

# „WE ARE 56“



**BADUR**

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independent  
theater



Erasmus+

# **“WE ARE 56’!”**

- Historical Remembrance on the Street -

CASE STUDY

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**independent  
theater**

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## INTRODUCTION

Four Roma theaters operating in the field of art and education in Budapest, Rome, Bucharest and Seville put theater on the streets of their cities. We collected stories that highlighted the importance of Roma communities in the past and present of our cities. Based on these stories, we wrote plays, made outdoor theater performances and implemented workshops related to the performances. All this with the participation of contemporary Roma artists and workshop trainers, who were not only facilitators, but also took part in the artistic and educational initiatives.

In the following case study, we present the background, results, and lessons learned from the performance and workshop in Hungary. We hope that with the help of this text we can inspire other cultural and educational initiatives throughout Europe.

## **PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The Independent Theatre Hungary has previously staged outdoor theater performances and in several of our performances we have engaged with the audience through interactions, thus making them not just viewers, but participants. Many of our performances and our Roma Heroes Complex Art and Education programme, which has been running since 2017, focus on historical and social events involving Roma heroes and Roma people. These events are typically not part of mainstream education and culture. We believe that it is important to show active characters in Roma theater self-representation, and empowering members of Roma communities by offering them role models and differentiating the - often negative - attitudes of the majority towards the Roma. We believe that people from different social groups, recognising their common values and similarities, are more likely to open up to each other and move towards social inclusion, than if we only draw attention to differences. We have developed and disseminated a number of educational methodologies for theater performances, and held workshops facilitated by Roma and non-Roma trainers, both nationally and internationally. In our workshops, we encourage the participants - especially students - to form their own opinions on the raised issues by listening to each other, to the facts and perspectives and by conveying the different perspectives, values, heroes and dilemmas. We never directly convey ideology or value judgements. The dramatic heroes that we present are used to raise awareness of the importance of active citizenship, of choice and responsibility. We point out the impact that they can have on our shared world by creatively working and showing their own stories and values.

The interactive street theater performance about the Roma heroes of the 1956 Revolution was preceded by a short street performance in February 2020 by Tamás Szegedi, Kíra Sallai and András Marton, in the framework of our international Erasmus meeting (the participating organizations were the same ones that were our partners in the project described in this case study). In an interactive survival game, the workshop trainers reenacted one of the events of the 1956 Revolution at an original location, near Corvin district (Józsefváros). Based on the positive feedback and experiences of the audience and the youngsters that were involved in the reenactment, we decided to continue the work. In the Autumn of 2020 we recalled some of the figures of the 1956 Revolution in a short [video](#), with the support of the Roma Press Centre and the Goethe Institute in Budapest.

This initiative was the foundation of our later project entitled „We are ‚56“.

Through the “We are ‘56” performance we have set the following objectives:

- the development of Roma and non-Roma creators, with the aim of preparing them to participate in and facilitate the collaborative creative processes;
- the creation of a play and of an interactive outdoor performance based on the stories of the Roma heroes of ‘56, in order to:
  - ensure the historical remembrance of the Roma revolutionaries, thus empowering the Roma youth and shaping the image of Roma among the majority;
  - to create an innovative theater form
  - to provide an experiential version of history education
- to involve Roma and non-Roma workshops trainers in the development of the performance’s educational methodology and in the workshops to improve their facilitation tools;

- the workshops will contribute to the deepening of the performance's objectives, it will make the participants more aware of their own possibilities for social engagement and for creative work in their communities
- to present outdoor opportunities as an alternative to cultural and educational programmes for indoor institutions;
- to inspire other initiatives to take action towards the same goals.



## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: ROMA HEROES OF THE 1956 REVOLUTION**

In the Independent Theatre Hungary's play and performance called *"We Are '56"*, we look at the revolution of the Hungarian people against the Stalinist terror and the Soviet occupation, one of the most defining historical events of 20th century Hungary. The events of October 23 1956 begin with a peaceful demonstration of university students in Budapest. The Communist Party leadership gave orders to the police to fire into the crowd of the demonstrators. As a response the civilians took up weapons and the Revolution started.

On October 30 1956, the masses occupied the Communist Party building, leading to the fall of the government, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the restoration of a multi-party system and the beginning of the country's democratic transformation.

In the first days of November 1956 the new government began negotiations with the Soviet Union on the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops and the neutrality of the country. After an initial willingness, the Soviet political leadership changed its tactics and, having counted on the Western powers not to provide help for the Hungarian government, the Soviet troops launched an undeclared war against Hungary on November 4.

The country's revolution, which had been fought alone for several days in the face of a huge overwhelming force, had failed. According to the files, which were declassified in 1993, nearly 200,000 people fled the country, most of them to Western Europe.

In January 1957 the revolutionaries were imprisoned and many of them got executed. The brutal retaliation and the oppression of the Hungarian people were condemned both by the UN and the world public opinion. Until 1989 the events of 1956 were labeled counter-rev-

olution by the party-state authorities. After the fall of communism in 1989 the official assessment of the events changed and October 23 became a double national holiday in Hungary: the day of the outbreak of the 1956 Revolution and the day of the proclamation of the Hungarian Republic in 1989.

Until the 2010s, the role of revolutionaries of Roma origin was not, or only rarely, mentioned in the public discourse. The researchers Gábor Bernáth and Éva Kalla, alongside the members of the 'Gypsy Corps', who played a significant role in the revolution, presented more than twenty Roma people who took an active role during the events of the Revolution. We don't know the exact number of the Roma revolutionaries. However, according to the available information, 5-8% of the revolutionaries may have been of Roma origin (a mix of Hungarian Roma and Romani), which is a higher proportion than the overall official Roma population in the 1950s. This means that the Roma were extremely active in Hungary's 1956 Revolution.

