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A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ROMA THEATER IN ROMANIA

By Nona Vintila Serbănescu

This article attempts to recreate a broader historical framework as an awareness raiser regarding the evolution or - more precisely - the near absolute absence of the Roma theatrical and dramaturgical tradition in the Romanian cultural landscape, especially regarding the inter-war and communist periods. Furthermore, it explores the evolution of the Roma theater movements and institutions in today's Romania, alongside with the emergence and development of some important Roma activist independent theater companies.

Background - The Roma cultural emancipation movements in the interwar period

Although there are almost no traceable Roma theater movements or institutions in the 1920s-30s, it is relevant to consider this period as the emergence of some important Roma cultural organizations in Romania. As well, these decades may be regarded as perhaps the only period of authentic cultural emancipation and flourishing of the Roma cultural identity in pre-accession Romania.¹ Thus, during the interwar period the modern Roma identity crystallizes amongst a new wave of intellectual and cultural Roma elites that begins assuming their own ethnic identity. Before this period, the *“social climbing on the part of Gypsies* as a rule had led to the loss of their ethnic identity.”*²

In the nationalist context which followed Romania's Reunification - and which was a common ideology throughout Europe -, the Roma intellectuals, artists and merchants that formed the main core of the Roma elite acknowledged the major opportunity in assuming and promoting various cultural programs with the purpose of instilling a Roma identity consciousness amongst the Romanian Roma communities.³ Such organizations were at first created around the soul of the Roma culture and identity: music. These organizations reunited Roma musicians especially in the urban societies, where some of them were trying to maintain and promote the traditional Roma folklore, while others adopted what was regarded as high culture at that time. In the field of classical music, one of the most prominent personalities was [Grigoraş Dinicu](#), the first worldwide renown Romanian Roma composer and violinist. Dinicu was also a vocal activist for the cultural emancipation of the Romanian Roma, being one of the leaders of *Junimea Muzicală* (The Musical Youth), the largest Roma musical society established in Bucharest.⁴ Alongside with the musical societies, many organizations established their own Roma newspapers - such as *Neamul Țigănesc* (The Gypsy Nation)⁵ or *Glasul Romilor* (The Voice of

¹ Romania became a full member of the EU on 1st January 2007.

* The term Gypsy is used as such in the cited work since at the time of its princeps edition (1997) the term was widely seen as acceptable in Romanian academia and throughout society at large.

² Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, CEU Press, 2004, p. 154.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

⁴ Achim, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

Roma people)⁶ both in 1934; and had in plan projects that were to open book publishing houses, a popular university for Roma and a national Roma museum.⁷ It is important to mention that, in this context, many Roma organizations promoted through their publications the use of the term *Roma* instead of *Gypsy*.⁸ Regarding the *Roma* term, one can notice that in 1933 one of the most important and active Roma organizations, Uniunea Generală a Romilor din România - UGRR (The General Union of Roma in Romania)⁹ was also established, led at first by [Gheorghe A. Lăzăreanu-Lăzurică](#), and since 1934 by Gheorghe Niculescu (Gogu Floraru), a Roma “flower merchant from Bucharest and adviser to the Labour Ministry and the Council of Merchants.”¹⁰

Due to the UGRR's intense activism, we can trace back the first and only record of a Roma theater representation in this period. Thus, on 18th or 25th March 1934 at the “*Omnia*” Theater and Cinema in Bucharest, premiered the play “*Rivalii*” (The Rivals), “a one-act play with a subject taken from the life on the front lines, which shows the patriotism and the spirit of humanity of the Roma soldier during the war.”¹¹ The original play was written by a certain Mr. Gal (*Di. Gal*), who was mentioned as a Roma writer (*publicist*),¹² an author who remains anonymous even to this day. The play was part of a larger event that celebrated the almost one year-long activity of UGGR, organizing “the first artistic and cultural Roma festival, with conferences, theater performances, parades, music concerts, presentation of various traditional customs.”¹³

Needless to say, in spite of all these advancements in the realm of Roma culture, literacy and identity, the nationalist state regime of the early 1940s began to target the Roma communities in Romania under the racist priority of solving “the *Gypsy problem*”.¹⁴ In this manner, the relatively prosperous and peaceful period of

⁶ Ibidem, p. 156.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 155.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 157.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 156.

