

Inclusive Community Theater

An Erasmus+ Project

case study

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Independent Theater Hungary

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**independent
theater**

INTRODUCTION

Two Roma theaters — the Independent Theater Hungary in Budapest, legally and financially represented by the Women for the Future Association (hereinafter: ITH), and Rampa Prenestina in Rome (hereinafter: RP) — implemented an artistic program, in collaboration with Asociatia Teatrula Shoshin in Cluj-Napoca, in which the theater stepped out of traditional spaces and conventional artistic processes, creating performances through a community-based approach. The activities lasted a total of 15 months, from 1 September 2024 to 1 December 2025. What does this mean? There was no preconception, no pre-written play or text. Everything that we brought to the stage and everything we worked from arose from the creativity, knowledge, experience, and personal interests of the creators. During the project, we collected stories that show the crucial role Roma communities and traditions play in everyday life. These stories gave rise to several stage scenes, which were complemented by audience meetings and conversations with the creative team. We involved contemporary Roma artists, workshop leaders, and young creators in the work; they contributed not only as facilitators but also as creative partners in the artistic and educational processes.

This case study presents the circumstances, experiences, and lessons learned from the creation of the community theater performance in Hungary. We hope that what is described here will inspire other European cultural and educational projects as well.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The background and objectives of the community theater performance *“Prikézsia, or Pancu and Traditions from Birth to Rebirth”*:

What preceded the performance? In the autumn of 2024, we created and performed a theater production and interactive outdoor performance multiple times, based on the stories of Roma participants in the 1956 revolution and war of independence. Its title was *“We Are ’56.”* In addition, a variety of activities followed the performance, which we played on streets and squares. These included a ninety-minute processing session led by educational professionals, closely connected to the play, as well as various stands where we invited the audience and passers-by to join craft activities and creative writing. On 22 October 2024, this interactive street theater performance was presented three times in Corvin köz, and on 23 October twice in Ferenc tér, in several sessions. It revived the revolution—and the four Roma heroes who took part in it—by placing the audience in the role of revolutionaries.



Each performance was followed by a processing session, most often for pre-arranged school groups and disadvantaged young people, though middle-class school groups also took part in the programme. The people on the street watched the events with surprise from a distance at first, and then their curiosity brought them physically closer. What started as community rap writing turned into amazing music, which was performed that evening with glowing torches and a shared choreography. The moment had a very powerful impact, especially since both friends and strangers participated spontaneously.

With this new experimental form of theater, we had many goals, but I will highlight only the one most closely related to the later performance that is the subject of this case study. This goal was to involve Roma and non-Roma young people in the programme. First, as audience members, so that they could see the performance and at the same time become part of it, and second, to support these young creators in gaining the confidence to participate in collaborative, community-based artistic processes. Later, they could join our theater's youth drama group as well as the community theater performance that forms the focus of this case study.



The first step of the project was the kick-off meeting in Rome, hosted by Rampa Prenestina. In 2024 September, over three days, the theatre space became a creative workshop, filled with notes, shared exercises, and professional discussions about what inclusive theatre means to us. The partner organizations exchanged their approaches: Shoshin's image theatre and Forum Theatre methods, Independent Theater's community-based creation techniques, and Rampa Prenestina's experiences working with young people. These exchanges shaped a shared methodology, which serves as a guide rather than a fixed set of rules for future collaborative work. The methodology, together with this case study, is available in a bilingual, open-access format on the partners' websites.

INVOLVING THE CREATORS, PREPARATORY WORK

In February 2025, we launched an open call for Roma and non-Roma young people who had previously worked with us, as well as for newcomers, as refreshing the group was also one of our goals. We had already announced this opportunity, though only verbally, during the “We Are ’56” outdoor interactive action-theater programme. Even at that stage, we aimed to involve young people with whom we had not yet worked. Several people expressed interest on the spot, but unfortunately, due to their schedules, they were unable to join us later.

We published the February call not only on online platforms and social media but also shared it directly with schools and leaders of youth groups. Beyond the basic personal information (such as date of birth, place of residence, etc.), we asked why they wished to participate in the group, what knowledge, skills, or abilities they possessed that they considered valuable in a theater ensemble, what they expected from the training, and about their availability. Thanks to previous collaborations, we knew many talented young people, and from the twelve applicants we ultimately selected eight: for three young creators, this was their first collaboration with our theater, while five had already worked with us in the youth drama group, and therefore had experience with our creative processes. The newcomers also had some relevant experience, though these were rather diverse.

To build the group effectively and with clear intentions, we held personal or online meetings with each applicant. By this I mean that the group leaders—Lucia Lakatos, the professional director of ITH, and Tamás Rábavölgyi, drama teacher and clown doctor—met the young people and were able to get to know them, and their parents as well if the applicant was underage. From this very first step, we made sure, as group leaders,

that parents were involved from the beginning and knew what was happening and what to expect.