The following stories of historical figures inspired our creative process in the creation of the performance:

### **Ilona Szabó (Shaggy)**

She was 17 years old and four months pregnant when she and her friends became involved in the Revolution's events. The young woman learned how to use a gun among the Corvin köz rebels and in a few days she became the commander in charge of six people. Of the Roma fighters in Corvin köz, only her and her husband, Gábor Dilinkó, were Romani. The other fighters of Roma origin were musicians. On October 28 1956 Shaggy was shot dead at the end of Práter Street. Her husband, Gábor Dilinkó, also fought in Corvin köz, he was captured with serious injuries and sentenced first to 12 and then to seven years

in prison. He was released in 1966. A memorial plaque was erected in honor of Ilona Szabó (Shaggy) in Corvin köz.

### **Gábor Dilinkó (Bijou)**

He was born into a family of horse traders on his father's side, and a blacksmith and musician on his mother's. Because of his parents' divorce and his mother's illness, he was placed in state care in 1937 at the age of 8, and got back into his mother's care only after World War II. He was a worker at the Rákospalotai oil mill when he met Ilona Szabó (Shaggy), who later became his wife.

On October 24, the second day of the Revolution, his dog returned home from a walk without his pregnant wife. He goes in search of Ilona, and two days later finds her in Corvin köz as the commander of a six-people team. Gábor himself joined the revolutionaries of Corvin köz. He was seriously wounded during the Soviet invasion. He was taken from the hospital and sentenced to seven years in prison. In the first few months during his imprisonment they beat him until he went unconscious. He was not given a job after his release from prison. He got food from pity or from garbage cans before he finally found work as a cleaner. In the seventies his life started to settle, he got remarried, but in 1975 he was run over by a bus. During his one year recovery he began to paint. His work gained attention and his paintings have been exhibited around the world. After the change of regime of 1989, he was rehabilitated and recognised with several medals and awards. Gábor died in 2014.

### **József Radics**

While one of the five brothers of the Radics family became a mechanical engineer, another a detective, and two more professional athletes, the youngest, József, chose to work at the age of 14. In 1956 he

was no more than 16 years old when he joined the rebels of Prater Street School. He was assigned to guard duty and then to treat minor wounds. In one of the school's classrooms were kept about 30 secret policemen (ÁVO), party functionaries and revolutionaries who committed theft or other offenses. Late in the evening of November 4, one of the Corvin köz rebels, Mária Kolozsi, tried to kill one of the detained secret policemen (ÁVO) with a hand grenade. The grenade was wrenched from the hands of the threatening woman by Jolán Papp, the head of the health team. Jolán ordered József, who was still a child, to shoot the woman, and if he didn't obey her she would shoot him. Radics finally gave into the orders.

After the Revolution József went to work at a cotton weaving mill. Once the repercussions started, he tried to commit suicide, but his mother notices it in time and saved his life.

He was taken away on March 28 1958. His family knew nothing about him for three months. He was severely assaulted during interrogations. The prosecutor asked for the death penalty for József, but he was sentenced to five years in prison. He never told his six children about his past in the '56 Revolution. He died in June 2013 after a long illness.

### **József Sörös Kóté**

József was born in Kiskunfélegyháza in 1927 and had nine siblings. He was originally a musician, but Roma musicians in the 1950s could not make a living. In 1953 József obtained a license as a tinsmith and locksmith and he occasionally played music at weddings. Being a communist at heart, he joined the party. He married and raised their two children with his wife in Monor. When the Revolution broke out, he immediately joined the rebels. On October 30, he arrived in Budapest with his friend József Tóth and two truckloads of food collected by the Red Cross. They both join the Vajdahunyad Street rebels. They got

weapons, joined the street fights and marched with the crowd to Republic Square. József also took part in the armed resistance after the Soviet invasion on November 4. He was wounded on his thigh and was forced to stop fighting. After a few days, he fled to Austria. He begged on trains and played music for two months. He returned to Hungary on the promise of amnesty, but he was arrested in July 1957, as was his friend, József Tóth. József Kótté Sörös was sentenced to death in both first and second instance for “participation in the movement to overthrow the people’s democratic state order”. He was executed on February 26 1959, aged thirty-two.

### **Erzsébet Hrozova**

Erzsébet was born in Budapest in 1938 to a Czech father and a Romani mother. Her mother died early and the children were raised by Erzsébet’s father. After primary school, she started working in a machine factory in Csepel, and in the afternoons she studied to become a nurse. After two years she was a nurse’s aide in the workers’ hospital of the Csepel Works. In 1954 she was transferred to the hospital in Kaposvár. Here she met her future husband, Béla Székelyi, a lieutenant at the Soviet-Hungarian military airport. In October 1956, Erzsébet worked in Pest, at the Baross Street gynecological clinic as a graduate nurse. She and her husband joined the Víg Street rebels. She tended to the wounded and joined the street fights. Together with her husband they opened two closed shops and delivered food to the revolutionaries with a car that they got from the gynecological clinic. After six months of hiding, she got arrested and held in pre-trial detention for a year. She was severely beaten during interrogations. She was accused of robbing shops, the Fashion Hall and a bank - the retaliation sought to portray the revolutionaries as public criminals. She was eventually sentenced to life in prison for participation in the fighting, for armed

conspiracy to overthrow the People's Republic and for three counts of attempted murder. She was released after 13 years, in March 1970. That is when she learned that her husband had been executed. Erzsébet died in 2013.

# THE CREATION AND RECORDING OF THE PERFORMANCE

## The Inclusion of Artists and Operational Preparations

In June 2021, we launched a call for applications for young Roma and non-Roma people who have previously worked in our theater. As we previously worked with a significant number of young people, who are keen to engage with new opportunities, we had the opportunity to involve a total of eight young people (four artists and four workshop trainers). We decided to select the participants through an invited call for application rather than an open call.