¹⁰ Achim, 2004, op. cit., p. 155.

¹¹ [translated from RO] Mariana Sandu, Delia Grigore, Contribuția rromilor la patrimoniul comun (Roma contribution to the common heritage), in http://www.opportunitatiegale.ro/pdf_files/Contributia%20romilor%20la%20patrimoniul%20comun.pdf, p. 3

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ [translated from RO] Ibidem.

¹⁴ Achim, 2004, op. cit., p. 166.

advancements regarding modern Roma identity and culture collapsed, as it did everywhere in Europe.

A major absence on the cultural stage: A Roma theater under the Communist regime?

Whilst the new communist regimes installed in 1947-'48 throughout Eastern Europe continuously maintained their internationalist and anti-racist statements, very little was done to support and protect an authentic Roma identity. However, one of the most renowned Roma institutional theaters remains even today the state-funded Romen Theater. Inaugurated in 1931 in Moscow (USSR), the theater also symbolized a form of showing the West that the communists made no racial or ethnic discrimination. Regarding Roma theater in Romania, the drastic regime change might have seemed at first as a chance for the Roma organizations¹⁵ to establish a national state theater similar to the one in Moscow. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity was quickly closed by the new regime, with a swift amendment to the latest Theater Law (Legea Teatrelor)¹⁶ that was issued during the final months of the Kingdom of Romania, in 1947. Thus, the communist regime issued a [Decree](#) in 1948 that modified one single article (art. 73) of the Theater Law by adding mentions of the existence of new ethnic theaters that became state institutions - such as the Yiddish Theater (Teatrul Evreiesc) in Bucharest and the Székely Theater (Teatrul Secuiesc) în Târgu Mureș, beside the already recognized Hungarian State Theater in Cluj. There is no mention of a Roma or “Gypsy” state theater, even though the Roma community was at that time the fourth largest

¹⁵ [translated from RO] In 1949 Roma leaders step in for their recognition as a minority to the highest authorities in the state. They received encouragement, but in the end their action did not result in the desired result. The Roma did not then obtain the status of cohabiting nationality, Cf. Viorel Achim, Încercarea romilor din România de a obține statutul de naționalitate conlocuitoare, 1948-1949 (The attempt of the Roma in Romania to obtain the status of cohabiting nationality), in „Revista istorică”, tom XXI, 2010, nr. 5 - 6, p. 449.

¹⁶ Cf. Monitorul Oficial, Partea III, Teatrele Naționale de Provincie (The Official Journal, Part III), Art. 73, p. 6205 - https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b1/Monitorul_Oficial_al_României._Partea_1_1947-07-18._nr._162.pdf

ethnic minority in Romania,¹⁷ alongside with the Hungarian (and Székely), German and Jewish communities.¹⁸ Moreover, since the 1940s there are no official records whatsoever on any Roma actresses, actors or theater activity in Romania. Not only that there are no records of Roma theater professionals with an assumed Roma identity, but also there are no official records of any actors that might have been commonly renown as of Roma origin. The late 1940s and early 1950s heralded a stark absence of any Roma cultural identity activities, especially in the case of theatrical representations of Roma communities, and also regarding the activity of Roma theater professionals. Thus, a slow but steady acculturation process had begun. This situation has to be observed in the broader context of the post-war Europe, where Roma communities and their organizations were left with little resources after they had suffered an official state-level persecution, followed by a genocide and later on, by public and cultural stigma.

This small omission of mentioning the establishment of a Roma state theater in the Theater Law ushered in the entire state policies regarding the Romanian Roma community at large. In 1949 the General Union of Roma in Romania was officially dissolved by the regime,¹⁹ and in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the creation of the National Councils of Workers for all major ethnic groups there was no mention of any sort of Roma council.²⁰ Thus, without any form of basic representation at any local and official level, one cannot talk about the existence of cultural institutions such as a Roma theater organization. During the communized Romania, there were virtually no Roma educational or cultural institutions that could have promoted and sustained a Roma identity. Therefore, the Roma communities were subjected to a long-term acculturation process that was encouraged or tolerated to some extent by the communist regime.²¹ Some local

¹⁷ [translated from RO] The population census of January 25th, 1948, did not register the nationality of the reviewees, but only the mother tongue. The statistics show that 53,425 people had a “Gypsy language” as a mother tongue, representing 0.3% of the country's population, Cf. Achim, 2010, op. cit., p. 449-450.

