Wallachia, issued a series of laws aimed at improving the living conditions of enslaved people.

The first law abolishing the enslavement of one category of Roma was adopted in Wallachia, on 22 March 1843. A few years later, on 11 February 1847, at the proposal of the ruler Gheorghe Bibescu, a law was

voted on by which all Roma of the metropolis were released from enslavement by bishoprics, monasteries, and any public establishments (Petcuț 2001).

In 1843, Mihail Sturdza, the ruler of Moldavia, initiated reforms aimed at the progressive emancipation of enslaved Roma. Between 1843 and 1856, several laws were enacted in both principalities aimed at the gradual emancipation of the enslaved. In 1856, the ruler Barbu Știrbei issued the decree for the final release of enslaved Roma from Wallachia, and in 1855, Grigore Alexandru Ghica released enslaved Romani people from Moldavia. Emancipation was not a smooth and uniform process, encountering resistance from boyars and other enslavers, who feared the loss of free labour and their control over it.

Even after liberation, Romani people continued to be marginalised and discriminated against, without access to land or economic resources that would enable them to recover from transgenerational economic, wealth, health, social prestige, and cultural losses and to prosper in society.

After liberation, Roma did not benefit from economic and social support measures. They were not provided with land or other means to support themselves, leaving them in a state of extreme poverty and vulnerability. Without a legal and economic framework to facilitate their integration, many Roma continued to live on the margins of society, becoming victims of discrimination and institutionalised racism. Liberation was an essential step towards the recognition of Roma rights but did not immediately lead to significant change in their social and economic status. The legacies of slavery have continued to influence perceptions and attitudes towards Roma, perpetuating negative stereotypes and social exclusion.

Who Is History Told by?

Various differences and relational elements between the system of slavery and the system of serfdom have been conceptualised and nuanced in certain historical and social contexts. In the specific case of Romania, the terminology preferred, or imposed, to describe the experiences of over 500 years of Romani enslavement is critical. Historians and other scholars have often used the power of cannons and terminology to advance the term “*rob*” (serf) as opposed to “*sclav*” (enslaved) and, consequently, downplay the brutality and impacts of the system of slavery in the Romanian Principalities.

Yet, slavery, in the strict sense, involves a complete deprivation of a person’s freedom and fundamental rights, reducing enslaved Roma to the status of someone else’s property. In contrast, serfdom had more varied connotations and was less dehumanising, as it did not reduce Romanian serfs to a status of property but was still an oppressive form of servitude.

As Becky Taylor said in her work *Another Darkness, Another Dawn: A History of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers*, the history of Romani people remains at least for now, a history told by non-Roma.

“Who is history told by?” asks Magda in *The Great Shame* when the teacher’s oppression cannot be countered through dialogue. However, the performative revolt of the student does not have the expected effect/echo and the singularity of her voice tends to be found only in the turmoil of the teacher Oprea.