An early call was necessary because we wanted to present the performance ahead of schedule, on the national holiday of the Revolution, October 23. We thought that the actuality of the performance would attract more spectators. Eight young people applied for the call, five of whom were selected for the creation of the performance. Four of them participated as actors, and one as assistant director. As the rehearsals progressed, it became clear that we will need a technician, a propman, a dresser and a few extras. Therefore we recruited three more people in Autumn 2021.

The writer-producer (Rodrigo Balogh), the dramaturg (Márton Illés) and the director (András Tamás Szegedi) were set from the beginning of the project, as they were involved in creating the concept of the performance and are key collaborators in the theatre's talent-caring programme.

Out of the total of 11 people 7 were under 30, 3 were women and 7 were of Roma origin.

On August 23 2021, we started the process for creating the performance, which lasted for two months and had 26 sessions in total.

We fixed the dates of all the rehearsals in advance, which was important because we had limited amounts of time and the participants had additional commitments. We couldn't leave the dates to chance, as this could either delay the performance or cause one of the artists to drop out from the project.

The performance was planned to take place in one of the main locations of the Revolution (Corvin-köz or Práter street), therefore we looked for a rehearsal site for the indoor preparatory training in this neighborhood. The training and creative process took place in the Tranzit Community Space (Tranzit Közösségi Tér, 63 Práter street).

### **Workshop and Training**

In the first phase of the training we had two main focuses. On the one hand, as we wanted to create an outdoor interactive performance, it was important that the actors would have no difficulty interacting with the audience and could easily persuade them to engage in the different activities of the performance. We wanted to place the spectators in a revolutionar's role, so that they would be actively involved in the Revolution's events. On the other hand, the aim was to create a play based on existing historical information and on the ideas, improvisations of the creators, in a cooperative way.

### **Interactive Theater Techniques**

Since our aim was to have the four main characters determine for the audience when and in what activities they should participate during the performance, it was important that the actors learn techniques - even without verbalization - that would help to motivate the audience to actively participate.

In the first exercise everyone sat in a circle, the writer-producer stood up,



and tried to persuade everyone to stand up without speaking, using only his hands for communication. Everyone stood up. He thanked them, then sat them down and asked „why“ did they stand up.

Here are the answers:

- the focus was on the one who wanted them to stand up (setter), the attention was on him, he guided/motivated, there was no question of following him;
- respect for the setter, leading by example and following the group spirit;
- acceptance of the rules of the game;
- the eye contact was an important tool;
- the use of the ‘stand up’ gesture was powerful yet respectful, it defined a relationship of trust that participants were eager to follow;
- a desire for task completion (ambition) on the part of the participants.

The aspects and tools of the above exercise could be used in practice by the artists in the next, „Match Gathering Exercise“, facilitated by the director of the performance. The aim of the exercise was to have the actors go out on the street, with a phone at their ear, as if they were talking to someone, and make passers-by light their cigarettes without speaking to them. They had five minutes per person to do this. All of the actors completed the task within the time frame. Some felt uncomfortable interacting with strangers while on the phone, some blinked to indicate that they „thanked“ the kindness. Some of them were searching through their pockets suggesting that they were looking for a lighter, the other person took pity on them, and lit their cigarette. Two of them claimed that the pretend phone calls made it difficult for them to do this exercise.

During the discussion of the exercise we talked about the importance of the „I want you to...“ attitude which means that „if the actor wants something, then it has to happen“. This was an important realization, because this attitude, together with similar techniques, will have to be applied during the performance.

One more exercise, which was facilitated by the assistant director, is worth mentioning. The actors walk on the street, holding a few large notebooks or folders in their hands, as if they were rushing to an office (imitating a slight hurry can be useful). They accidentally drop the notebooks/folders in front of a passerby. They try, without using any words, to get the passerby to pick up the dropped object for them. The time available for this exercise was two minutes per person. The attitude defined at the end of the previous exercise („I want you to...“) was a perfect representation of the success or failure of the exercise. The only actor who didn't succeed, was the one who went out with doubts in the first place. During the closing discussion it was important to reassure the actor who had failed and to indicate to him that this was only an exercise, but that the incident had created a situation worthy of introspection.

### **Casting, Character Building and Storytelling**

In conventional theater making the director decides which actor can play which role, which often constrains the actors, and can pigeonhole them in the long run. The characteristics, backgrounds and concepts of the characters are often determined only by the director, which further hinders the actor from becoming an autonomous creative partner and stops them from shaping the character he or she is portraying. The plays that are performed in conventional theater are usually written dramas, and only the director or dramaturg has the power to change the text, the actors can adjust only small parts of it. We wanted

to break free from these traditional, hierarchical ways of doing theater. Our actors were not only seen as executors, but as equal partners and collaborators. The aim was to develop holistic creative skills and attitudes of the actors, to make them feel ownership over their work. And last but not least, we believe that a collaborative creative process can produce a more exciting, diverse and authentic art product than if the whole group of artists would follow only one person's vision.

Because of this, the producer, director and writer did not come to the group with a ready-made play, with assigned roles, nor with accurately drawn characters. We presented them only the description of the four revolutionaries indicated in the previous section (with the exception of Bijou). The four main characters were selected from the dozens of Roma revolutionaries about whom information was available, according to some criterias. Our aim was to show various Roma people, thereby raising awareness of the diversity of the Roma community: women and men, from the capital and from the countryside, educated and uneducated, Roma and Romani, representatives of different professions (e.g. nurse, musician), whose motivations, worldviews and values may have differed greatly from each other. We felt that the different personal backgrounds and opinions could represent in a differentiated way the experience of the Revolution, with its excitement, chaos, joy and loss.