¹⁸ An interesting observation is that in the 1930 census the total “Gypsy” population was 262,501. The sudden drop can be correlated with the forced deportations during WWII and also with their later reluctance of assuming the Roma identity, Cf. INS, România, un secol de istorie - Date Statistice, Table 1.13 Populația României pe naționalități, la recensământul din 1930 - continuare, București, 2018, p. 25.

¹⁹ Achim, 2004, op. cit., p. 189.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 190.

²¹ [translated from RO] The assimilation of the Roma in Romanian society generated the emergence of some important groups of people of Roma origin who have lost (in whole or in part) their Roma identity and their ethnic and cultural characteristics, Cf. E. Marushiakova, V. Popov, 6.1. Politica de

Roma cultural groups and theater troupes were active inside the artistic brigades (*brigăzi artistice*) of the propaganda since the 70s, but their activity mostly focused on promoting the ideals of regime or it was limited to organizing Roma music and dance lessons in order to have performers at communist celebrations or festivals.²²

Most of the Roma actors were simply assimilated into the broader Romanian culture, having little or no contact whatsoever with the Romani ethos, traditions or identity, since the official state propaganda had no real interest in investing into a solid Roma culture or education. Furthermore, the image of the Roma people was popularized, especially through the state censored cinematography, filled with prejudices that only reinforced the already existing common stereotypes. For instance, Jean Constantin, a famous and talented Romanian actor of Greek origin, was casted during his long career in many “Gypsy” roles due to his looks, all his characters describing untrustworthy, shifty or lazy individuals having Roma names or pejorative pseudonyms.²³ This fact is well illustrated by Caterina Preda,²⁴ observing that *“the artistic representation of the Roma belongs mostly to non-Roma (gadje). Most often these artistic representations of the Roma (painting, drawing, engraving, feature films, music), as well as the documentary ones (photography, documentaries, documentary theater) reproduce stereotypes, despite the cultural diversity that exists within this community.”*²⁵ This raises the major issue of an acute absence not only of the Roma theater *per se*, but of the self-representation of the Roma communities through its own actors and authors. Still, one of the few famous theater and film actors known for their Roma origin during the 70s and 80s, only due to their own merits, was [Ștefan Bănică](#) - although his

stat în țările comuniste – Romii, Istorie (State policy in Communist countries - The Roma, History), Consiliul European - Proiect Educația Copiilor Romi în Europa, p. 7 - <https://rm.coe.int/politica-de-stat-in-tarile-comuniste-fise-de-informare-despre-istoria-/16808b1c5d>

²² Idem, 6.2. Instituționalizare și emancipare – Romii, Istorie (Institutionalisation and emancipation - The Roma, History), Consiliul European - Proiect Educația Copiilor Romi în Europa, p. 3 - <https://rm.coe.int/instituționalizare-si-emancipare-fise-de-informare-despre-istoria-romi/16808b1c66>

²³ Such popular productions were the Brigada Diverse series (Miscellaneous Crimes Brigade) in the 1970s, in which the portrait of the Romani people follows the same set of ethnic deprecatory stereotypes.

²⁴ Conferențiar at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Bucharest.

²⁵ [translated from RO] Caterina Preda, *Reprezentări artistice ale romilor în cultura română în sec. XIX - XXI*, in „Romii în România: identitate și alteritate. Manual auxiliar didactic“, (coord.) I. Nastasă-Matei, Universitatea din București, Facultatea de Științe Politice, Ed. Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2016, p. 84.

ethnic identity was never recognized at official level. Nevertheless, his son Ștefan Bănică Jr., also a famous actor and musician, had never publicly assumed his [Roma origin](#). This situation was still common until recently - with some notable exceptions²⁶ - for most of the Roma mainstream artists in post-communist Romania, as a remnant of the social stigma that one could experience if they were to adopt or admit their Roma identity or origin in public.

