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Bambina, the Queen of Flowers

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(excerpts)

Zita: (...) Thank you for coming in such large numbers to tonight's unique show that will tell you the story of Bambina, the Queen of Flowers. We have a difficult mission. Though it seems to be a textbook success story of a woman who starts from the bottom and through hard work ends up building an empire, Bambina's story is much more than that. She managed to break all clichés, standards, and barriers imposed by the society of her time. When we think of women, many of us associate them with the tenderness and fragility of a flower. Bambina's strength laid precisely in these flowers, which, though delicate, have an unstoppable energy. For me, Bambina is a model of a Romani woman who succeeded in a man's world. A world that often puts up barriers in front of women. I'd love to know Bambina's recipe for success: how did she do it all? She did everything society demanded of her: she was a responsible and loving mother, a devoted wife, and a thriving businesswoman. Despite her tireless work, she also found time to see her girlfriends, the street florists, who were like sisters to her and whom she treated as such. People say that, when it comes to business, women aren't that active in Romani communities. Yet, Bambina dismantled even this cliché and proved that a woman could be successful even in a society that didn't welcome her with open arms.

(...)

Alex: When we're born, we're surrounded by flowers. There are also the flowers that a mother, a wife, a daughter, and all people in love can never forget. Flowers are with us even in death, as we say goodbye to life and our loved ones also through flowers. I've had the opportunity to do my research and in fact to enter this world of flowers by talking to Mr. Florin Georgescu, whom many of you know. He's the eldest son of Bambina, the most famous street florist in Romania, whom we will commemorate tonight, and one of the founders of the Florists' Association. I want to thank him for his support. I admit, previously I knew little about this subject. Talking to Florin, I've realized that we're actually creating a show about a trade with a strong tradition, and especially about the women of a guild that is respected in society and in the Roma community: the street florists or the flower girls, as we used to call them.

(...)

It can be traced back a very long time, being passed on from generation to generation. And the street florists originate from the village of Bold.

(...)

SCENE 2 - THE VILLAGE OF BOLD

Kalia: We been sellin' flowers in Bucharest for a very long time, startin' with our grandparents.

Struțu: Even earlier, since the reign of Cuza¹!

Kalia: In other villages peasants had apples and pears for sale in front of their houses, but in Bold they only had wicker baskets full of flowers.

Struțu: When Cuza passed by one day, he asked: "What's with all these flowers?"

Kalia: An old gypsy woman told him: "Your Highness, the Boldens sell flowers, they don' know how to do nothin' else. We do what our ancestors did."

Struțu: And then Cuza asked: "Why you, the people of Bold?"

Kalia: "Your Highness, we take care of the flowers God left for people in His garden. We're hardworkin' people who love beauty, we learned how to take care of flowers and make our livin' this way."

Struțu: "That's how we earn a livin' and 'tis a decent and honest life." When Cuza heard such words, he said: "Tell your people that the king has ordered that the people of Bold are to be allowed to sell flowers in Wallachia forever." And that's how the idea of the Boldens, the street flower sellers, came to be.

Kalia: Other gypsy people and Romanians been learnin' how to sell flowers from us. Bold was always packed with flowers and people from other villages came there to buy 'em. The street florist with experience took baskets of flowers from Bold to Bucharest and sold 'em at Capșa, the fanciest restaurant at that time.

Struțu: And every time people saw a pretty, charmin' flower girl, they were very happy to buy from her, believin' it was good omen and that they'd have a great day.

(...)

¹ Alexandru Ioan Cuza was the first king of the united Romanian Principalities through his double election as ruler of Moldavia on 5 January 1859 and of Wallachia on 24 January 1859.

SCENE 3 - IN THE 1930S

(...)

Zita: (...) In the 1930s, the Roma asked the mayor to let the street florists do business in more places in the Capital. They explained that the flower girls were “forced to walk all day with a heavy burden on their heads, coming back home exhausted and often without selling enough to make a living.”

Andrei: The most important representative of the street florists during that period was Gogu Floraru, Gheorghe Niculescu being his real name. He fought for this profession’s survival to this very day.