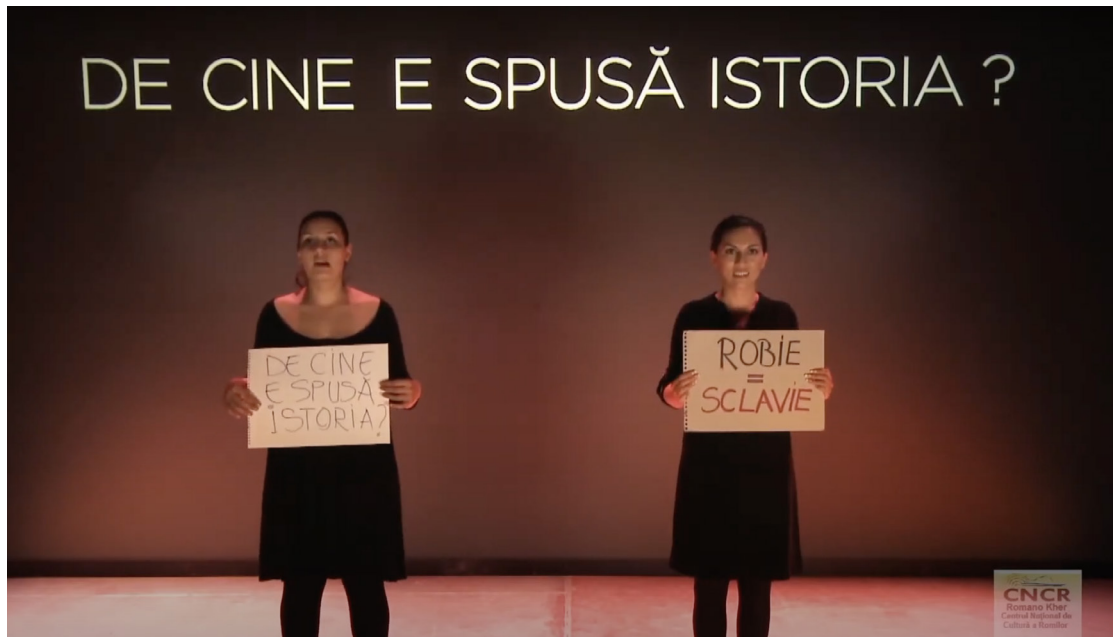


Figure 1. Still from *The Great Shame*

Magda (right) and Elena (left, daughter of Professor Oprea) join the protest organised by the young master's student.

The placards of the two girls read: Magda: Serfdom = Slavery; Elena: Who is history told by?

The photo is a screenshot from a recording of *The Great Shame* at 50'34". A link to the recording can be found in the references.

In *The Great Shame*, Magda tries to highlight the gravity and injustice of slavery. However, the intervention of the coordinating teacher, who censures Magda by refusing her use of the term “slave”, reflects an actual scholarly and societal trend to minimise historical trauma and diminish collective responsibility for such atrocities. This academic and interpretive censorship not only undermines the real experiences of Roma but also perpetuates a form of denial of the past often found in hegemonic discourses.

From the point of view of interpretative theatre analysis, this scene can be seen as a critique of how society and academic institutions have the power to manage, distort, and interpret Romani history. In a theatrical setting, this conflict between Magda and her coordinating teacher becomes a symbolic representation of the struggle for truth-telling, recognition, and justice. Fortunately for us, theatre as an art form has the potential to expose and challenge these tensions, providing a space for marginalised voices to be heard and audiences to be confronted with uncomfortable realities and untold stories.

This censorship dynamic in *The Great Shame* can be analysed through a prism of postcolonial theory, which examines how dominant discourses perpetuate inequalities and control historical narratives. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), argues that the West has systematically distorted representations of non-Western cultures to justify colonial rule. Said describes how these representations not only alter the perception of the Orient, but also serve to maintain colonial power through the construction of subordinating and exoticising narratives. The response of the

coordinating professor reveals how the academic authority can rewrite and diminish the historical experience of Roma:

I gave you the opportunity for a Roma master's student to prove that she can be as good as any master's student. And what are you doing? We have a problem: I suggested replacing the expression Roma slavery with Roma serfdom... How to use the subtitle 500 years of Roma slavery in Romania, that is an inadmissible ideological error.

Applying and adjusting postcolonial theory to *The Great Shame*, the teacher's intervention to censor the use of the term "slave" can be seen as an act of domestic orientalism, where Romanian dominant narratives avoid fully acknowledging the atrocities committed against Roma in order to maintain a clean and unproblematic national image.

I have no reason to feel ashamed... did I have slaves? If I don't feel ashamed, does that mean I'm a racist?

This statement is voiced by the same professor, who positions himself as detached and morally unaffected revealing how the refusal to acknowledge historical responsibility becomes a strategy for preserving dominant comfort.

Gayatri Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), explores the difficulty of the marginalised to express their voices in a context dominated by hegemonic discourses. Spivak points out that the subaltern (those on the fringes of society) often lack the means and structures to articulate their experiences and suffering in a way that is heard and understood by those in power. In *The Great Shame*, the censoring of the term "slave" by the coordinating teacher is a clear example of an attempt to silence a subaltern voice, in this case, the voice of Roma who are trying to claim and tell their own history.

Through these theoretical lenses, the teacher's intervention is not just a simple act of academic censorship but a manifestation of power that controls and limits historical narratives to protect existing power structures. This censorship reflects a tension between the hegemonic collective memory and the efforts of historically marginalised groups to acknowledge and affirm their traumatic past. In the context of the theatre, the scene in which Magda is censored thus becomes a focal point for the critique of power and for highlighting the need to allow spaces for free and authentic expression for all voices, especially marginalised ones.