Another notable Roma actor and theater director is Rudy Moca, still active since 1973. His early career revolved around the Puppet Theater in Târgu Mureș, working as well as an actor in plays that, at the time, had no connection with his Roma identity. However, during the early 90s he became one of the active voices of the broader Roma identity movement in Romania. Moca also developed "*a series of civic cultural programs as a manifesto for solidarity (and) for education*",²⁷ believing that "*the Roma must assume their identity through an act of courage, overcoming the barriers that place them on the margins of society.*"²⁸

²⁶ Although he is not an actor, Mădălin Voicu (violinist, conductor and politician), was one of the most renown Roma artists who publicly assumed his Roma origins and identity in post-communist Romania; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mădălin_Voicu

²⁷ <https://ikultura.ro/personalitati-rome/rudy-moca/>

²⁸ Ibidem.

Post-communist Romania - Slow steps towards an activist Roma theater

Even though the 90s brought major changes into the Romanian broad society, for the Roma theater there is still the same silence in all studies regarding the Roma communities in Romania. This is partly due to the intense focus of most academic research regarding the social and economic realities of the Roma communities of the 90s, manifested almost no interest in the potential of the theatrical and the literary aspects of Roma culture. And exactly those precarious social and economic realities topped by the prejudices of the general population kept most of the Roma communities away from manifesting an authentic interest towards self-representation in fields such as theater or playwrighting. Still, *“after 1990 the diversity of perspectives on the Roma has increased and does so today, we have access to various and realistic representations, mostly documentary ones”*.²⁹ In this new context, an important step in the life of the Romanian Roma communities was the attainment of political recognition. In comparison with the failed attempts in 1948, the official recognition of the Roma communities as a National Minority in Romania in 1990³⁰ can be regarded as the cornerstone of today's development of the modern Roma identity, a small but important step which helped the emergence of Roma political, cultural and human rights organizations.

One of the first and most active Roma rights organizations established after the fall of Communism in Romania is [Romani CRISS](#) (The Roma Center for Social Intervention and Studies), founded in 1993 in Bucharest. The organization brought together many vocal and active Roma intellectuals, such as Margareta (Magda) Matache, executive director of the Romani CRISS between 2005 - 2012, scholar, researcher and Roma rights activist. Although many decisive steps have been made in relation with the evolution and establishment of some relevant Roma cultural and political organizations, the 90s did not provide a significant development in the Roma theatrical and playwrighting landscape.

²⁹ Preda, op. cit., p. 84.

³⁰ Achim, 2010, op. cit., p. 449.

However, the beginning of the next century brought in the foreground a different generation of Roma artists, actors, writers and activists. In 2008 the Amphitheatrrom Cultural Association (NGO) was established, and by 2010 they produced the first theater show exclusively staged and played in Romani language: „*Jekh răt lisăme*“/ „*O noapte furtunoasă*“ (Stormy Night).³¹ The project combined the input of some of the most renown Roma figures that are active in the sphere of public and institutional theater, but also in the area of independent Roma theater, such as Rudy Moca, Zita Moldovan, Marcel Costea, Mădalin Mandin and Dragoș Dumitru. In this context we can find many Roma theater professionals, such as Zita Moldovan, as a part of the new generation of those Roma actresses and actors who began their career in public state theaters and later transitioned partially or fully towards the independent activist Roma theater movements. In this sense, Moldovan started as a collaborator of the National Operetta and Musical Theater „Ion Dacian“ in 2006, but in a short time she became “*actively involved in the Roma feminist and anti-racist movement, working as a theater trainer in Roma communities and in various Roma rights campaigns.*” Today she is working exclusively within the independent activist Roma theater, also having collaborations with other state-funded ethnic theaters such as The Jewish State Theater or the National Theater in Târgu Mureș (the former Székely Theater).

Marcel Costea had a similar path: he also started his activity in the public area of acting as a Roma actor for over 30 years at the „Valah“ Theater in Giurgiu. Since the late 90s until today, he has been involved in social theater performances on “*domestic violence, women's right to self-determination or drug use among young people*”, working closely with Roma and non-Roma independent theater companies and organizations. Although Mădalin Mandin and Dragoș Dumitru are more involved in the public theater institutions - both currently acting at The National Theater in Bucharest in mainstream plays that do not necessarily represent their Roma identity and culture -, they also contribute to the independent Roma theater by acting in plays directed by Roma theater directors, such is Sorin Sandu, and by publicly assuming their Roma identity.