Zita: Great flower merchant! He was the first given permission to open a flower shop, “Two Roses,” in St. Anton market. Starting there, he initiated an emancipation movement that exceeded all expectations. In 1934, he became the Voivode of the Roma and the president of the General Union of the Roma, the first legally established Romani organization, which had forty branches and 780,000 members.

Andrei: He was also famous for the Roma Balls he organized in Bucharest at the Bragadiru Gib ballroom, where the party lasted till morning and a Queen of the Ball was elected. Next to Roma, many celebrities and artists attended, the most beloved being singer Maria Tănase². Every time, at midnight, Gogu Floraru went on stage, while the Romani March played, and gave a speech.

Instrumental recording of the Roma March is playing.

Zita: Let’s listen to him speak!

Gogu Floraru: My dear Roma men and women, all I know is that I’ve worked tirelessly for the wellbeing of our people. Not a day goes by without hearing

² Maria Tănase (1913-1963) was a Romanian singer and actress. Her music ranged from traditional Romanian music to romance, tango, chanson, and operetta. Tănase has a similar importance in Romania as Édith Piaf in France, being considered a major cultural icon of the twentieth century.

about a new Roma association. Yes, Roma have begun to understand that they can no longer live like they have, that they need to find a better future. Every day I've knocked on the doors of the ministries to meet the demands of the Roma. But I must ask myself a question. For better or for worse, we, the florists of yesterday, have found work, but what will our children do? There was a time when our people earned a living more easily thanks to flowers. The turning of the world has made many of our beautiful trades slowly disappear, and our Roma fell prey to poverty and unemployment. My association and I have fought for the Romani youth to have a different life. The authorities must help our sons and daughters so that the Roma's children have access to all trades and occupations. I urge you, my beloved florists who are here, to stay close to each other 'cuz only united will we reach this goal. Let's show everyone what our troubles are, who we are, and what we can do to prove to the whole world that we want a better fate and don't deserve so much contempt. (...)

Kalia: The women of Bold was great florists and kept to their trade and taught it to their daughters. The times was different! They got together, collected the flowers, and then each took a basket and went to work barefoot 'cuz they very poor at that time. And they ain't sell no flowers sittin' in one place.

Struțu: Very few had a designated place on the street or in the market!

Kalia: They took the baskets and went to ladies' homes, to the boyars. The veggie sellers, the flower girls, the dairy sellers, all gone door to door on 'em streets downtown, on Mântuleasa, on Dacia, to the mansions.

Struțu: The ladies came out on the balconies and called, "Flower girl, come upstairs!"

Kalia: And they never bought just a few flowers, they bought whole baskets! They wanted to help the gypsy women. If they had two-three young children and no one to leave 'em with in the mornin', they took 'em along. And the ladies welcomed 'em into their homes, can you imagine? Yes, they let 'em in through the service doors!

Struțu: Into the servants' quarters! After they bought the flowers, the ladies filled the gypsies' baskets with food, shoes, children's clothes, they also gave 'em money. But all this happened long ago, in King Carol's time.

A Florist: My father also sold flowers in that time. In 1930, when he was only ten, he was already selling flowers with my grandmother in Rosetti Square.

Kalia: Near the public clock!

Struțu: That's right! There was about seven-eight flower stalls in a row. And when Queen Marie,³ Carol's mother, passed by in her carriage, the florists came out to her and filled her arms with flowers. She was very popular, I know from my father.

Kalia: Very, very popular!

³ Marie of Romania (Marie Alexandra Victoria; 1875-1938), also known as Marie of Edinburgh, was the last Queen of Romania as the wife of King Ferdinand I from 1914 to 1927.

