

# NARROW PATH TO HAPPINESS



**A Film by Kata Oláh**

2023 / Hungary / USA / 83 minutes

Produced by **Makabor Studio** in association with **13<sup>th</sup> Gen**

**World sales: First Hand Films**

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<https://www.facebook.com/narrowpathtohappiness>

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## Festivals 2023



World Premiere & Special Jury Mention, International Competition

### 2023 **Thessaloniki** International Documentary Film Festival

“... A delightful love story that emerges from the most unexpected place to delightfully evoke the conventions of family, gender, culture and fame.” - *Thessaloniki Jury*

#### INTERNATIONAL FESTIVALS IN COMPETITION

**DocsBarcelona** – Barcelona, Spain / May 2023

**PinkApple** Film Festival – Zurich, Switzerland / April 2023

**InsideOut** Film Festival – Toronto, Canada / June 2023

**Cinema Diverse** Film Festival – Palm Springs, USA / September 2023

**TLVFest** – Tel Aviv, Israel / October 2023

**BangkokThai** Film Festival – Thailand / October 2023

**Perlen Queer** Film Festival – Hannover, Germany / October 2023

**QDOC** Film Festival – Portland, USA / November 2023

**Melbourne Queer** Film Festival – Melbourne, Australia / November 2023

**Slovak Queer** Film Festival – Bratislava, Slovakia / November 2023

**Merlinka Queer** Film Festival- Belgrade, Serbia / December 2023

## Logline

A young gay Romani couple strives to make their dreams come true despite all the difficulties. Gergő and Lénárd's inspiring journey takes them from a hostile, homophobic remote village in Hungary to vibrant Budapest, where they plan to make a musical film based on their lives. But when tragedy strikes in their families, they must go back to their roots to face the past and find inspiration to write their own happy ending.

trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RffU6AT4hMU&t=2s>

<https://vimeo.com/791406364>



## Synopsis

Gergő and Lénárd are a young gay male couple living in a remote Roma settlement in the poorest part of Hungary. They live in a community where being gay is considered an unforgivable sin, yet they dream of making a musical film about their lives and becoming famous. They could continue to live out their lives within this hostile environment, but to make their dream come true they have to move to Budapest, where LGBTQ+ life is more open and available, and collaborations with musicians and artists are abundant. When the sudden death of Gergő's mother brings a tragic wrinkle to their story, they return to the family who disowned them for one final reckoning, helping them to accept their gay identities, the key to their own acceptance and their own chance at happiness.

## Long synopsis

One way of breaking free from poverty and stigma is to become famous. Lénárd and Gergő, not only dream about fame, but they are ready to work hard for it. As a young gay male couple living disinherited by their families in a remote Romani settlement in the poorest part of Hungary, they've been targeted by both racism and homophobia.

Despite these complex circumstances, these two young men manage to truly love one another and stick together. They have a dream that is so absurd that it seems almost impossible. They should write a musical film based on their own life story, become famous, and change hearts and minds about what it means to grow up being both Romani and gay. Lénárd would take charge of writing the script, and Gergő would compose the music.



The first step towards achieving their dream is moving to the capital – Budapest – a place where LGBTQ+ life is more available and abundant. Once there, Gergő finds a suitable job in construction while Lénárd starts networking and planning for their dream project. He finds Zsófi, a young scriptwriting student at the University, who befriends them and offers her help developing the script.

Lénárd also contacts the local media and LGBTQ+ community groups and begins a very active life on social media to build up their public profiles. Little by little, they find a growing community of open-minded creative collaborators in Budapest, who join them on the journey of bringing their musical film project to life.

Moving to Budapest from the countryside and facing the city's more liberal ways of thinking also comes with some unexpected challenges. Lénárd and Gergő have to work hard to overcome their own conservative religious beliefs by spending time with a reverend at an LGBTQ+-friendly church who opens their eyes to the idea that God does forgive them and accepts all kinds of love.

At the same time LGBTQ+ life is increasingly under attack by Hungary's government, so political activism becomes an urgent and central theme for both Lénárd and Gergő, as they start attending large demonstrations against the country's growing spate of hateful laws and politicians.

When the sudden death of Gergő's mother brings a tragic wrinkle to their story, their musical film project has to be put on hold, as they return to the same families in the countryside who disowned them. For the first time, Gergő's family lets his boyfriend be a part of a family event, allowing him to stand next to the family during the traditional Roma funeral.