### **"Casting"**

During the rehearsals, we made the outline of the four main characters, the actors read them and chose which of them they wanted to work with. Any role, male or female, could be played by any actor, male or female, this way the choice was totally in the hands of the actors. The actors' choice of roles was respected by all those involved. For example Nóra Nemcsók wanted to work with the person of Erzsébet

Hrozova, whom she named „Zsike“. Ramóna Farkas created Mária, the character inspired by Ilona Szabó's story. Norbert Varga chose the story of József Radics, who later became the character called „Kid“. Dávid Varga, named the character of József Sörös Sóté „Vonó“ (Bow), because of his musical past.

### **Why was the renaming of the characters necessary?**

The play was inspired by four historical figures, but due to the lack of information about them, it was important to fictionalize their stories. The artists were inspired by their life, but the personalities, places, dates and facts were mixed during the rehearsals. We felt that it would be a falsification of history if we used their real names in the play and performance.

Moreover, our story takes place during the last days of October 1956 and the first days of November 1956. It was important to compress the time, because historically at the end of October the revolutionaries were still fighting against the Hungarian Communist forces, Ilona Szabó died during this period. The majority of them stepped down only after the Soviet troops invaded the city, which was on November 4. Many of the characters have presumably never met in real life. But in the performance the question of surrendering is raised up at the death of Mária, the character who was inspired by Ilona Szabó.

## BUILDING CHARACTER AND STORYTELLING

We began a long process of interpretation and examination of the fictional characters, delving into past events, as well as into the personal stories of the historical figures. The completion of the holes in the stories of the characters has also been an important task (for the reasons indicated above).

Besides the brief information about the historical Roma revolutionaries, the members of the creative team were given basic information about the '56 Revolution and the situation of the Roma, as well as a specific story that might be relevant to the development of the play. This way the members of the creative team had enough background knowledge of the period and of the historical figures that they had chosen and they were able to delve deeper into the fictionalizing of the characters for the performance.

As a first step, each actor answered the following questions about their characters and they also asked each other some clarifying questions:

- What is your class situation, what is your attitude towards Roma/Hungarian identity?
- What grievances do you carry, why do you want to overthrow the system, what's wrong with it?
- To what extent do you see through the reality of the political situation, or are you more driven by visceral anger?
- What do you have to lose by partaking in the revolution or by not putting down your gun? What do you gain by putting down your gun?

The answers to the basic questions above were used to relate to the events of the Revolution and to deepen the characters' backgrounds, motivations and characterisation. In addition to these questions, many oth-

ers were raised, and the actors asked and answered each other's questions to further detail the characters they were playing. For example, how Mária (who was inspired by the life of Ilona Szabó) met her partner, whose child was she pregnant with, and whose dog she left behind to join the revolution? The backstory of Ilona Szabó proved to be very incomplete from the point of view of character development, but we needed more information to form the character of Mária. We re-thought it as follows:

*Mária met her partner, Gábor Dilinkó, at the leather factory where they both were working. At first they just made eyes at each other, then they had sexual intercourse on several occasions. Mária got pregnant. Gábor started avoiding her after she told him the news. Mária's parents faced her with an ultimatum: either she marries Gábor or she leaves her parents' house, because they are not able to feed another hungry mouth. She persisted with her partner, who after the initial hesitation eventually let her into his home. However, Mária still felt that she was an unwanted guest.*

*Gábor went out drinking in the evenings and sought the company of other women. He slept and rested during the day, he didn't go to work, he traded in small things and didn't care that Mária was doing hard work in the factory.*

*On October 24, in the afternoon, Mária went home from work and found her partner in bed with another woman. She started screaming, to which Gábor smashed her head repeatedly against the wall. He had punched her before, but never this violently. Mária grabbed the dog and ran out of the apartment. Within an hour, she found herself in a gunfight with the revolutionaries against the secret police (ÁVH). They showed her how to load a gun, how to aim and shoot. She learned it within moments. She shot four dead in a gunfight.*

*She jumped out of the shelter to rescue a shot revolutionary, she used her strength to drag him behind the barricade. The others looked at her with a mixture of fear and awe.*

Fictional details such as the above did not necessarily have to appear in the performance, but they did provide inspiration for the actors playing Mária and her Gábor. Especially in the scene where the man finds Mária among the revolutionaries and wants to get her home, but she refuses to do so. Domestic violence and cheating did not appear explicitly in the final text - as the writer and dramaturg ultimately decided that this would create too negative of a perception and reinforce prejudiced, stereotypical attitudes. But it was useful for the actors' to understand the intentions and emotions behind their characters and helped them to build their roles.

After learning about the historical facts, the historical figures and finalizing the fictionalization of the characters we were able to start with the improvisational scenes. Some of the scenes are based on the highlighted facts in the beginning of the text (e.g. Sörös Kóté brought food supplies from Monor to Budapest, József Radics is commanded to shoot a vigilante woman, after which he became disillusioned with the Revolution; Ilona Szabó fought as a commander and was killed in action, Erzsébet Hrozova took part in the Revolution as a nurse), others are based on the fictionalized backstories that were created in the previously mentioned step (e.g.: Mária's husband wants to take her home from the rebels).

Some scenes primary role was to empower the audience, to give them a visceral experience of the Revolution and to confront them with its dilemmas (e.g.: the formation and coordination of food and armed troops; what do they expect from the Revolution; the community's decision after Mária's death, should we put down the guns or not). During the improvisations only two things were settled beforehand: the start and end point of the scene and what it will be about (summarized in 1-2 sentences). We held several rehearsals for every scene where the

actors would improvise. All of these rehearsals were recorded. The play was written by the writer based on the recordings of the improvisations, and was complemented by the dramaturg and director. The text was finalized during the rehearsals of the performance as a whole.