SCENE 4 - TRANSNISTRIA AND SOCIALISM

Alex: In 1942, at the order of Ion Antonescu, Romania's wartime dictator, many convoys of wagons guarded by gendarmes and freight trains overloaded with Roma people, including many florists from Bucharest, left for Transnistria. This was the place of exile for those considered of inferior race, those who had to disappear to purify the Romanian nation. Lied to about their fate upon departure, lied to upon arrival, robbed upon departure, robbed while crossing the Dniester, robbed upon arrival in Transnistria. With no one to care about them, the Roma were easy prey for those who planned their disappearance, forced them to give up their way of life, and brought them to their deaths. An outbreak of cold and hunger, typhoid fever, and firing squad executions. Nobody ever wanted to know how many were sent there and how many came back to Romania. So far, no mass Roma grave has been found and no monument has been erected in Transnistria to commemorate those missing.

(...)

Kalia: We don' know nothin' else, even durin' communism we only knew how to buy flowers and sell 'em. If you think 'bout it, it looks like an easy job, but 'tis hard work. You wake up at night and line up at the wholesale at 1 or 2 in the mornin'. Then, 'tis up to each of us: how she runs 'er place, that's how she has it. In our trade, men don' get involved.

Struțu: There are men who do this job, but just a few, you can count them on one hand.

(...)

SCENE 5 - BAMBINA

Alex: We've come to the most important chapter in our story. Bambina's name is known to all florists in Romania and with her life, dedicated entirely to flowers, she made history in this field. She loved flowers and they paid her back with power, wealth, and fame. Hers is the story of a Romani woman who defied the stereotypes of the time. She began getting to know flowers, to cherish them, and to make a real business out of selling them at an early age. George Coşbuc Market in the capital was known for many years as the kingdom of flowers. There was no flower, scent, or color that you couldn't find there. She was nicknamed Bambina by the florists everywhere because she was just a child when she started. Her fame was so great that Bambina became Elena Ceauşescu's official supplier during the "golden" years of communism. Few knew her by her real name, Lina Georgescu. She was and will remain Bambina, the Queen of Flowers, who, with her financial genius, outclassed the business world at the time and built an empire of flowers. Like many women, she loved looking good and yet she ran her business with an iron fist. There are good reasons everybody says that she revolutionized the flower trade in Romania. In 1994 she was importing the most beautiful flowers in Romania and owned 90% of the capital's flower market. I want to invite Andrei and Zita back on stage. Andrei has spoken many times with Bambina's son, Florin Georgescu, and has been inspired to impersonate him on stage as he is in real life. Zita talked to several street florists who remembered their friend Bambina. Zita assembled these discussions and created a new character, Kalia. All the words are a hundred percent authentic, just like they were spoken, we haven't added anything.

Andrei and Zita come back on stage as Florin and Kalia, respectively.

Florin: Mom stood out 'cuz she was probably a little smarter than my grandma, who had only a flower stall on a street corner. My parents were street florists and my parents' parents were also florists, our whole family has been in the flower business since forever.

Kalia: Bambina loved flowers since she was a child. When she was just seven, she came home from school, threw her knapsack down, and went to her mother's flower stall. I'm gonna tell you a story you'll like. On Monday, when all the florists rested, Bambina's mom stayed at home to cook for the whole week and catch her breath. When it came to flowers, the girl ain't listen to anyone. Her mother, Victora, bought a bunch of a hundred stems, made seven-eight bouquets, and threw away the ones that broke. What do you think Bambina did? She gathered 'em, made bouquets, gone to restaurants, and sold 'em. Monday been her big day, all the flower girls was off, and the customers had no choice, but to buy from Bambina.

Florin: Exactly! That's how she made her pocket money. At fourteen, she was already a street florist in the Union's Square. Her stall was there where St. Friday's church's now. When she first went to a movie with my father, my mother paid 'cuz he had just come back from the army and had no money. After they got married, they had five children, three boys and two girls, and started, as we say, from the bottom. Her family had already moved to Bucharest and they lived in the Colentina neighbourhood, besides Brotăcei, the Little Frogs restaurant, if you know it, on Teiul Doamnei street. Across the restaurant there was a compact area of Roma, about five hundred people lived there, all very poor. Seven-eight-ten even fifteen people slept in one room. Only three-four families had a television set, and everybody went to 'em to watch shows. "Let's go to the uncle's," they said. That's how she met my father. Less than two years after they got married, the mayor assigned 'em an apartment in the Pantelimon neighbourhood with two bedrooms 'cuz they already had children. We had one-upped our people, we were more than fine. Other Roma slept ten in a room, we had a bathroom, a shower, we had better livin' conditions. At the old house, we had an outhouse in the backyard, we had to walk ten meters to it even in winter. Durin' Ceaușescu's time, the florists went to the Coșbuc Market at three in the mornin', bought flowers from the peasants, and then paid a fee for a stall.