Relations

Magda Vernescu's story explores the complex and tense relationships with those around her, and each relationship contributes to shaping her personal and professional path.

Magda's love affair with a *gadjo* (a term used to denote a non-Romani person) is one that often causes cultural and family conflicts. The *gadjo*, a fellow university student, is open and eager to understand

Romani culture but often encounters resistance from members of the community. He is also played by a *gadjo* actor – Radu Ciobănașu. This relationship could be seen as a representation of Magda's desire to join majority society but also the difficulties encountered in maintaining her cultural identity. The university professor, who is of Romanian origin, represents academic authority and, in a certain sense, the voice of the dominant discourse. He is the one who censures Magda, refusing to allow her to use the term "slave" to describe the historical experiences of Roma. This conflict reveals the tension between the official narrative of history and the lived truth of Romani people. Magda sees him as a major obstacle to the correct recognition of a Romani past.

Mrs. Oprea, a Romani teacher, becomes Magda's mentor and unconditional supporter. I, a Romani actor – Oana Rusu – play the teacher character. Elena Duminică, another Romani actor, plays the role of my daughter in the show. Mrs. Oprea is a mother figure who dreamed of writing a book about Romani slavery but gave up for various personal and professional reasons. In Magda, Mrs. Oprea sees a reflection of her own aspirations and the desire to bring unspoken truths to light. This relationship is one of female empowerment and solidarity, giving Magda the emotional and intellectual support she needs to continue her fight. The fact that the professional relationship between the two women continues in the writing of a book about Romani slavery leaves us a ray of light and hope that the stories of our ancestors will not remain untold.

For me, the interpretation of this role overlapped the novelty of the information I was learning with indignation and revolt. I recalled my grandmother, telling me about her childhood and re-interpreting all her stories, feeling that I finally understood their subtext. Each rehearsal consumed me more than any other because I was in a process of re-identification.

This new development and fluidity in my identity made me think of Jacques Lacan's theory that our identity is not fixed but is continuously formed and reconfigured through our relationship with our image and with others (Lacan 1978, 76). In the context of theatre, this idea becomes extremely relevant because actors, through the repetition of roles, are challenged to reconnect and constantly reinterpret their own identity through the lens of the character they are playing. Even more so when the play you are acting in has to do with your nation's historical past. An actor may begin to assimilate the traits or emotions of the character they're playing, leading to a dissonance between their personal and professional selves. This fragmentation of the self can be psychologically draining, especially when the character is going through intense or emotional moments, as in *The Great Shame*. Therefore, rehearsals become not only an exercise in memorisation and performance but also one of self-reflection and identity negotiation.

Magda's brother, the priest Vernescu, played by Romani actor Sorin Sandu, works for the Church, an institution that has a controversial history regarding the enslavement of Romani people. The relationship between Magda and her brother is deep and complex, marked by different visions of the past and the present. Vernescu sees the Church as a force of morality and salvation, while Magda looks at it critically from the historical perspective of oppression and disinterest in regret, repair, and healing. The scene of the interview between Magda and Vernescu is illustrative of these differences of vision. Magda challenges her brother to recognise the Church's role in perpetuating the system of slavery, while Vernescu tries to explain to her the complexity and changes of the institution over time. The relationship with her priest

brother, in particular, deepens Magda's internal conflict between loyalty to family and the desire for truth and justice. Vernescu represents tradition and an attempt to find meaning and hope in a complicated institution, while Magda symbolises a new generation that demands transparency and recognition of the past. This complex relationship provides rich material for reflection and discussion, inviting the audience to contemplate their own views of history, religion, and identity.

Thus, in this context, as Matache argues, "Ignoring reparative mechanisms – apologies, compensations, memorialisation and historical truth processes – is not casual negligence. It is the product of memory wipe" (Matache 2021).

This story is a study of interpersonal, institutional, and social tensions, offering insight into a young Romani woman's struggle to assert her identity and break free from historical power and cultural constraints. Each relationship in Magda's life adds a new dimension to her understanding and the complexity of her condition. Theatre is a powerful medium to expose these conflicts, using dialogue and stage interactions to bring themes of identity, justice, and reconciliation to the fore.