From there, shared grief opens up conversations between Gergő and his father who wants to understand his son, but it isn't easy to accept how his son can love another boy. Suddenly, at Lénárd's twenty-first birthday party, there is a chance for a reckoning with both families, helping Lénárd and Gergő to finally accept their gay identities alongside being both Romani and religious, the key to their own chance at happiness.

In the end, we're left with the understanding that their musical film project may never come to fruition. But, regardless, the two young men have gained something much more powerful than fame. They have come of age beautifully, emerging as a proud openly gay Romani couple ready to take on the world together and be their true authentic selves.

## Topic summary



“Narrow Path to Happiness” is a feature-length documentary that charts the lives of two young gay Romani men in a positive loving relationship over three years. It is a first-of-its-kind gay-themed intersectional documentary out of Hungary that bridges two worlds and focuses a lens on the Romani aspect of the LGBTQ+ experience.

Our main characters represent populations in Hungary who are actively persecuted because of their race, ethnicity, and sexuality, so there is a built-in urgency to these stories. The film has also been made against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism and anti-LGBTQ+ hatred and misinformation in Hungary, and as such, this has impacted the lives of our characters and the direction of the story.

The Hungarian State chooses not to protect and actively undermines the freedom and rights of all LGBTQ+ people. For example, in a May 2020 statement by László Kövér, speaker of the Hungarian Parliament said, “Fighting for LGBTQ+ adoption is morally equivalent to pedophilia. Morally there is no difference between the behavior of a pedophile and the behavior of someone gay who demands the right to adopt. In both cases, the children are treated as objects, luxury goods, mere tools for gratification, for self-realization.”

Further, comprehensive changes to the Hungarian Constitution in December 2020 altered the definition of families to exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, defining the basis of the family as “marriage and the parent-child relationship.” It declared that “... the mother is a woman, and the father is a man.” This change also declares that only married couples may adopt children unless granted special permission by the family affairs minister.

As same-sex marriage is constitutionally forbidden in Hungary, this effectively bars same-sex couples from adoption. In June 2021, a bill was submitted to Parliament to ban all products, advertising, and media featuring gay or transgender people from those under the age of 18, removing the appearance of LGBTQ+ people in public service advertisements or any school program.

As for Romani people, the largest ethnic minority in Europe, the situation is also very difficult, and anti-Roma attitudes and discrimination are commonplace in Hungary, where over 750,000 citizens of Romani background are subject to racist violence and official persecution.



A 2021 European Union survey found that 55 percent of Hungarian Roma dropped out of school before the age of 16. Romani people face unemployment rates of nearly 85 percent.

The areas where Hungarian Roma live are mainly disadvantaged areas and small villages where there are no job opportunities. Hungary's Supreme Court recently declared that the segregation of Roma children in church schools is legal.

Perhaps most importantly for this film, it cannot be overstated that the existence of a Roma LGBTQ+ community is still considered taboo in Hungary, especially within the Roma community itself, where religion dominates all aspects of life. Unfortunately, racism and xenophobia are also present within the LGBTQ+ communities, as are homophobia and transphobia in Roma communities.

Most people can't even imagine that Roma LGBTQ+ people even exist. This often has serious consequences including a life full of lies, forced marriages, and masking one's sexual or gender identity inside unhappy and unfulfilled relationships. With "Narrow Path to Happiness," we're proud to be making a film that counters all of the stereotypes and negative messaging faced by Roma LGBTQ+ people.

## Director's statement



My family name is Oláh, which is a term referring to musicians within the Romani (gypsy) communities. Being half Romani and half Jewish myself, I have a strong urge to make films about individuals from marginalized groups. Growing up, I had to face prejudice and antisemitism even though I grew up in a middle-class family in the capital of Hungary. In early 2018, our company received an e-mail from Lénárd, explaining their current situation in the Roma settlement, their dream about making a musical film based on their lives, and his request for a producer's help.

First, it was hard to believe that their letter was even real, as it did sound so absurd. But thankfully, I was curious enough to answer and meet them. After our first meeting, I proposed: "What if I make a documentary about you two trying to achieve your dream?" When they were searching for a producer, they were specifically looking for a woman. I understood the reason a few months later. They both desperately needed a "mother" figure they can trust to help bring the musical film to life.

