



# OUR STAGE THEATRE AS A TOOL



## ABOUT THE PROJECT

OUR STAGE” project entails aTheatrical Partnership as Enablers of Social and Behavioral Skills for Romani people and Travelers” is aiming to equip youth Roma artists and travelers, giving them the opportunity to be in the forefront of the performances and to gain the ground in labor integration through the creative sector, to promote the positive narration through their stories and roles.

For a positive narrative, as a creative form to educate people, we suport and promote inclusivity and the existing knowledge into an innovative training curriculum.





**We are thrilled to share the joyous accomplishment of the first two Acts of the OUR STAGE project, an extraordinary initiative that has been weaving the vibrant tapestry of Romani culture and creativity.**

Act 1, held in the picturesque city of Lisbon, Portugal, from October 15th to 21st, 2023, was a harmonious blend of diverse backgrounds, where individuals with both Roma and non-Roma origins came together to share, collaborate, and delve into the rich realms of cultural and creative expression.

Building on this success, Act 2 unfolded its magic from December 10th to 16th, 2023, in the enchanting city of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The atmosphere buzzed with collaboration, co-creation, and intensive training sessions, fostering an environment where participants could deepen their knowledge in the cultural and creative sectors. Amidst these interactions, personal narratives took center stage, bringing to light the poignant stories and instances of discrimination faced by the participants. Bonds were forged, uniting individuals in a collective effort to shine a light on their shared experiences.

As we celebrate the triumphs of Acts 1 and 2, the OUR STAGE project is now gearing up for its grand finale – Act 3. Our journey continues in Graz, Austria, in February 2024, promising an unforgettable experience that transcends boundaries and stereotypes. Stay tuned for an immersive exploration of creativity, inclusivity, and a resounding rejection of discrimination. The OUR STAGE project beckons you to join us on this transformative voyage, where compelling narratives and untold stories take center stage.



## We are approaching the last C activity with our partners in Aústria, in which we will complete the play **Change Through Theatre** with the staging of Act 3.

In the last few months we have been able to participate in the C1 and C2, together with other Roma young artists in Lisbon and Amsterdam, two weeks in which the youngsters have learned, created and shared experiences with each other.

As an entity dedicated to promoting and supporting the education of young people, especially roma children, it was the first time that we had the opportunity to participate in the creation of a theatrical work, an aspect that, in addition to inspiring us, gave us the opportunity to contribute with important details and messages about Roma culture and history. More over, we took advantage of the weeks of work to observe how the young people created synergies among themselves, despite their place of origin, we were able to talk with them and discover their life stories, their expectations for life and work, as well as creating friendships along the way.

Portugal presented itself as a challenge. It was the first time that the young participants met each other! We had to organize ourselves in groups (by specialty or department) and work hard to get to the end of the week with Act 1 recorded and presented to the public.

The participants from Spain were in charge of the creation and preparation of the scenery, coordinated with the producer and the director of the play. Even though it was a new experience, the girls were able to learn about the process of creating a play and achieve spectacular results, as well as participating in interviews with Ivanna and discussing their Roma identity.

We were again in charge of the scenography in Amsterdam, but since it was a different act, we focused on creating something that would allow us to interact more with the actors and actresses. Using the Roma flag as a base, we designed ornaments related to the famous Roma characters represented in the play, highlighting the individuality of each person. On the other hand, the participants highlighted in their interviews how they had been able to relate to the boys and girls from other countries, surprised at how certain things that they considered universal in the Roma community, were somewhat different. Music and dance in particular was a theme that they highlighted, struck by how the girls had different traditional dance steps compared from their own.

Overall, they had new experiences, were able to meet young Roma artists from other social spheres and achieved to create a scenography that worked perfectly with the scenes of the event. 2. We are very much looking forward to Act 3, we know it will be the closing of an incredible experience and the achievement of a specific goal of the project.

Our Stage is a project with a concrete vision, working to achieve active participation from young Roma artists. Since they write their own stories, we want to promote their history and culture without a stereotypical and racist approach.





**Embarking on the OUR STAGE project, CUBE faced the initial challenge of navigating the intricate tapestry of diverse cultural backgrounds and stories that make each participant unique.**

In the beginning, the prospect seemed daunting, a symphony of different narratives waiting to be harmonized. But guess what? We not only conquered the challenge, but we turned it into an unparalleled, successful, and essential experience!

Our mission was clear – to seamlessly bring together individuals from Roma and non-Roma backgrounds, proving that labels fade away when creativity takes the stage. The expectations soared, and oh, did we meet them! Training sessions were executed flawlessly, rehearsals were finely tuned, and then came the unexpected highlight – live performances with engaged audiences in both Acts! Picture this: the magic of theater, captivating the audience, and sparking conversations that transcended cultural boundaries.

