From Gypsyland With Love: Review of the Theater Play *Roma Armee*

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Abstract

My review of the 2017 theater piece, *Roma Armee*, focuses on its attempt to decolonize the stage and denounce the complicity of cultural institutions – in this case, the theater, with its typical fetishization of Roma as exotic nomads and the simultaneous perpetuation of racist stereotypes of Roma as criminals and undesirables. I focus on storytelling as a methodology that has the power to elevate the voices of underprivileged groups, and claim that *Roma Armee*, with its unapologetic Roma-ness, undeniable coolness, and overall brilliance, is much more than an elegant *j'accuse* directed at skewering antigypsyism. Rather, it provides a timely addition to current debates about the social responsibility of art and the possibilities for the effective decolonization of the regimes of representation that govern art institutions and, as such, should be seen as a unique contribution to the ongoing process of radical self-rebranding exercised by Roma activists and cultural producers.

Keywords

- Culture
- Decolonization
- Representation
- Theater

No Romantics in Roma Statistics[1]

Of the estimated ten million Roma currently residing in Europe, the majority live in precarious conditions: they are threatened by deportation, ghettoization, and violence. Slavery and discrimination are not merely historic footnotes but contemporary lived realities for the European Roma, who are framed by mainstream society as the ultimate Other to modernist concepts of territory and the nation-state.

Like the myth of the *Wandering Jew*, the stereotypes of the *Gypsy witch*, *nomad*, *fortuneteller,* or *horse thief* reflect a long history of persecution and mythmaking enacted by the mainstream that continue to surround Romani people and their position in society today. These stereotypes contribute to the denigration of Roma and point to the Roma themselves as responsible for their own difficult economic and social conditions instead of looking at the discriminatory systems that methodically exclude Roma from gaining access to human rights and opportunities to fully integrate into society.

The analysis of visual narratives of Roma points to two important phenomena that define how this population is typically represented: Roma are either invisible or hypervisible. The common denominator of either of these visual representations is that a Roma person tends to be cast as Other (Raatzsch and Klahn 2014; Bogdán 2015; Tumbas 2018). Depictions of Roma are subject to a primitivizing lens that presents Roma as exotic, bohemian strangers while simultaneously reproducing some of the most toxic stereotypes of criminality and backwardness. When opportunities do arise for a Roma-led artistic production, it is often appropriated by a *Gadje* (non-Roma) production, be it in film, fashion, or music.

This marginalizing and exploitative mechanism is also reflected on the level of cultural institutions. Although Roma represent an ethnic minority with a vast output of cultural production, prior to the presentation of the first Roma Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Roma art had been relegated largely to ethnographic museums and Roma artists had been absent from the institutional circuit of art and art historical scholarship. The emergence of "the new generation of Roma intellectuals and artists" (Junghaus 2007) – mostly as a result of the first Roma Biennale Pavilion in 2007 – established a remarkable and unprecedented paradigm shift.

Over the last decade we have witnessed increased activity of Roma cultural producers from visual and performative art fields, including initiatives that contest cultural appropriation of Roma identity. Examples include protests against the film *The Shutka Book of Records* in Macedonia in 2006 or the open letter from the Independent Theatre circulated in Hungary in 2013 regarding the representation of Roma in theaters, and the mobilization of theater professionals from across Europe trying to address the incapacity of the mainstream stage to move beyond the "Carmen paradigm." Romano Sveto and Mindji Panther in Austria, the Independent Theatre in Hungary, and Giuvlipen in Romania – all Roma-led theater companies – have come about in response to the limits of local theatrical circuits, where Roma actors and actresses are almost always offered supporting roles as sex workers or thieves. The actors and

1 Dan Perjovschi, 2018.

theater professionals involved in these independent initiatives see it as their main objective to address the lack of an institutional framework for challenging the mechanisms of visibility and stereotype that dominate contemporary representations of Roma culture in Europe.

1. Making Visible

White people's sense of entitlement, alongside their dominance throughout history, hinges on the idea that theirs are the stories that matter. Western cultural institutions have been instrumental in the proliferation of damaging, racist, and demeaning visual narratives of Roma disseminated through media, art, literature, theater, and film. In a public sphere where minority identities are deprived of any appropriate speaking positions and where cultural institutions then typically internalize such existing regimes of representation, *Roma Armee*, directed by Israeli Yael Ronen in 2017 at Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theater, is an important step not only towards a more nuanced representation of Roma on theatrical stages but also towards their integration into European society.