They grew up in an environment where they were never educated, accepted, or loved. They never had a mother, who could teach them this essential lesson: "You must work for your dreams because your dream won't work for you." I found these two boys to be very inspiring from the first moment I met them, when I realized that they instinctively live their life according to this maxim. Growing up in a remote Roma settlement could have determined the limitations of their lives, but they resisted.

## Producer's note

We are an independent family-owned production company, and we make character-driven films for an international audience. Mother-father-daughter. All three of us have worked very closely with Lénárd and Gergő, like an extension of a trusted family. We started filming in May 2018. When we decided to make this film, we knew that funding would be difficult to find as the story represents everything that the current government in Hungary tries to keep silent and invisible. As we worked without any official support, we had no formal schedule.

We took a nimble approach to our work and filmed whenever something meaningful happened in the life of our protagonists. We have worked on the cut with Rough Cut Service, and our U.S. Co-Producer Marc Smolowitz was very active in giving us creative notes through the long editing process. We showed the finished film to Roma and LGBT activists, and they found it authentic, honest and accurate. It was incredibly important for us, as to our knowledge *NARROW PATH TO HAPPINESS* is the first feature length documentary ever to tell a Roma LGBT story.



## The TEAM

**Katalin Oláh** (director-editor) is a Hungarian filmmaker based in Budapest. After many years working as a producer, she switched focus entirely to directing and established **Makabor Studio**, an award-winning production company with her cinematographer husband. Since 2012, they have produced several documentary films in different length and short fictions as well. All of their films have been broadcast by different Hungarian TV channels and received numerous awards and have been screened internationally. She has been nominated several times by The Hungarian Film Academy as best director, and she was awarded the best editor prize in the documentary film category in 2019. Her feature documentary, *The Bar Mitzvah boys* was nominated for Prix Europa 2018, her short documentary *Mignon* won received the best short documentary award at BDF 2019. She received the prestigious international critic's Fipresci Prize at Cinefest 2022 for her feature documentary *Conquering time – Ágnes Keleti*.



**Sándor Csukás** (cinematographer) graduated from the Hungarian Film Academy in 1993. He is a well-recognized cinematographer in Hungary, **awarded** by the prestigious György Illés, The cinematographer of the year award, and Béla Balázs, the highest state film professional award. He participated as a cinematographer in more than 60 documentaries and short films, several TV dramas, such as the first Hungarian HBO Europe series, and 14 fiction films, winning several national and international awards with his work.

**Borbála Csukás** (Producer) has been working in different roles in film production from an early age. Notably, she is the Producer of a feature-length documentary, "Divas," co-produced with HBO Europe, which she pitched at several CoPro forums and participated in the Sarajevo Rough Cut Boutique workshop. She also participated in Sarajevo Talents 2020 and was the Hungarian representative of Emerging Producers 2022.



**Marc Smolowitz** (Co-Producer) is a multi-award-winning director, producer, and executive producer who has been significantly involved in 50+ successful independent films. The combined footprint of his works has touched 250+ film festivals & markets on 5 continents, yielding substantial worldwide sales to theatrical, television, and VOD outlets, notable box office receipts, and numerous awards and nominations. His credits include films that have screened at top-tier festivals including Sundance,

Berlinale, Locarno, SXSW, Venice and Tribeca, among others. In 2016, he received one of the prestigious Gotham Fellowships to attend the Cannes Film Festival's Producers Network marking him as one of the USA's most influential independent film producers.

### **Main production credits**

Director-Editor Kata Oláh

Cinematographer Sándor Csukás

Producer Kata Oláh, Borbála Csukás

Co-Producer Marc Smolowitz

Written by Kata Oláh, Borbála Csukás, Marc Smolowitz, Sándor Csukás

Music Gergely Barcza

Colorist Robert Libel

Sound design Tamás Lőrincz

### **Developed at**

Verzio DocLab

When East Meets West Co-Production Forum

Hot Docs Deal Maker

Thessaloniki IDF Agora Docs in Progress

EWA Network Mentoring Program

DocCelerator: Ove Jensen, Geoffrey Smith

Rough-Cut Service: Erez Laufer, Jordana Berg

### **Made with generous support from**

Robert Holgate Philanthropic Fund

Center for Independent Documentary

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Metropolitan University

Summa Artium Foundation

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Hungarian Film Incentive

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