Kalia: At that time, you couldn' ask for more than six lei⁴ for a stem but when Bambina turned eighteen, she bought her husband a car and they started drivin' around in the villages. She saw what the peasants had and asked 'em,

⁴ Leu - singular, lei - plural – Romanian currency.

“How many flowers you got?” “Five hundred.” “And how many can you have by next week?” “Three thousand.” And she gave ‘em the money in advance. She done that differently than the older florists who ain’t had no trust to pay in advance. And since she also bought all they had, Bambina always got a good price. We, the other florists, bought five hundred stems at most.

Florin: Mom also started buyin’ flowers from the greenhouse outlets. There was one in St. George Square, another one, Iris, also in Bucharest, she also went to the greenhouses in Codlea, near Braşov, and always had fresh flowers. She ended up buyin’ by the truck, 500,000 carnations at once. It was very difficult to manage with so many flowers at that time, the other florists didn’t even think they could do it. She already had a team of women florists and was sellin’ truckloads of flowers in the Coşbuc Market. My mother stood out with her courage! How could one dare buy hundreds of thousands of carnations at once? We had problems sometimes, many went bad once when the Thermo King, the refrigerated truck, didn’t work. A carnation, for example, doesn’t last more than four-five days. But my mother could sell half a truckload in twenty-four hours ‘cuz all of Romania was buyin’ from her. Year after year she became more and more powerful without realizin’ it.

Kalia: All of us, the gypsy florists, loved her but Romanians loved her, too. She gave us flowers on credit, she was the kindest possible woman! We paid in a week, in three weeks, when we could. She gave us a discount when we had to throw away too many unsold flowers. She was the best! So kind! She saved us with flowers and money. Oh God, how many times did she save us? Now we pay cash and throw away half of what we buy. She sometimes even gave us a bouquet or two for free and her business still thrived in one year as much as others in ten!

Florin: Monday’s our day off ‘cuz flowers don’ sell well on Mondays, and mom went to Cina, the Dinner restaurant, every Monday. It was very difficult to get a table there durin’ Ceauşescu, especially for gypsies. Mom made friends with the manager, invited him to our apartment, he came, and she served him the best whiskey and Kent cigarettes. The man was shocked how generous she was and how nice he treated him.

Kalia: Durin' communism, givin' flowers meant payin' someone respect. After 1990 was an explosion of Western products and no one bought flowers anymore. We almost gone bankrupt till 1994.

Florin: Let me explain what that means. Up to 1989, florists with street stalls made about, let's put it in euros to make it clear, about 1000 euros a month. After 1990, they only made 150-200 euros. They just couldn't sell more. People were no longer interested in flowers. Before, flowers meant respect, but after 1990 you gave a pack of Kent or a bag of coffee beans or a box of candy to a teacher. So, we thought of bringin' somethin' new to the market and started importin' flowers from Holland.

Kalia: Yes, 'cuz in 1994 somethin' extraordinary happened. A former taxi driver, Bambina's driver, with whom she was friends, went to Holland to work and became a driver at the largest flower auction. One day he was chattin' with the owner and told him that Bambina was the best in this business in Romania.

Dutchman: Well then, put me in touch with her.

Kalia: And the Dutchman came to Bucharest. They met at the Dunărea restaurant.

Dutchman: I want to work with you, to send you merchandise, to do business together.

Kalia: And Bambina told him: "You know what's the problem? We don' have visas. They ne'er give visas to gypsies. We'll ne'er get to Holland so that I can see the goods and I can't just buy 'em by the photos.