## THEATRICAL TRAINING AND REHEARSALS

Each rehearsal started with an opening round where everyone shared their feelings and thoughts. At the end of the rehearsal, during the closing round, the participants answered the questions “what are you taking home” and “what feelings and thoughts are you leaving with”. The answers to these questions have greatly contributed to the success of the theatrical work. On one hand, it strengthened the trust between the team members, allowing them to discuss all their personal issues related to the creative work. On the other hand, it gave the artists the feeling that they were in a safe space and that they are not just there to execute the performance, but are also actively shaping it. During the follow-up discussion with the creators, several of them pointed out that, unlike in other rehearsal processes, the opening and closing rounds helped a lot in achieving cooperativity.

Each rehearsal included 20-30 minute long physical strength exercises, artistic speech and breathing exercises. The physical exercises included the development of possible movement sequences for the performance. Speech and breathing exercises were needed primarily because outdoor acting requires a more powerful voice, a conscious breathing and voice production. Expressive speech and correct breathing were essential for the intelligibility of the performance.

During the final rehearsals, the director worked with the actors to develop the content and the style of the performance. The established structure of the performance was refined and fine-tuned. During the rehearsals the actors modeled the situations of the play scene by scene. If the weather allowed it, the rehearsals were held outdoors. The refinement and detailing of the scenes created by the actors was developed further by the director, using frequent pauses and discussions. Each scene or set of scenes presented during the rehearsals was thoroughly

discussed with all the participants. The director noted the things that need to be improved and gave suggestions to the actors on how they can make the scenes better.

The first section of the rehearsals took place indoors, while the second half was held in public spaces.

During the rehearsals, the director constantly incorporated props into the actors' performances, as well as costumes.

The sound designer joined the team before the final rehearsal week. The director's concept was to start the performance by inviting the audience on a journey back in time. On a sensorial level this was achieved by playing mixed fragments of music and news from different time periods, which gave a sense that we are slowly transitioning from the present to the past. At the end of the performance the same mixtape was played, only with a different direction, from 1956 to the present. This is an important conceptual approach, because the creators did not want the performance to feel like it wants to reproduce the 1950s. The performance made it clear that people from the present are "traveling back in time" to reenact scenes from the Revolution.

The team was later joined by two main extras, a set designer and a prop maker. Two weeks before the show, we knew exactly what props and costumes we would need and where we could get them. The poster of the performance was created before the rehearsal week, which helped to promote the performance more effectively.

## OPERATIVE CHALLENGES

Two months before the performance, our theater staff contacted the authorities in order to ensure that the performance could take place with the necessary permits in our possession on the streets of the 8th district, where the historical events took place. Besides the bureaucratic reasons, this was necessary because we had requested the closure of several streets due to the planned use of pyrotechnics (smoke grenades, flash-bang grenades), for the safety of the actors and spectators. Although the authorities acknowledged the importance of the performance, they didn't grant the closure of the mentioned streets due to traffic reasons.

Since creating a safe venue for an outdoor theater event is the same basic criteria as creating a safe venue for an indoor theater event, we decided to look for another venue that could suit our needs. That's how we found the site of the Bakelite MultiArt Center, a suburban industrial site with numerous industrial workshops. Nearby was the obsolete weapon factory that once supplied the rebels with rifles, grenades and pistols. It was an ideal location, as the streets were enclosed and there was little to no traffic on working days and zero on the weekends. The surrendering buildings were in a state of disrepair. In addition, the Bakelit MultiArt Center provided a waiting room for the audience, hot tea, toilets, a venue for post-show meetings, and storage for the actors' costumes and props.

Since there was no pedestrian or vehicular traffic at the space of the performance, we lost the specificity of an outdoor theater, that anyone can join the performance at any time. The audience could only attend the show by registering. But this also meant that the video recording of the performance could be done without any disturbance, both visually and audibly.

We had to let go of some of the planned pyrotechnics, but we were able to use inexpensive, spectacular devices such as smoke grenades and toy guns for the spectator-revolutionaries.

## **FINAL REHEARSAL WEEK, PREMIERE AND VIDEO RECORDING**

The costumes and props for the performance arrived during the final rehearsal week. A car was available for the entire rehearsal week, which was ultimately used in the performance.

The costumes were borrowed from the Hungarian Television's warehouse and were historically accurate. We were fortunate enough that we didn't have to spend countless hours, energy and even more money to reproduce the costumes by involving a designer.

The timetable for the final rehearsal week had slightly changed. Movement, speech and breathing exercises have been canceled. By this time, the director had asked the actors to put into practice the techniques that they had learned. The actors were responsible for their wardrobe, their make-up and checking the props (smoke grenades, blood cartridges, weapons, etc.). Meanwhile, the background workers took care of the power supply, the car, setting up the visual crew for the recording, and the sound technician prepared the portable sound system (a portable speaker and a notebook).

The final rehearsal began after the practical preparations ended. The rehearsal was followed by a quick discussion, during which the director suggested points for improvement. In the second part of the rehearsal, the performance was played again, followed by the director's evaluation. The director's supervisor for the final week was the writer-producer, who visited the rehearsal sessions and gave written feedback to the director on points where it would be useful to clarify the content and language. The written feedback was only shared with the director, who passed on as much information to the actors as he considered useful. From the third day of the final rehearsal week,

the performance was played in front of an invited audience, this was the only way we could rehearse and evaluate the actors' work in the scenes that included interaction.