The heartening feedback from our audiences was music to our ears. They marveled at the power of the play and were astounded by the remarkable work accomplished in such a short span

For us, at CUBE, the pinnacle of these Acts lay in the stories shared and the experiences woven into every moment. The positive feedback we received affirmed that OUR STAGE had not only met but surpassed expectations.

With every applause, every shared story, and every resonating narrative, we could feel the impact – OUR STAGE and its consortium were already breaking down stereotypes, dismantling discrimination, and challenging the shadows of racism. We stand proud, knowing that this project has become a beacon for positive narratives, illustrating the profound message that the cultural and creative sector can be a powerful force to unite diverse cultures. It is a celebration of history, culture, and the unyielding pride of the Roma people! As we gear up for Act 3 in Graz, Austria, our hearts are filled with anticipation. The journey continues, and we are ready to showcase, once again, the transformative power of creativity, unity, and the unwavering spirit of OUR STAGE.





**Join us for an insightful journey of the Our Stage Project, as director of photography, Desislava Ilieva, shares the behind-the-scenes magic of capturing the essence of Roma culture through the powerful medium of video. In this project, every frame tells a story and captures rich cultural Roma heritage.**

Introducing our visionary behind the lens, Desislava Ilieva, that together with her team, helps to capture the talented artists as they shine on stage. In this interview she reveals a glimpse of the emotions behind the scenes and welcomes us to the world of lights, camera, action!

Desislava is an adjunct professor in the American University in Bulgaria, teaching several courses on cinematography, but shares a passion for exploring new journeys and perspectives. She reveals that when she was invited to join the project, she entered with a sense of curiosity rather than specific expectations. Her eagerness to meet people with diverse backgrounds that are brought together by the love for theatre, only grows. Desi, as her close friends call her, is a firm believer that art has a special power to dismantle stereotypes and serve as a spotlight for the history, customs, and traditions of the Roma people.

As the project unfolded, the first act of the play was set to be filmed in the enchanting city of Lisbon, Portugal. During the journey to this picturesque location, Desi shares that she immersed herself in the script.

In her role as part of the film crew, her mind buzzed with plans on how to visually interpret the narrative. "... While setting up the lights and camera [...], I was thinking about what would be the best way to transfer the stage atmosphere to the viewers online..." - she adds.

The initial encounter with the artists, musicians, and dancers was a game-changer for Desi. She admits that the vibrant colours of their costumes, their diverse thoughts, expectations, and exceptional energy, accounted for a fresh perspective on her work. According to Desi, it wasn't just because they were young and full of ideas that she felt closer to her task, but also because they were with Roma origin, and brought with them a variety of stories, memories, and traditions.

After spending five days in Portugal, heading back home was more than just carrying footage to piece together the first act. Desi happily mentions that she found herself with a bunch of new young friends, and was genuinely excited about the prospect of meeting and capturing them again for the second act, with the idea to showcase their talents and narrate their stories through the lens of her camera







**In a transformative initiative OUR SSTAGE, young Roma individuals have seized the opportunity to showcase their talent and break down societal barriers through participation in theatrical performance workshops. These workshops, designed to foster creativity and self-expression, have become a platform for these aspiring artists to not only hone their skills but also challenge stereotypes that have long marginalized the Roma community.**

The project, initiated by a collaborative effort between transnational cooperation and theater professionals, aims to empower young Roma individuals by providing them with a platform to express their stories, challenges, and aspirations through the powerful medium of theater. The workshops focus on various aspects of theatrical performance, including acting, scriptwriting, and stage management, etc.

One of the project's primary goals is to amplify the voices of the Roma youth, allowing them to share their unique perspectives and experiences. Through the workshops, participants have been encouraged to explore and articulate their narratives, contributing to a richer, more diverse cultural tapestry.

Anna Vodrážková who join the proejct activities in Lisbon and Amsterdam, share her thoughts about the workshops "In this project I have improved my English, got to know Roma from foreign countries, made friends with them, we are in contact, got to know again new cities, countries thanks to this project, we connected our cultures, It gave me the feeling that no matter where we are in different parts of the country, we are proud to be Romani".

The transformative power of the workshops is evident in the personal growth and newfound confidence of the participants. For many young Roma individuals, the experience has been a catalyst for self-discovery and breaking free from societal constraints. The project not only provides artistic skills but also instills a sense of empowerment and pride in their cultural identity.

The culmination of these workshops is a series of theatrical performances, where the participants bring their stories to life on stage. These performances serve as a testament to the resilience and creativity of the Roma youth, challenging preconceived notions and fostering understanding among the wider community.