We began working with the young people on a weekly basis from March, but the final group of six was formed at the end of the summer. Three young people were about to start secondary school, and for this reason, they could no longer commit to attending rehearsals or participating in performances. Two of them had joined us as complete newcomers; although they did not know each other, both had seen our youth theater performance and were so impressed that they felt inspired to try acting, even though they had no previous theatrical experience.

Meanwhile, two other young people joined the group during the summer, both of whom had worked with us before. One had moved back to Budapest with her family from abroad and wished to continue her theater work with us; we welcomed her back with joy. The other young person also returned—she had previously been a member of the youth drama group but had not applied to the call due to personal circumstances that at the time made it impossible for her to commit to rehearsals. During the summer, however, she was able to reorganise her life in a way that allowed her to participate in the process, and we were equally glad to welcome her back.

The composition of the group was diverse. The final ensemble included a 14-year-old boy who joined as a newcomer and the returning 20-year-old young man—both of Roma background—as well as a returning 12-year-old girl, and a 13-year-old, a 17-year-old, and an 18-year-old girl. They had all appeared in previous youth performances at our theater, representing both Roma and non-Roma young people. Some live in Budapest, others in the metropolitan area, and some travel from rural towns.

The diverse composition of the group reflects well the inclusive spirit of the project.

THE PROCESS OF CREATING THE PERFORMANCE

We began the process of creating the performance on 14 March 2025, and presented it on 11 October at our own venue, Füszi, to an audience of 35 people. On 17 October, we performed it again at the same location for 27 people, and later in Cluj-Napoca, within the framework of the “Out of the Frame” dissemination event organised by Asociația Teatrului Shoshin, where 40 people saw the performance.

Throughout the seven months leading up to the summer, we aimed to meet every Saturday or Sunday for at least a four-hour session or rehearsal. The planned days and time frames were already stated in the call for applications, so the young participants knew well in advance what to expect. Still, weekly meetings were difficult to maintain due to the young people’s other commitments. For this reason, between 21–25 July we organised a camp in Gyöngyösoroszi, where we were able to work on the performance intensively. Absences were often not announced in advance, occurring ad hoc, and as a result the composition of the group varied from one session to another. The months-long work can be divided into two phases.

The first phase (from March to May) focused primarily on getting to know theater itself—its circumstances and processes—as well as getting to know each other and ourselves. It can also be considered a kind of trial period to see who was able to commit to such a level of dedication and



regularity, and whom we could rely on—both individually and as a team—in the long term. In this phase, we focused on developing skills such as concentration, coordination, sense of rhythm, musicality, attention, teamwork, and individual expression.

The core principle of community theater is that themes, stories, scenes, and even the performance itself are created by the participants. We do not even provide a guiding direction – unlike other similar initiatives where leaders define the topic to be addressed. At the same time, it is important to consider that overly open situations may hinder creativity. Therefore, we use various methods to support participants in formulating and sharing their own ideas and stories. Building on the methodology of the Roma Heroes workshops, we began the process by discussing with the participants what, in their opinion, makes someone a hero. Heroes make active decisions when facing difficulties, take action, and achieve impact – this is true for every hero. Next, participants shared their heroes' stories in pairs or small groups, and also reflected on times when they themselves had been heroes for others. Trainers also shared personal stories, encouraging participants to open up. It is important that these personal stories are honest and shared at a depth that can also be expected from participants. For example, if we share a very superficial story, participants will respond with similarly shallow experiences. At the same time, care must be taken that the story is not too far removed from the children's world or that it does not evoke traumatic experiences we cannot process. After this, participants shared each other's stories with the whole group, always in the first person – this marks the beginning of character work. Sharing, hearing stories back, and receiving feedback can have a very strong impact on participants. Together, we select stories that prove deep and exciting, and we identify emerging themes. If too many stories come up, voting can help decide which ones interest the most participants. Once the stories are chosen, small groups can begin creating related scenes. The story does not need to be followed literally; the group decides which story they want to work with. In some cases, participants were asked to merge

several stories into one scene. It is important that participants have the opportunity to express themselves verbally and actively engage in storytelling. The participants' stories were highly diverse, exploring various problems and situations. Trainers facilitated this linking process, for example by writing a coherent narrative from situations and scenes brought by participants.

Beyond these elements, we began our shared work by learning clowning techniques and basics, and once we started searching together for the theme of the performance, faith and traditions emerged as the central focus. This idea also came from the young participants, and in order to explore it and begin creating a story around this theme, we unpacked our thoughts in a rap-writing workshop. We discussed what faith meant to them, why it was important—or not important—how they related to it personally, and how it appeared in their daily lives. The same questions were addressed regarding traditions. We gathered these reflections, wrote them into a rap, and performed it during the sessions.