The staff member in charge of the video documentation of the performance, who participated in the work as creative designer, cinematographer and editor, attended four rehearsals during the final week. On the first occasion, he visited the venue where the director had planned to stage the performance, and suggested a new venue depending on the expected lighting conditions at the time of the premiere. The producer and the actors were photographed in costume, so that the social media manager would have visual material to promote the performance. During the final rehearsal week, the cinematographer made three test shots, which were edited and sent to the director and the producer to show them what the visual world of the video would look like. The video crew was joined by a second cameraman, this made it possible to edit the test shots from several camera positions. On the day of the premiere, the cinematographer and cameraman were joined by a sound engineer who (based on the rehearsal footage) already knew how the characters or scenes had to shoot for the creative vision to be realized. Three focus scenes were filmed at the premiere, which will be screened during educational workshops.

The particularly active participation of the video crew was also justified by the fact that not only the actors had to be captured on video and audio, but also the audience, their participation was crucial, which required a thorough preparation and special care during the filming. It was very important to create harmony between the cameraman, the sound engineer and the audience. There were situations when the cameras were in the "limelight", but in many cases the cameras had to take a "step back" to not compromise the interactivity between actors and audience members.

On the day of the premiere the performance was photographed by a professional photographer. It was clearly communicated to the audience that the performance would be recorded and that they would be included in the final video and visual documentation. This was accepted



Ramóna Farkas as Mária

by all of the members of the audience. They were asked to come in dark-coloured clothing without patterns or lettering, if possible, to not to distract the attention of the viewers of the recording.



Scene: the execution of the woman who threatened the revolutionaries



Ramóna Farkas as Mária and the spectator-participants

### **A total of six videos were produced:**

- [We Are '56 - Focus Scene\\_Nurse](#)
- [We Are'56 - Focus Scene\\_Bow \(Vonó\)](#)
- [We Are '56 - Focus Scene\\_Kid \(Kölyök\)](#)
- [We Are '56 - Focus Scene\\_Mária](#)
- [We Are '56 - Full Performance](#)
- [We Are '56 - Trailer](#)

A meet and talk between the creators and the audience took place after the performances. Contrary to our plans fewer students attended the premiere show, several student groups canceled at the last minute. We had some minor concerns that an adult audience won't be as engaged in the play as a younger one, but this proved to not be the case. The adult audience was also fully immersed in the role of revolutionaries, they had no problem running or taking part in other physical challenges. They found the performance and the experience staggering. The historical Roma revolutionaries, who inspired the per-





Scene: the revolutionaries attacking the Russian tank,  
on the left Ramóna Farkas as Mária,  
on the right, Dávid Varga in the role of Vonó

formance, were unknown to most of them, and many had no previous knowledge of Roma participation in the Revolution. So in addition to providing a strong experience, the production also had an educational function. One of the student participants said that 'If they taught like this in school, everything would be easier to learn'.

## THE CREATORS OF THE PERFORMANCE

WRITER-PRODUCER

**Rodrigó Balogh**

DRAMATURG

**Márton Illés**

DIRECTOR

**Tamás András Szegedi**

DIRECTOR'S ASSISTANT

**Kálmán Lukács**

ACTORS

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Nóra Nemcsók  
Norbert Varga  
Dávid Varga

EXTRAS, PROPMASTER, SET DESIGN

Szilárd Szegedi  
Anna Eszter Zábó

POSTER, SOUND

Vilmos Horváth

CINEMATOGRAPHER,  
AND POST PRODUCTION

Péter Illés

SOUND ENGINEER

Zoltán Darányi

PHOTOGRAPHER

Anna Zsófia Vitrai

HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

Vivien Kovács-Balogh



Poster of the event: We are '56

## PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Our original objective was to hold an outdoor, walking workshop in the second year of the performance (we plan to play it every year only between October 20-23). In the meantime, there was a demand from staff, schools and other youth groups to play the performance again and to make a workshop about it. Since the performance takes place outdoors and provides a physical experience for the participants, taking in consideration that the weather tends to be cooler at the end of October, we decided to organize the interactive workshop indoors.

During the Summer of 2022, we were invited to screen the video of the performance and hold a workshop session for international university students at the Summer University of Central Europe. Two members of the creative staff: Tamás Szegedi András Szegedi (director), and Márton Illés (dramaturg), who are both experienced workshop trainers held a 90 minutes long workshop. In the first part of the workshop, all participants shared their thoughts about who they consider to be a revolutionary. After this we watched the recording of the performance. We thought that the video of the participatory theater performance might not have the same impact as the live version, because viewing the recording is a passive activity. But the video had such a strong power that some people even left the room. Instead of the planned thematic focus the emphasis had to be put on talking about the emotions of the experience. We didn't take in consideration the fact that since the premiere of the play (October 2021), the Russian-Ukrainian war broke out (February 2022), and the confrontation with "Russian tanks" (the tank is represented by a car in the performance) has brought up war traumas in many of the participants. In our opinion, after talking about their feelings, the majority of the group was able to focus on the questions raised by the presentation, for example:

- To what extent can you justify killing people in the context of a revolution, in the interests of a national cause?
- For what would people risk their life for?
- Why could the Roma be so active in a national revolution?
- The lesson learned from the workshop was that the first step in the processing workshop should be to create an opportunity to share emotions after the performance, and to anticipate that the emotions, thoughts and messages related to the ongoing war will be present.
- In the development of the methodology, we invited 10 workshop trainers who have been active in our theater for a longer period of time. Four of them attended the meeting and the training, where we cooperatively developed the methodology. The meeting was moderated by the dramaturg and director of the production.
- We watched the video of the performance together - which most of them had already seen live -, after that we talked about their feelings, experience and the ideas that had come up. The following points were raised:
  - Why are the Roma fighting for the Hungarian Revolution? Are the Roma Hungarians? (In the play, one of the slogans of the Revolution is: "Who is Hungarian, comes with us!");
  - Which of the characters are Roma (everyone is Roma, some characters are mentioned during the performance, but there are also some who no one thinks are Roma - e.g. the character of the nurse);
  - Who would have participated in the Revolution back then? Who and for what would they risk their life and freedom today?;

- It would be good to give the participants more information about the Revolution, the role of the Roma and the people who inspired the characters in the play;
- There are also dark sides to the Revolution (e.g. manslaughter);
- What might have motivated some of the revolutionaries?