Importantly, the project transcends the boundaries of performance art. It acts as a bridge between communities, fostering dialogue and dispelling stereotypes that have perpetuated misconceptions about the Roma people. Through these performances, audiences are invited to witness the richness of Roma culture and the shared human experience that unites us all.

The success of this initiative extends beyond the stage, as it opens doors for the participants to pursue further opportunities in the arts. By providing a platform for their talents to shine, the project is not only breaking down societal barriers but also creating pathways for a more inclusive and diverse cultural landscape.

As we celebrate the achievements of these young Roma artists, it is crucial to recognize the importance of such initiatives in creating a more inclusive society. Through the transformative power of theater, these workshops are not just about artistic expression; they are about rewriting narratives, fostering understanding, and paving the way for a future where the talents of every individual, regardless of their background, are acknowledged and celebrated.



**Gina Marie Stempfle is 23 years old and originally comes from Germany. She came to Graz, Austria, for her studies, where she is currently pursuing her master's degree in psychology.**

Gina is very active in the local theater scene in Graz and is a founding member of the theater group "Traustdanie," with which she develops independent theater projects. Through this group, she became aware of the OUR STAGE project. She participated as part of Theater am Lend in both the activities in Lisbon and Amsterdam, showcasing her artistic versatility and openness more than once. "I'm so glad to be part of this. I think through theater, one gains better access to cultural topics because you really talk to each other and engage much deeper than through a mere informational event. I find that more lifelike."

Gina visibly feels comfortable in the mixed group of individuals from the Roma-community and people like herself, who are not from the community. She has encountered new perspectives and heard stories she probably wouldn't have access to in her daily life. "Now that I've delved into the topic intensively, it's certainly easier for me to continue informing myself."

How would Gina describe the group? "I found the group to be very diverse and very, very lively. Everyone takes great joy in art and collaborative work. Everyone is curious and not at all shy - I really like that."

Speaking openly about other life realities and issues like discrimination and exclusion has expanded Gina's awareness of these issues. During the two stays in Lisbon and Amsterdam, which Gina perceived differently in their own ways but ultimately managed to connect well, a real group, a team, emerged. Genuine friendships have formed.

Gina is already looking forward to the reunion in Graz in February. "I'm excited to welcome the people here and also show them around the city of Graz!"





**The idea was born after the trip of five Roma and Sinti girls to the places of remembrance in Auschwitz-Birkenau, on the occasion of the Samudaripen commemoration day, 2 August 2022. A journey born from the need to rediscover one's origins, to merge collective memory with personal, more intimate and hidden memory.**

Theater show, Ethnic coming out: proud to be Roma and Sinti, written and directed by the artist and human rights activist, Ivana Nikolic.

“Art is fundamental to being able to change the narrative that is often conducted about my ethnic minority, completely wrong and always made by external people. The time has come for us to tell our story first. Social art, i.e. social denunciation through different artistic expressions. Talking about my ethnic minority and other minorities, about human rights, about the pride of being Roma and Sinti. I work with the community and based on the collective need we stage a performance.”

Already from the name chosen for the show you can understand the intersectional approach that Ivana adopts in her daily work with the community, online and in the area. The term coming out means "to come out", declare oneself or make oneself visible, and is generally used in reference to sexual orientation or gender identity. Making a part of oneself, of one's identity, visible and freely and proudly declaring one's belonging to a community. In this specific case, an ethnic community, the Roma and Sinti.

"There should always be an intersectional perspective, because belonging to an ethnic minority does not exclude belonging to other minorities. Demila, Swami and Natasha will give a monologue on their belonging to the Roma and LGBTQIA+ communities, precisely to bring the topic even more to light. I believe that the Romani community must work on the process of ethnic coming out, which needs support and a network to start. Obviously it can't be done when you don't feel safe. Furthermore, revealing your identity is a burden that you must take on, aware of the consequences. It is undeniable that job opportunities are reduced and, if they exist, they often lead to positive discrimination, so the presence of a Roma person allows the request for diversity to be met."

The first part of the show is dedicated to the Romani resistance, real and unknown. A journey into the past, narrated by present voices. The second act develops, however, starting from current events, describing the discrimination that Roma and Sinti ethnic people suffer today throughout the world.

"Stanislav Tomáš was killed by three policemen with a dynamic reminiscent of the death of George Floyd, but no one talks about it. Anna, a Roma woman from Naples, had given birth a few days ago and was experiencing severe pain. She wanted to go to the emergency room, but the policeman in front of her camp prevented her and laughed in her face. She didn't make it."