The plays that Ronen has written and directed for the Maxim Gorki Theatre and Austria's Schauspielhaus Graz have gained her a reputation as one of Europe's most socially, culturally, and politically conscious directors. Working with what she calls a "mockumentary theater" approach, Ronen explores how majoritarian narratives internalize the concepts of nation-state, identity, neoliberalism, patriarchy, and hetero-normativity. In her plays Ronen talks about political and social phenomena through personal stories, taking politics out of their narrow context and showing the actual impact that nationalism, racism, and the securitization of ethnic minorities have on our lives. Her earlier projects – including *The Situation* that looked at the political situation in the Middle East and *Winterreise* that commented on the life of migrants in Germany – show that salient political issues are not new to Ronen's work.

First staged in 2017 in Berlin, *Roma Armee* speaks directly to the most dangerous trends in the post-Brexit era of hyperdivisions, violent racializations, and silenced counter-cultural histories: nationalism, xenophobia, persistent antigypsyism, and the normalization of violence against Roma people.

2. Berlin is Ours[2]

"There was a cabaret and there was a master of ceremonies and
there was a city called Berlin in a country called Germany. It was the end of the world…."
Cliff in *Cabaret*

The mise-en-scene of *Roma Armee* borrows from Christopher Isherwood's iconic tale, *The Berlin Stories*, set in 1930s Berlin. Lindy Larsson, as emcee holding court over the Roma varieté, opens the performance *Roma Armee* with the story of Zarah Leander, a Swedish diva, star of Universum Film AG, and "one of

2 Ethel Brooks, 2017.

Hitler's best friends." Lindy's emcee role is like Gustav Gründgens' 1932 Weimar Mephistoles, a fun-loving, decadent hooligan, amusing, playful, and extravagant rather than insidious and menacing. His Roma Revue – "the Zarah Leander's Fag-Juden-Zigeuner Army" – is reminiscent of Woland's Variete Theater in Moscow, in which the devil in disguise uses black magic to create illusions that expose the greed of the bourgeois spectators. Lindy, and the other characters, Mihaela, Simonida, Riah, Mehmet, Orit, Hamze, and Sandra, succumb to "pressure to use the rare moment of opportunity to say 'the right thing'" about Roma, poverty, slavery, sterilization, and the Romani genocide. After all, we are in Germany, and as Riah says: "Berlin is not all about Berghain."

Berlin, like Foucault's definition of the space of the mirror, is both utopic and heterotopic (1986): a reflection of an ideal modernist metropolis turned into a city of trauma, savagery, and sorrow, Berlin is also an example of a spectacular rebranding. After the fall of the Wall, when Berlin became a depopulated, empty city, scaring potential dwellers with its voids and destruction, a new urban development strategy hoped to use Berlin's poverty as a (tourist) attraction. "Poor but sexy,"[3] the Berlin of the twenty-first century has re-emerged as a creative city, attracting expats to its clubs and galleries and exuding a spirit of *je ne sais quoi*. Against the ever-present memory of the Nazi past, the inauguration of the "welcome politics" (*Wilkommenskultur)* that remains a model, if imperfect, for integration of migrants, was a kind of positive redemption. For all its grievous history, Berlin might actually be a model of how to get the modern world right. This Berlin is now leading Europe into a civilized, open, generous future. Given Berlin's cosmopolitanism, it is not surprising that it has become the capital of a Roma "renaissance," heralded by Junghaus in 2007.

3. Poor But Sexy

Roma Armee is based on the original idea of sisters Simonida and Sandra Selimović, who created the concept of the *Roma Armee Fraktion* as an umbrella for their interdisciplinary projects *Romano Svato* and *Mindj Panther*. According to Sandra Selimović, the concept of Roma Armee factions was established as a challenge to the traditional portrayal of Roma as helpless victims and as a subversive invitation to explore the transformative power of anger to bring about a Roma revolution (Drăgan 2018).

The play, combining political cabaret and storytelling-based theater, consists of loose interventions from protagonists sharing personal stories that celebrate the idea of Roma people organizing and being powerful enough to form an army. Antonio Gramsci (1971) coined the term "subaltern" and Nelson H.H. Graburn (1976) employed the phrase "Fourth World" to describe people "without countries" and without access to society's established institutions. Without a state of their own, European Roma have been traditionally racialized, subjugated, and silenced in the countries of their residence. Despite the fact that the amount of abuses Roma people have been collectively subjected to should grant them the title of Europe's most resilient people, they are often presented as helpless and weak victims by the mainstream. Thus, the Selimović sisters' desire to generate an image of Roma as freedom fighters sprung from the over-representation of Roma strictly as victims of European society.