After the discussion, we agreed on the objectives of the workshop:

- to provide information about the Revolution, about the role of the Roma in it, and about the people who inspired the performance;
- participants should be able to share their feelings, thoughts and questions raised by the performance;
- to draw attention to the moral dilemmas of revolutions and armed conflicts;
- to raise awareness of the Roma-Hungarian dual identity, to encourage integration, to draw attention to similarities and common issues;
- to stimulate reflection on the possible goals of their own civic activity;
- to provide an experience of creative community work.

In the following step we did some brainstorming on the workshops' style and tools, we defined the timeframe (max. 90 minutes), and the outlines of the interconnected modules were developed.

On the basis of the outline, the participants divided the modules among themselves. These were developed individually and finalized together.

## **The Structure of the Workshop**

After the performance, there is a short break, the participants are invited to have some tea and are seated in a circle. The ideal number of participants for the workshop is 15-20 individuals, if the group is larger they need to be split into two smaller groups.

### **Introduction, Frames (00-05 min)**

The first step of the workshop is to introduce the trainers and briefly explain the framework around which we can spend the next hour and a half together in an effective and fun way. It's important to make it clear that we're curious about them, that there's no right or wrong answer, to respect each other's opinions, to listen to each other, and that they can take home as much as they put into the workshop.

We have assured participants that there is a unanimous non-disclosure agreement, so even if we talk about what happened to a workshop participant, we do not mention them by name. We asked for their permission to take photos and not to make phone calls during this time.

### **Introduction of the Participants and Reflection (05-15 min)**

All participants were asked to introduce themselves and say a few words about their experience of the performance, what feelings and thoughts they have. The trainers summarize what was said (if there were repeated feelings or thoughts) and reflect on them briefly.

### **The Role of Roma in the 1956 Revolution (15-30 min)**

The trainers ask some questions to find out what the participants know about the '56 Revolution and whether they know anything about the role of the Roma in it. The trainers will tell additional information to what they know and correct it if necessary. They are unlikely to have

much information on Roma participation, so we can provide more information. At this point it is worth asking: do you think that the Roma participated in the Revolution to a greater or lesser extent than their proportion in the population? After their guess, the trainers tell them that there is little information available, but it can be said that they participated to a greater extent. So a Roma at that time was more likely to have participated in the Revolution than a non-Roma. The trainers ask what could be the reason for this, they collect the answers and reflect on them.

### **Roma Characters in the Performance (30-45 minutes)**

#### **- in small groups**

The trainers ask who they think was Roma in the performance and who was not? What makes them think that?

After listening to the guesses, the trainers tell them that everyone was Roma. They might mention that if someone did not sound or “seem” to be Roma, or had an occupation that was not considered a typical Roma occupation, especially at that age (e.g.: graduate nurse) we tend to think that they are not Roma.

The show is inspired by real stories and real people, but the characters portrayed are not the same as the real people, about whom we have little information. That is why the creators filled the gaps with their imagination, and that’s why they didn’t use the original names.

After this the group will be divided into four small groups and each will be given a description of one of the characters. The participants will discuss what they think about the said character along with the following questions.

- Who did you talk about?

- What is their background (origin, profession, place of residence, age, etc.)?
- What did they do in the Revolution?
- Why did they join the Revolution, what was their motivation?
- What happened to them after the Revolution?
- Do you consider that person a hero? Why?

The trainers monitor the groups to see if they are stuck on the topic or if they have any questions. The trainers can also join in the conversation if necessary. If the group seems to be progressing without problems, they are reminded just a few minutes before the end of the allotted time to wrap up shortly, do they have all the answers and who will summarize to the others what they talked about?

### **Presentation of the Group Work (45-60 minutes)**

Following small group work, the participants share to the others the objective information about the characters and add their own opinions. After the sharing, the participants have the opportunity to ask questions, add comments, and the trainers can also make additions or corrections if necessary.

With further facilitating questions, the following ideas can be explored:

- the background of the Roma revolutionaries was very diverse (ethnic, geographic, gender, social, educational, etc.) and many of them very non-stereotypical (e.g. middle class, graduate nurse with ancestors from different countries)
- their motivations may have been different (some may have been motivated by the idea or aim of the Revolution, others by their own individual goals or frustrations)
- there are moral questions (e.g. endangering an unborn child)



### **Why Would You Fight? (60-65 minutes)**

Then the trainers conclude that these people have risked their lives, their freedom, their health. They ask the question: Why would you risk all that? Is there a value, a cause that you would fight for?

This opens the discussion to a wider perspective.

### **Creative Group Work (65-80 minutes)**

In small groups, the participants make some kind of banner or poster on which they write words or draw characters that are important to them and values that they would fight for. For this part it is needed writing and drawing utensils and flip chart papers. If the group is visibly stuck, not everyone is participating in the shared discussion or creation, or if the writing/drawing on flip chart paper has not started after 5 minutes the trainers should intervene and facilitate the group.

### **Presentation of the Group Work and Conclusion (80-90 minutes)**

The Small groups present their creations and briefly explain what they have put on paper and why. The trainers give a brief, affirmative response to their work and thank them for their activity.

Finally, the trainers ask the participants to highlight a thought, a feeling, an experience that they will take home from today's workshop.