The conclusion, however, focuses on the personal stories of the young people and the path of proud acceptance of their ethnic identity. It is the first time they have performed in front of an audience, yet, with the help of Ivana Nikolic and Igor Alvarez Cugat of Zidtheater, everyone has already discovered the way to express themselves and feel at ease on stage. Natasha, for example, tells her story through Dragqueen performances, while Swami writes lyrics that become intense monologues. We worked with various theater and energizer activities, to create a sense of community. the different groups of actors, dancers, drafts and musicians worked together to create a show.

“Even if they are not professionals, they are very professional in approaching the theatre, they do it with commitment. It is essential to be able to bring out emotions when you are on stage, to be able to tell others about them. Little by little, they managed to remove the insecurity and shame of showing their vulnerability openly. Ultimately, this is what theater is all about, expressing and arousing emotions. We had 5 preparation days in December. In total, four meetings before going on stage.”

Different and unique stories and personalities, linked by a common experience. Having been silenced within power dynamics that deny existence, history, life and Romani identity.

“We all have in common a feeling of shame, which makes us feel wrong. It is very difficult to eliminate, but with a community that supports each other, a path of reappropriation of Roma culture, language and pride is possible. How much do we have to deny ourselves in order to be accepted? We have the right to be Roma, to be proud and to say it without having any kind of repercussions, at work, at university, when looking for a home... Therefore, let us cultivate the common desire not to give up, so that each of us can live our minority in serenity.”





**We at JÁ are proud and delighted to have been hosts and producers of the C1 stage activity of the OUR STAGE Erasmus+ project.**

Designed to engage with Roma youth from Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain and enable them to develop skills in the performing arts and crafts, with the final objective of developing a stage for Roma youth to enact, embody and own their own stories and give voice to their own sense of the human condition.

The project deliverables labelled C activities include 3 modules hosted in 3 different countries, Portugal, the Netherlands and Austria in sequence, with each module comprising a one week intensive training of 40 emerging Roma artists and technicians from all 7 countries in the host country, with the goal of developing a recorded performance of an original play, devised by the host country, at the end of the week.

The first leg of this module sequence was executed in Portugal during the week of 16th-20th October at the Centro de Artes Marvila, Lisbon, which was generously made available to us by the Companhia Dance de Evora, thanks to the generosity of its head, Nelia Pinheiro, an avid friend and supporter of JÁ.



As part of this module, the attendant artists and technicians forged fecund creative synergies and bridges across cultures and artistic processes to device from the ground up, a full stage execution of a play **BLUES MAKETH THE ROAD** by Suresh Nampuri, based on real-world ethnographic research on the Roma in Portugal. The performance incorporated Romski music from the Czech Republic as well as movement and dance elements drawing on from the varied strains of Roma culture that have taken root in 7 countries.

### Anatomy of the production:

The thematics of the production hinged on the natural integration of all the diverse talent that landed in Lisbon on the 15th of October. On the first day, the event co-ordinator and director for JÁ introduced the guests to the polyvalent venue at Marvila, which contained a performance stage, a dance rehearsal space, a music room, a refreshment lounge with snacks and a couple of spare rooms for more rehearsals and a workshop space for production work (props and set design). The artists were grouped into actors, dancers, musicians playing instruments and singers. The crew were comprised of the lights and camera technicians and the crafters responsible for prop and set development. The Czech contingent decisively contributed to the last three artistic groups with a smooth sax player, a lilting vocalist and smooth dancers while our friends from Barcelona brought with them a committed team of crafters. Bulgaria sent in young keen camera and light technicians with a hearty can-do attitude with Greece sending in social media experts and administrative helpers. Austria and the Netherland contingent, being dispatched by Theatre Am Lend and ZiD theaters respectively, unsurprisingly were choc-a-bloc with actors and dancers, as were the Lisbon home team.



As all the artists and crew members had already familiarized themselves with the script before, they were simply given certain creative prompts to set to work separately for the first couple of days while the director proceeded to stage rehearsals with the actors. The dancers, hailing from different countries started exchanging notions of physicality and technique while the musicians slowly started converging on a theme music that was a classic Romani song arranged to jazzy standards for the sax.

On the third day, as the scenes came together, the dancers were finally integrated into the play, as a surreal, hyper amplified embodiment of the characters' internal states.. And quite organically, Romani music on the piano became a crucial standpoint for the emotional beats of the story. So by Thursday, we had a full fledged interface of music, dance and dialogue humming away nicely in front of the cameras. We finished the shoot late on Thursday and in high spirits waltzed into the Friday ready to welcome our audiences for what turned into a colourful flamboyantly theatrical experience. The feeling at the end of the show on Friday was that of a moment that created meaning for everyone involved and showcased the incredible effectiveness of talented people who walked into a room with open hearts ready to receive and give, of stories and imagination, that form the recipe for generating a moment that reaffirms what unites us as humans.