In the second phase, we created the actual performance within the framework of community theater. During an intensive five-day summer camp held in the countryside, we specifically collected information about traditions, particularly Roma–Hungarian traditions. This happened through the participants’ own knowledge, but they also called their relatives to ask what traditions they knew or practiced. In addition, they researched online. We shared the results of this research and our collective knowledge, and in groups, the young people selected certain traditions from the list and began working on them in the form of scenes. In the following days, we refined and deepened these scenes, rehearsed them, and assembled them into an order from which a coherent story emerged.

After the camp, we returned to weekly rehearsals, and eventually began staging rehearsals again at Füszi with the final group of six young performers. Everyone plays multiple characters—usually no more than two—and developing and defining these characters was largely the young people’s own task.

The title of the performance is: “Prikézsia, or Pancu and Traditions from Birth to Rebirth”. Prikézsia (also spelled prikezsia or prikezhija) is a Romani word meaning misfortune, accident, curse. In creating this performance, we explored our relationship to tradition. Our focus turned to the generational divide — especially the flood of expectations imposed on us, which sometimes feel unnecessary. And, of course, we couldn’t avoid the topic of Pancu. At times, our debates about how he ended up there — and whether he even belongs there — became almost fierce. Would it be worth lifting him up? Up, high above. Would anyone still be shocked? Or should we rather step into him? We thought a lot about this throughout our interdisciplinary creative process. Then Pancu began to tell stories.

According to our plans, we would like to bring the performance to various venues, as continued performance is itself another, different kind of learning process. For this, we count on the children’s schools as potential host institutions, and we also hope to present the piece at one or two festivals. In addition, we will perform the piece once more at our own

venue in December 2025. In 2026, the production will remain part of Fűszi's programme, with one performance planned each month until June.



CHALLENGES

Throughout the process, we encountered a number of challenges that shaped the community theater work and the development of the group. From the very beginning, it became clear that the young participants arrived with highly diverse levels of experience: some had already performed in theater productions, others had only participated in their school choir, while some had less artistic background. This diversity was both an enriching opportunity and a significant pedagogical task, as we had to create a shared methodology that was understandable, accessible, and inspiring for everyone.

Another difficulty arose from the constant changes within the group. Three young people left due to their school commitments, while two former members rejoined during the summer, meaning the group's composition was always shifting. This movement made it challenging to build trust and a stable sense of cohesion: while returning members already knew one another, newcomers needed time to integrate, and the leaders had to ensure that all participants felt safe and equally valued.

Time management also posed considerable challenges. Between March and June, we met weekly, yet the young people's differing school, family, and extracurricular obligations often made full attendance impossible. Despite scheduling sessions on weekends, there were many occasions when only a few participants could come, and absences were not always communicated in advance. This not only slowed the work but also affected motivation, as low attendance could easily become a "contagious" pattern.

Parental concerns introduced additional logistical tasks as well. Several parents were worried about their children having to travel home after dark, so we had to arrange safe travel — whether with an older

companion, with the support of the group leaders, or by adjusting rehearsal times.

Group dynamics were further complicated by the presence of dominant personalities among the young participants, which occasionally disrupted the balance. It required careful pedagogical attention to ensure that everyone had a voice, everyone had space, and no one felt overshadowed.

The weekly rehearsal structure worked for a while, but as summer approached, it became increasingly unsustainable. This was one of the reasons we organised an intensive five-day camp, during which everyone could fully engage, and the quality of the collaborative work improved rapidly. Thanks to this focused period, we were able to assemble the final structure of the performance.

The continuation of the project — performing the piece at various venues — also brings new challenges. These include aligning schedules, maintaining communication with parents, and ensuring that motivation remains high while the young participants are dealing with a new school year and new responsibilities. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm and dedication of the group give us confidence as we look ahead.

DISSEMINATION, RESULTS

Throughout the project, we placed special emphasis on ensuring that the completed performance would reach as many different communities as possible, and that the values created by the young participants would become widely known. The premiere took place on 11 October 2025 in our Füszi theater space, we performed it again at the same venue the following week, and at the end of October we presented the piece in Cluj-Napoca at the “Out of the Frame” dissemination event organized by Asociatia Teatrara Shoshin. The performance outside Hungary was a particularly important milestone, as it was the first time the participating young people could experience what it is like to play in front of an audience in another country, and how strongly they are connected by shared cultural traditions.