Through its relationships with those around it, the show manages to raise essential themes of identity, power and historical truth, providing a platform for often silenced voices.

Legacies...

The interpretive and aesthetic direction of cultural productions plays a vital role in how the public perceives and appreciates them. It is not enough to make performances with and about Roma: we need to look deeply into how they are produced and presented. In this regard, performances are not just a form of entertainment but a medium through which complex cultural stories and themes are explored and transmitted to the public.

A significant example in this sense is the approach of the director Alina Şerban, who creates an apparent separation of plans between the present and the past in this show. She emphasises the need to understand the past in order to live in the present and to let go of prejudices and stereotypes. The lessons of the past should not be presented as an argument or a slap, but in a way that is firm but not harsh, compressed but not reduced. Only in this way is the message received and understood.

In the first part of the show, the story is fluently presented, and the characters are interpreted realistically, we could say according to the "Stanislavski method". This method emphasises the importance of authenticity and lived experience in the actors' interpretation. In the second part of the show, the characters are sketched discreetly, with irony – boyars who feel wronged that they must free the people they enslaved – in some places with humour but also drama – in the case of Coana Profirita who has to free her "slave" whom she raised as her own child. In this particular context, a relevant theorist is Bertolt Brecht, who introduced the concept of "distancing" or the "alienation effect". Brecht argued that the audience should not be completely absorbed by the illusion of theatre, but rather be aware of the fictional nature of performance in order to reflect critically on the themes presented (Brecht 1977, 31). This is pertinent

to the historical part of Alina Șerban's show, where the separation of plans between present and past can serve as a Brechtian mechanism to provoke reflection and introspection.

A major challenge in artistic representation is creating an authentic connection between present and past. This requires not only a deep understanding of history but also an ability to present these stories in a relevant and expressive way. That is why the actors' play combines irony and drama to render the complexity of human experiences. This dual approach allows viewers to see beyond stereotypes and explore the complex motivations of the characters, thus creating a connection between the historical narrative and contemporary reality.

Set design and visual expression are key elements in creating the atmosphere of a show and directing the audience's attention. The stage is not unnecessarily loaded with props, but a minimalist design is used to emphasise the message of the show. The separation of space is achieved through the use of lights and projections of character names in the background, ensuring that the audience remains focused on the core of the story's essence and the characters' interactions.

According to Edward Gordon Craig's scenic design theory, minimalism in set design can amplify a performance's emotional and intellectual impact by allowing audience members to use their imagination to fill in missing details. Here, light and shadow become powerful tools for visual storytelling, creating contrasts that emphasise the moral tensions and dilemmas of the characters. *Design elements must function as symbols and communicate deeper meanings, rather than simply reflecting the real world* (Lucarelli 2014). In any cultural representation, there is a complex dynamic between stories that are privileged and those that are marginalised. This aspect is essential in exploring representations of the Other, often influenced by social, political, and historical factors. *The Great Shame* brings to the fore the experiences of those who have been historically oppressed, excluded, and underrepresented. Therefore, the role of cultural productions, of Romani artists, regardless of the field, is not only to inform but also to provoke emotions and critical reflections among the public.

The emotional impact of a play often depends on its ability to address universal themes and foster empathy through the characters and stories presented. According to Aristotle's theory of catharsis, theatre has the power to purify the audience's emotions through empathy and introspection. *...evoking pity and fear, (tragedy) carries out the purification characteristic of such emotions* (author's translation from the Romanian edition) (Aristotle 1957). The audience is always invited to live alongside the characters and explore the moral dilemmas and challenges together, accomplishing a form of collective catharsis. In the spring of this year, Alina Șerban – director and author of the play – stated small details of great significance in an interview:

I wanted to show solidarity between us. I really care about lifting each other up. Before the premiere, I took the actor Oana Rusu by the hand, I looked into her eyes and my tears were already flowing. Because we were together not just physically. We were two Roma women on stage. As we, the actors, sat in the booth before the show, we were very emotional – we felt that it wasn't just any play. Because others have not been on stage as Roma to tell their story. Their story and that of their ancestors. And we were trembling with fear. That we want to do

good, that we are limited, that we are tired. That... all our human failings. I told them: We are together. No one is alone. This song is supported by all of us. Today, on 20 February (Day of Liberation), we have the honour of feeling many souls behind us. For them we must find the strength to tell this story. When I looked up, it was incredible. The physical space seems to no longer exist.