At the very end participants will be asked to fill in an anonymous feedback sheet on the programme, including the performance and the workshop.

### **Improving the Performance**

The development of the performance was influenced by several factors.

## **Dramaturgical Add-Ins**

At an international meeting, after watching a video of the performance, our partners gave us feedback that it would be better to give more focus on the story of the four main characters within the performance, because it seems that the main focus is on the participants' experience of the Revolution.

So we added another scene to the performance. The participants are invited to travel through time by a Storyteller (Csányi Dávid) - before they were invited by the actress who plays the Nurse (Nóra Nemcsók). At the end of the performance, when the participants and the characters decide not to surrender and make the final assault, the characters fail one by one. Those characters who died during the Revolution, or were executed afterwards, lied on the ground, while those who were imprisoned after the Revolution, bent on their knees. The Storyteller returns, draws the outline of each character with a chalk (as the police does with the victims' bodies) and tells the stories of the real historical figures, who inspired the characters of the performance. However, the fact that they were all Roma is still not mentioned - we wanted to leave this question open and only make it known to the participants during the processing workshop.

## **Change of Location**

The venue of the 2021's show, the Bakelite MultiArt Center, closed down, so we needed to find a new location. We finally chose the Kőbánya Brewery, as it had some outdoor venues that were reminiscent of the '50s, and little traffic disturbance. There was also an indoor venue where we could set up changing rooms, as well as the workshop, facilities for tea and restrooms.

A week of rehearsals took place at the new location, during which the movements were adapted and minor changes were made to the details of the scenes and props.

### **Change of Cast**

In addition to the previously mentioned Storyteller character (Dávid Csányi) , there was another change among the actors. A week before the performance we found out that one of the cast members was unable to participate due to health reasons, which posed a significant challenge for the team. The director (Tamás András Szegedi) stepped in, who knew both the movement and the text, and was there during the rehearsals.

The drop-out of an actor can challenge any production. However, the chances of this happening are much greater when you are working with young people, not exclusively professionals. So, to avoid similar risks, we can recommend doubling the cast so that the exit of one actor does not jeopardize the production.

### **Involving Student Groups**

Building on the failures of the previous year (several groups of students canceled at the last minute), we started to involve groups more carefully and earlier. In the case of informal groups, they were only invited if we had previous experience with them, or if their leaders were very committed to participate in the performance. Such groups arrived on Sunday 23 October 2022.

Student groups could participate in the performance during school hours - in many cases, the number of students attending afternoon optional programmes is much lower. Students from the Deák Diák Primary School, the MÁV Telepi School and the Burattino School in Csepel arrived in successive rotations on Friday 21 October 2022.

It was also important to involve groups of students from disadvantaged or Roma backgrounds, who are both empowered by the stories of Roma heroes and more likely to be left with a more lasting impression by experiential learning than traditional classroom education. Not to mention, that these young people are less likely to have any other cultural experience than their middle-class peers.

In addition to the student groups, the late afternoon performances could be attended by other interested parties with pre-registration. The late afternoon performances were at sunset and this added a certain speciality to the Revolution's atmosphere.

On 21 and 23 October 2022, a total of seven performances and workshops were organized, with around 150 participants.

Several members of the press attended, the director of the performance was interviewed, and the performance was filmed by the most important Hungarian Roma television station, Dikh Tv.

## REFLECTIONS AND FURTHER OPPORTUNITIES

After the performances, the student groups took part in the workshop described earlier, while the adult groups were given the opportunity for a structured discussion - the main information and aspects were the same both in the instance of the work and the discussion.

We completed feedback forms with the students and conducted short interviews with some of them.

Below are some quotes from the young participants who were interviewed:

*"It was very immersive... We didn't expect such a strong emotional involvement, the actors were great!"*

*"I liked the way the performance also pointed out the internal conflicts between the revolutionaries, I feel that this part is rarely highlighted regarding '56."*

*"It was much better than our history class..."*

*"It wasn't good that it was cold, but at least we got guns - and I guess the revolutionaries weren't hot either, were they?"*

*"If this were happening now, I would be very scared. But acting here with the actors was very exciting!"*

*"It was like two minutes before [the performance] we were talking about traffic, and now I almost know how my grandmother must have felt at that time!"*

Based on the anonymous feedback filled in by the students, on a scale of 1 to 6, they rated the programme interesting on an average score of 5.57, while the average score on how much new information and perspective they got on Roma communities was 4.97. So, based on the

feedback, the programme was both highly interesting and informative for the participants.

Among the qualitative feedback, the best thing many participants mentioned was the interactive and immersive experience of the Revolution. In addition, many highlighted the conversations and team work as positive aspects. Some feedback quoted below:

*“We need more shows like this, so we can better imagine the Revolution and how people lived in the past.”*

*“It’s great to remember the past and the heroes in this way. I will remember it much better this way.”*

Teachers and chaperones also gave very positive feedback. The headmaster of one of the primary schools, who was not present but only heard the news, also described the programme as super and expressed his immense gratitude that students from his school were able to participate.

Although it would be very costly to continue playing the performance itself, it is possible to hold further workshops based on the video and the pedagogical methodology. In November, we received several requests for further workshops. A workshop was held at the Wáli István Reformed Roma College for 24 students on 19 November 2022 and one on 2-3 December 2022 for 15 students of the Ternipe Association in Rimaszombat (Slovakia).

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

We hope that our working methods, perspectives, challenges and achievements will inspire other cultural and educational initiatives to look at the role of active Roma people and communities in the past and present of different European cities. We hope that more and more initiatives will start to use public spaces, that through experiences and honest conversations they can encourage young Roma and non-Roma people to learn about our history, to share ideas, and to participate in community activities. To shape our common world in a self-reflective and responsible way.



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