The feedback was extremely positive at all locations. Several people highlighted that the performance approached the themes of faith and

tradition in an honest and surprisingly humorous way, while speaking sensitively and respectfully about Roma and non-Roma cultural heritage. During the post-show audience discussion, viewers emphasized how refreshing it was to see the young performers present their own experiences and personal connections to traditions. Many comments also appreciated that we handled the topic with both humor and respect. Interaction is an organic part of the performance. In the very first moment, when the audience arrives and takes their seats, they find themselves stepping into a funeral. Two apprentice actors hand a candle to each viewer, offer their condolences, sometimes even embracing them, while mourning women stand in the background and a traditional Roma lament plays. This is just one example of the many interactive moments. “The beginning was already very unusual— I truly felt part of the performance from the first moment. I’ve never experienced anything like it,” said one audience member. Although the young performers were nervous about the interactive form and the challenge of playing multiple characters, they were all the more proud when the performances succeeded and they received positive feedback from the group leaders as well.

The international performance contributed greatly to the group’s development; it was an important milestone for them to meet young people similar to themselves beyond the border, discovering how much they share in common, not only as individuals but also in the kind of theater they make. They were curious, for example, about how the team from Rampa Prenestina in Rome would assess their work from a professional perspective, and they received only positive comments. For them, it was an extraordinary experience to connect with other young artists, to identify with the same questions and passions, and to build new bonds despite cultural differences. The three days spent in Cluj-Napoca were not only professionally significant but also strengthened the group, deepening the relationships between members. During the post-show audience discussion, the young performers took center stage. When one viewer asked what the best experience was for them throughout the entire

process, three of them answered that it was the joyful, collaborative work with the instructors—making theater together. They emphasized how empowering it was not to feel stuck in a classic teacher–student hierarchy, but to feel that the performance truly depended on their decisions: what they wanted to talk about and how they wanted to create it, all within a cheerful rehearsal atmosphere filled with laughter. They also shared that they enjoyed working on a non-fairytale-based story, which presented a more serious and demanding challenge for them.



Dissemination did not only include performances; professional discussions were also held, mainly focusing on the community theater methods and working processes of RP and ITH. These were open conversations facilitated by professional moderators, accessible to both expert and non-expert audiences. In addition, the young participants visited a local (outskirts, marginalized) Roma community, where they took part in a handicraft and instrumental music workshop. They were able to make music and create together with many local primary-school-aged children, stepping for a short time into their everyday lives. This experience was

emotionally very impactful and further deepened their sense of belonging and connection. At the end of the trip, several ITH participants expressed their wish to return and to bring the performance to other countries as well, as the entire journey was a life-changing experience for them.



The activities of the project generated significant short- and long-term impact on the participating young people, the professionals working with them, and the wider communities. For the disadvantaged young participants, it was particularly important that they could take part in a creative process in which their own voices, opinions, and lived experiences were treated as genuine value. The community theatre framework did not only offer a space for self-expression, but also strengthened their self-confidence, sense of responsibility, and their awareness of their own role within a group. For many of them, this was the first time they experienced that their ideas and personal stories could become the basis of a professional artistic work that audiences—both in Hungary and abroad—receive with appreciation.

Throughout the rehearsal process and the performances, the young creators showed remarkable development in concentration,

communication, teamwork, creative thinking, and discipline. The interactive nature of the performance was especially formative: they learned how to react to the audience, how to switch between multiple roles, and how to navigate an open, unpredictable theatrical situation with confidence. The international performance abroad further reinforced their sense of cultural identity, showing them that their Roma and non-Roma heritage and personal narratives are valuable, and that through art they can connect with peers across borders, regardless of language or nationality.

For the professionals involved, the project also brought substantial benefits. Working intensively with the group enabled them to refine their methods, discover new approaches, and adopt innovative pedagogical strategies. The use of community-based and interactive theatre forms increased their sense of professional fulfilment and provided insights that traditional teaching or service roles seldom offer. The international partnership broadened their professional perspective even further, bringing new methodological inspiration and expanding their network.

Overall, the project contributed to strengthening social inclusion, supporting the empowerment of disadvantaged youth, and enhancing professional capacity-building. Its effects will continue well beyond the project's duration: the young people's increased self-confidence and the strong sense of community they experienced are likely to inspire future creative engagement, while the professionals will be able to integrate the acquired knowledge and experience into their ongoing work. The connections, experiences, and insights generated through community theatre will have a lasting positive impact on both the youths involved and the professional communities that support them. In the future, the collaboration will continue on multiple levels: within the existing team, through the further development and touring of the performance, and in the form of individual artistic and personal support for each young participant. The project has laid a solid foundation for long-term cooperation, ensuring that the creative processes, professional growth, and

community-building efforts initiated here can evolve and expand in the years ahead.