Cast

Premiere: 20 February 2018

Magda Vernescu – Alina Şerban/Ana Maria Carablais/Doinița Oancea

The professor – Radu Ciobanaşu

Daniel, the *gadjo* boyfriend – Radu Ciobănaşu

Teacher Oprea – Oana Rusu

Elana Oprea – Elena Duminică

Priest Vernescu – Ninel Petrache/Alexandru Fifea/Sorin Sandu

Directed by: Alina Şerban

Assistant director: Ştefan Pătraşcu/Radu Pocovnicu

Lights: Costi Baci

Sound: Cristian Constantin

Video design: Tania Cucoreanu

Set designer: Maria Creţu

Production: CNCR-RK National Centre for Roma Culture “Romano Kher”

Acknowledgments

This publication was funded in part by The Research Council of Norway, Grant Number 324045.

References

- Achim, Viorel. 2004. *The Roma in Romanian History*. Translated by Richard Davies. Budapest: Central European University Press. OpenEdition Books, 23 January 2013.
<https://books.openedition.org/ceup/1532?lang=en#anchor-resume>.
- Aristotle. 1957. *Poetica*. Translated by Constantin Balmuș. Bucharest: Editura Științifică.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1977. *Writings about Theatre*. Translated by Corina Jiva and Nicolae Dragoș. Bucharest: Univers Publishing House.
- Chiriac, Bogdan. 2020. "Mihail Kogălniceanu's Historical Inquiry into the Question of Roma Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Romanian Principalities". *Critical Romani Studies* 2 (2): 24–41.
<https://crs.ceu.edu/index.php/crs/article/view/64>.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1978. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. translated by Alan Sheridan. New York, NY: Norton & Company.
- Livada-Cadeschi, Ligia. 2015. "Robia în Țările Române în secolele XIV–XIX" [Slavery in the Romanian countries in the 14th–19th centuries]. In *Roma from Romania: Identity and Alterity*, edited by Irina Nastasă-Matei, 5–32. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană.
<https://www.roma-survivors.ro/images/Manual-auxiliar-didactic-Romii-din-Romania-Identitate-si-Alteritate.pdf>.
- Lucarelli, Fosco. 2014. "To Transcend Reality and Function as Symbol: Stage Design of Edward Gordon Craig". Socks, 15 February. <https://socks-studio.com/2014/02/15/to-transcend-reality-and-function-as-symbol-stage-design-of-edward-gordon-craig>.
- Matache, Magda. 2021. "Istoria ascunsă a strămoșilor romi" [The hidden history of Roma ancestors]. *Doar o Revistă* [Just a Magazine] (DoR) 46. <https://www.dor.ro>.
- Pelehatăi, Ioana. 2024. "Alina Șerban: "Vreau o revoluție culturală". *Scena 9 Magazine*. <https://www.scena9.ro/article/alina-serban-actrita-roma-teatru-film>.
- Petcuț, Petre. 2001. Istoria rromilor (Text rostit pe casetă audio) [*History of the Roma* (Text spoken on audio cassette tape)]. Translated into Romanian by Gheorghe Sarău. Translated into Hungarian by László Murvai. Bucharest: UNICEF.
- Said, Edward W. 2018. *Orientalism*. Translated by Doina Lică and Ana Andreescu. Bucharest: Editura Art.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Stanislavski, Konstantin. 2021. *Munca actorului cu sine însuși, vol. 1* [*The actor's work with himself*]. Bucharest: Nemira.
- Stoica, Oana. 2017. "Istoria Incomodă" [Uncomfortable history]. *Dilema Veche* 672. 5–11. <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/la-zi-in-cultura/arte-performative/istoria-incomoda-620529.html>.
- Taylor, Becky. 2021. *O istorie culturală. Romii* [*Another darkness, another dawn: A history of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers*]. Romanian-language edition. Bucharest: Paideia.
- The Great Shame*. 2016/2019. Full movie produced by National Centre for Roma Culture Romano Kher. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WD7atBtbJjw>.