Another notable Roma theater professional that remains active within public theater institutions since 1999 is Vera Linguraru, currently an actress at the „Ion

³¹ <https://sorinsan.wordpress.com/2016/03/06/teatrul-rrom-in-romania-scurt-remember-pentru-viitor/>

Creangă“ Theater. She also had some collaborations with the independent Roma feminist theater company *Giuvlipen*. Whilst the play „*Jekh răt lisăme*“ (Stormy Night) was written by the classical Romanian dramaturg I.L. Caragiale, and not by a Roma author, the endeavor of translating it into Romani and playing it in some of the major public theaters all around Romania („Masca“ Theater in Bucharest, the National Theater in Târgu Mureș, „Bacovia“ Theater in Galați etc.), as well as in the midst of some rural Roma communities, can be regarded as a real breakthrough in the field of Roma theatrical activity. It was the first time in Romania when professional Roma actors worked together to create a theater show in Romani language. The Roma actor and theater director, Sorin Sandu, founder of the Amphitheatrum NGO and collaborating actor at the „Masca“ Theater in Bucharest, believed that this *“endeavor will stimulate creative energies and will stimulate the increase of theatrical production among the Roma, which will eventually lead to the birth of the Roma Theater in Romania.”*

If this former instance is a unique representation involving a Romanian play that reflects the mores of the late 19th century Romanian society, being staged exclusively by Roma actors and producers, the next example is the complete opposite. Gianina Cărbunariu, a Romanian dramaturg, wrote a play inspired by the recent discriminatory and aggressive actions of the local authorities against the Roma community in Baia Mare, Romania. The play, called *Solidaritate* (Solidarity), was staged in 2013 at the „Radu Stanca“ National Theater in Sibiu and had relevant but short echoes throughout the Romanian media, describing the nationwide discrimination against the Roma as being the norm amongst local authorities. This is one of the new waves of contemporary plays written by a non-Roma that deals with the harsh realities of the vast majority of the Roma communities in Romania.

Another significant play in the contemporary documentary theater sphere is *Romo Sapiens* - staged and played by Roma actors in collaboration with Roma, Hungarian and Romanian writers and documentarians, which premiered in 2015 at the National Theater in Târgu Mureș. This theater production was part of a project created by the Asociația Romo Sapiens - Rudy Moca (NGO). The play follows a series of real-life discrimination cases that depict *“the current life of Roma caught in the threads of institutionalized racism. Scenes from Germany also appear (...), where the Roma are welcomed with open arms, but face the different types of bureaucratic blockages and cultural differences that complicate and prolong the problems of adapting to a new society.”*

Roma self-representation and activist theater movements over the last decade

Amongst the most prolific Roma rights producers who was also involved in the staging of the play, *Romo Sapiens*, is [Alina Șerban](#), Roma actress, authoress and pioneer of the Roma feminist political theater, active since 2009. Her autobiographical one-woman-show is on a Roma playwright, entitled *Slumdog Roma* (later renamed *I Declare at My Own Risk*) gained international recognition which led to more award-winning theatrical productions in the following years. Together with other active figures in the independent contemporary Roma theater, such as Mihaela Drăgan, Zita Moldovan, Mihai Lukács, Alexandru Fifea or Andrei Șerban, the new wave of Roma self-representation theater is today more oriented towards the independent social activist theater movements.

At the same time, the establishment of the first Roma feminist theater company *Giuvlipen*³² in 2014 by the Roma actresses Mihaela Drăgan and Zita Moldovan is an important leap forward towards the consolidation of a strong presence of the Roma self-representation theater in the broader Romanian cultural landscape. During the past years, *Giuvlipen* and the Roma actresses, actors, playwrights and theater directors that joined the company, wrote, produced and staged over 10 documentary theater plays focused on the self-representation of the Roma women and girls, and their vulnerability as women, and Roma community members, countering discrimination and racism, rising awareness on the Roma Holocaust (*Porajmos*) or countering prejudices about the Roma people that belong to the queer community. Still, apart from all its various collaborations and projects, *Giuvlipen* remains a feminist theater consisting only of Roma actresses, as one can see in almost all of its plays: “*La harneală tells, with the help of the evacuated women, the story of the evacuations from the area Rahova-Uranus (in Bucharest) in favor of the real estate mafia*; *Gadjo Dildo, a cabaret play which is a reaction to the famous film Gadjo Dildo and which resumes the deconstruction of the stereotypes associated with Roma women through the stories of three characters, Stela, Vanessa and Sidonia*; *Del Duma. Talk to them about me approaches the*