3 Slogan coined by Klaus Wewereit, the mayor of Berlin from 2001 to 2014.

Ronen and her ensemble use this tension to present an idea of establishing Roma Armee factions. The cast, consisting of Roma and Romani travelers from Austria, Kosovo, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, and the UK, and accompanied by a hilarious Israeli and Turk duo (another set of European Others), takes turns telling stories drawn from their own lives in order to claim their identity – "in all of its complexity, multiplicity, beauty, unity – as a way into politics. Into another politics. A politics beyond the Gadje problem. A politics of hope. A politics of Romanofuturo" (Brooks 2017). The cast members talk openly about everything their grandparents couldn't mention – and they do so without inhibition, presenting the audience with long-overdue and difficult conversations. The cast members present an extraordinary ability to use situations of extreme social humiliation, discrimination, and abuse to turn their survivors into speaking subjects. This gesture points to earlier interventions by Roma artists who have engaged in what Spivak (2012) calls "making the subaltern speak," or what Didi-Huberman (2018) interprets as a moral gesture consisting of creation of an image in order to give back the dignity.

With stage painting and artwork by the late Damian Le Bas and his partner Delaine Le Bas, and sumptuous costumes and set design featuring Damian Le Bas' signature maps of "Gypsy Europa,"[4] the fighters of the Roma Armee construct a stirring revolutionary manifesto for the future of Roma and the future of Europe. Following Le Bas' subversive gesture of overwriting European maps and Ethel Brooks' (2013) description of Roma as the transnational avantgarde of Europe, the soldiers of the Roma Armee call for the emancipation of Roma from internalized victimhood. There are moments when the various participants of the "revolution" discover that the shared experience of Roma-ness might not be enough to keep the Roma Armee together: women take revenge on men for patriarchal oppression and Romanians are criticized for spoiling all Roma's reputation vis-à-vis the *Gadje*. There is a lot of gunfire and some dead bodies. This revolution, as bloody as any other revolution, is underlined, framed, and led by resistance, reclamations, restitutions, repatriations, and reformations that are informed by a history of violence, dispossession, and oppression. These topics are uncomfortable. As an affront and indignation against colonization and coloniality, and all the by-products of the colonial matrix of power, they form "a programme of complete disorder" (Fanon 1963). Because "decolonization which sets out to change the order of the world (…) cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding" (Fanon 1963, 36). An excerpt from the character Mihaela's monologue, in which she quotes Fredrick Douglass, demonstrates the revolutionary thrust of the play: "But now a new world order is in the making, and it is up to us to prepare ourselves that we may take our rightful place in it. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; the change will not come as a gentle shower, but storm. We need thunders and flashes, and the earthquake. The hypocrisy of this continent must be exposed: and Europe's crimes must be denounced."

This is the Roma Revolution and Roma are here to face, affront, reclaim, restitute, and reform all that was robbed from them: dignity, spirit, resources, and being. *Roma Armee* shows the extent to which our existence within the colonial matrix of power is framed around what we are told, what we listen to, and the way hegemonic knowledge is universalized. Visibility goes beyond a physical and empirical matter of

4 Damian Le Bas for Roma Army in the First Roma Biennale catalogue, Maxim Gorki Theatre, 2017, p. 3.

vision, and the way particular narratives are activated is directed by asymmetrical forms of judgment. In this context, becoming visible is a way of creating a public sphere where disagreements and conflicts can be safely aired, openly discussed, and resolved through some form of consensus.

The show is a plea – alternately bitter, humorous, and sentimental – for understanding and for empathy. Art historian Suzana Milevska (2006) has drawn on the concept of "being singular plural," as formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy, in order to claim that "participation is one of the crucial societal tendencies needed today to control an all-embracing neo-liberalism driven by the consumerization of human relations and the resultant 'bare life'." To summarize, and paraphrasing the director of Maxim Gorki Theatre, Shermin Langhoff: *Roma Armee*, with its celebration of radical diversity, calls on its audience to engage in a truly plural democracy and abandon a comfortable enclosure in society divided into allegedly deficient minorities adapting to an imagined majority of the "fully fledged."[5]

Roma Armee
Idea by Sandra Selimović and Simonida Selimović

By Yael Ronen & Ensemble: Mehmet Ateşçi, Hamze Bytyci, Mihaela Drăgan, Riah May Knight, Lindy Larsson, Orit Nahmias, Sandra Selimović, Simonida Selimović
Premiere: September 14, 2017
Set design by Heike Schuppelius
Artwork by Damian Le Bas and Delaine Le Bas
Costumes by Maria Abreu, Delaine Le Bas
Music by Yaniv Fridel, Ofer Shabi
Video by Hanna Slak, Luka Umek
Lighting by Hans Frundt
Dramaturgy: Irina Szodruch

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5 Shermin Langhoff and the team at Gorki#14, September–November 2017, pp. 30–31.

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