³² Feminism, in Romani language.

subject of early marriages through the stories of four characters."³³

There are also other independent Roma productions by independent actors who are active in the field of social and political theater. For instance, in 2017 ART HUB Bucharest produced the play *Bambina, regina florilor*, (Bambina, Queen of Flowers), the first show that talks about the traditions of the Boldeni Roma, based on research conducted in partnership with the Florists Association in Romania. This research focused "on the oral histories and customs of Roma florists in Bucharest and the life of the florist Lina Victorița Georgescu, known as Bambina, a successful businesswoman, emblematic figure of the florists' guild".³⁴ The play follows the story of a seven-year-old girl "who started selling flowers in the market and by the end of her life ended up leading a financial empire".

[Alexandru Fifea](#) is a freelance Roma actor and playwright, one of the actors and documentary writers involved in the production of *Bambina*, and has been active in the social-political independent theater since 2005. Fifea wrote, performed and directed several plays inspired by the harsh life realities of vulnerable and defenseless individuals in general (poor and homeless, sex workers, street life, including Roma people), being interested in representing real-life stories. For instance, the play *Voi n-ați văzut nimic* (You didn't see anything!)³⁵ that premiered in 2015, followed the story of Daniel-Gabriel Dumitrache, a young Roma who made a living from helping people parking their cars in the Bucharest old city center. He was beaten to death by the law enforcement inside a police station in 2014.

One of the defining features of the contemporary Roma theater is the high level of collaboration between independent Roma theater companies, freelance Roma and non-Roma actresses and actors, playwrights or theater directors, both locally and at international level. Such an example is the play *Privind prin piele* (Seeing through the skin), premiered in 2016, written by two non-Roma authors, Alexandru Berceanu and Ayşıl Akşehirli and produced by the dramAcum NGO. The cast - consisting of Roma actresses and actors: Alina Șerban / Mihaela Drăgan and Alexandru Fifea - told "the story of a family that at first is hiding their Roma origin and at the end is assuming their Roma identity."³⁶

³³ Preda, op. cit., p. 83.

³⁴ <https://www.caleido.ro/bambina-regina-florilor/>

³⁵ <https://www.caleido.ro/editia-i-2015/voi-n-ati-vazut-nimic/>

³⁶ <https://www.radioromaniacultural.ro/premiera-privind-prin-piele-in-dubla-distributie/>

Another example is the project called *Vi me som rom* (I am Roma too), a 2018 collaboration between Roma and non-Roma actresses and actors. Directed by [Andrei Șerban](#), a Roma independent actor, trainer, theater director and activist since 2007. The play aims to encourage Roma teenagers to assume their Roma identity and counter racism in schools. The show has been played since 2017 at Macaz COOP, a bar and an independent theater hub in Bucharest, and was part of a tour amongst many high schools around Romania. Furthermore, Șerban is one of the founders of the independent theater at Macaz COOP, one of the few places that stages Roma shows and deals with the social and political aspects of human rights through theater, hosting and producing over 18 premieres and 200 shows in the last 3 years.

At international level, there are other important collaborations, for instance, the *International Roma Heroes Theater Festival* organized by the Independent Theater Hungary, a platform which promotes many Roma productions from Romania, such as *Bambina* ([ART HUB Bucharest](#)), alongside with other productions of and interviews with Roma theater activists in Romania, such as Alina Șerban, Mihaela Drăgan, Alexandru Fifea or Andrei Șerban. In this regard, ART HUB Bucharest is planning to launch the first *International Roma Theater Festival "Kathe Akana"* (Here and Now) in 2021 as a necessary remedy to the absence of such festivals in the Romanian broader cultural landscape.

About the future of the Roma State Theater in Romania

As we have already seen, the idea of a Roma State Theater similar to those of the other National Minorities in Romania, is not new. During the last decade there were many local or private attempts to establish such a public institution. At official level, the *National Strategy for Roma Inclusion* mentioned in 2011 that one of its priorities is the founding of a Roma State Theater,³⁷ although until now, the institution has not been called to life. In 2013, the local council of Alba Iulia City approved a project on the establishment of a *National Roma Theater* in

³⁷ Annex 2, Types of general performance indicators for the priorities of the Government Strategy, 5. Culture, 2. Establishment of the Roma State Theater, published in the Official Journal no. 6 bis, January 4th, 2012: <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/135391>

collaboration with two local Roma NGOs,³⁸ but the project was never implemented. In a radio interview in 2016, [Mario Grosu](#), a Romanian³⁹ choreographer and producer of shows such as *Nomad Rhythm*, stated that he intends to open the first “Gypsy” (sic!) theater in Romania.⁴⁰ The title is misleading, since Grosu refers in fact to a theater department for Roma dancers, musicians and performers inside his own artistic company.

Over the last years, the Roma theater movement gained cohesion, momentum and public attention, being able to increasingly generate more independent theater productions. The main issues remain the acute lack of funding, and the absence of a dedicated building that could be appropriate for a stable and flourishing Roma theatrical and dramaturgical activity. On many occasions, the Roma theatrical productions had to be hosted in alternative spaces or, under better circumstances, in the public theater institutions of other National Minorities in Romania.

One of these institutions that helped host Roma theater productions is the Jewish State Theater; as in the case of the show, *Kali Traš* (Black Fear),⁴¹ a play created in 2018 by the *Giuvlipen* theater company and financed by AFCN⁴². It tells the story of the Roma Holocaust in Romania. The play was adapted after the novel *Cu moartea-n ochi* (With the Death in Front of My Eyes) written by the Roma author, Valerică Stănescu, one of the survivors. Ironically enough, this show was part of a project called *The Roma Theater is not Nomad!*,⁴³ as an attempt to raise the public’s awareness on the difficult situations that the Roma theater movement faces every day in its activity, and to the stringent need to create a Roma State Theater.

Despite the efforts made by all the Roma theater communities in Romania over the last decades, Mihaela Drăgan stated in an interview in 2017 that, during her talks regarding the creation of a Roma State Theater, one of the issues that was

³⁸ https://adevarul.ro/locale/alba-iulia/teatru-national-rom-alba-iulia-prezentarea-traditiilor-culturii-romilor-proiectul-costa-1-milion-euro-1_5107c883703bef3647bdbeda/index.html

³⁹ His ethnicity is not stated anywhere.

⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skyCLHccMvE>

⁴¹ <https://teatrul-evreiesc.com.ro/portfolio/kali-tras-frica-neagra>

⁴² The National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN) is at this moment the only relevant public institution that funds some of the Roma theater productions. However, the funding is based on the project competition principle and the sums are limited and mostly modest.

⁴³ <https://giuvlipen.com/teatrul-rom-nu-e-nomad/>

raised in an intransigent manner by a former Romanian minister of Culture was that “*there is no Roma tradition in the theater*”.⁴⁴ However, by the end of 2020 the idea of a Roma State Theater seems to gain, more than ever, the attention and support of many public cultural institutions and theaters, artistic and cultural organizations and cultural professionals from various domains.⁴⁵ In this promising context, in late 2020, an online discussion⁴⁶ started between one of the state secretaries from the Ministry of Culture and the Roma Actors Association (Asociația Actorilor Romi),⁴⁷ the NGO that founded the *Giuvlipen* theater company.

As a conclusion, the Roma theater movement has clearly come a long way since the early inter-war period. Despite a short cultural and identity awareness blooming during the 30s, the lack of recognition of the Roma communities as a National Minority in Romania had a detrimental effect throughout most of the 20th century on the social, economic, cultural and self-identity development of the Roma people. Thus, one can see the strong connection between being an official National Minority and the ownership and assuming of one's cultural and ethnic identity via its own cultural institutions. In this new context, the Roma - as a National Minority that is aware of its heritage and identity - could finally take its rightful place in the Romanian cultural landscape by having its own state-funded cultural institutions.

⁴⁴ <https://www.scena9.ro/article/un-teatru-rom-pentru-romania>

⁴⁵ <https://capitalcultural.ro/peste-50-de-personalitati-si-institutii-de-cultura-sustin-infiintarea-unui-teatru-rom-de-stat/>

⁴⁶ The entire discussion is in Romanian, and it can be watched here: <https://www.facebook.com/giuvlipen/videos/3384327294985959/>

⁴⁷ https://www.stiripesurse.ro/infiintarea-unui-teatru-rom-de-stat-a-fost-subiectul-unei-dezbateri-intre-reprezentantii-ministerului-culturii-si-cei-ai-asocatiei-actorilor-romi_1527701.html