Dutchman: No problem, my taxes pay the ambassador. I'm a Dutch citizen and I pay him to facilitate my business in Romania. He has no choice but to give you a visa. Tomorrow morning get your husband and let's meet at the Dutch embassy!

Kalia: And Bambina went to the embassy, and the consul came, and the Dutchman said to him:

Dutchman: I want to do business with these people, and you are paid to facilitate my business in Romania, I want to enter this country with my flower business.

Florin: And they gave us a visa for the whole family, the four-year-old child included, we all went on the guarantee of Mr. Jan, Jan Van Der Meer⁵, that's his name. I went to Holland with mom and dad, and when I saw the flower auction, I was shocked. It was a whole underground city, and there were flowers that didn't even exist in Romania. Only new, quality products, the extra carnations had 1.10-meter stems and a head like this.

Kalia: Carnations was always anemic in Romania. When the flowers came from abroad, customers was amazed when they saw the carnations, not to mention the roses, tulips, chrysanthemums, or other flowers. They opened their wallets. So, Bambina been the first to bring 'em flowers to Romania.

(...)

⁵ Van der Meer Flowerexport is a wholesaler in the Netherlands. <
<https://www.vandermeerflowers.com>>

SCENE 6 - PROTESTS

Alex: Bambina's energy made her business grow and brought prosperity to all florists. Things went well until 2007. After Romania's entry into the EU, Dutch producers came here and opened their own flower warehouses. Van Der Meer opened a wholesaler in Iași. Soon, financial crisis also started. In addition, Bucharest city hall started demolishing the flower stalls and refused to renew vending permits.

Kalia: Before it was more profitable, we ain't have no problems with financial authorities and taxes. Durin' Ceaușescu, there been just permits and price limits. The peasants ain't have no time to go to the market, they had the advantage to do their job and we bought their whole flower crops. (...)

Florin: And after all this work, they now must go every three months to renew their vendin' permits. In 2005, I founded the Roma association 'cuz of that. The city hall said that they wanted to modernize the city, to demolish all the stalls and kiosks. I went to Mr. Adriean Videanu, the mayor of Bucharest at that time, and proposed to him to modernize the flower trade together.

Videanu: It's ok, you want to support us, and we'll support you. Let's sign a collaborative agreement.

Kalia: Florin wanted better conditions for us. He made a deal with the mayor, then told us, "Let's create somethin' beautiful for 'em, some unique kiosks." Mine's smaller 'cuz I don' have no more room in my place. Others have 'em large. It depends on the space. And last spring they been sayin' we had to change 'em.

Florin: We signed the agreement in 2006. I called all the district mayors and said, "Sir, we'll make a model kiosk as you want it, just give us the concession for 49 years like you did for books and newspapers. You gave it to 'em for free, but we wanna pay. Let's make it economically good for Bucharest, too. For one thousand flower kiosks, if you set it at one hundred euros per month, it comes to one million two hundred thousand euros per year. We, the street florists, don't want it free.

Videanu: Okay. We must set up a joint committee with representatives from the capital's city hall, the City Planning, and the florists' association to agree on where the kiosks should be located and which model to choose.

Florin: A year passed, and nothin' happened. Nothin' came from city hall and no one came from the City Plannin'. The urban planner said that he couldn' come without Videanu's approval, even though we already had the agreement. Then we held the biggest protest rally, seven-eight hundred Roma, all with placards, on which we wrote: "We want civilized commerce!"

Kalia: "We want cash registers!" We walked from the Cina restaurant to the city hall, but Videanu ain't come out. Murgeanu, the vice mayor, came to talk to us and he also called Bold, the city's chief architect, but he ain't one of us, a Bolden. Many older florists led by Bambina was there and Murgeanu told us straight that he ain't know 'bout the agreement. Videanu only signed it but ain't submit it nowhere.

Florin: Then I went to each district mayor and presented to 'em three models of flower kiosks. I held a referendum in the Obor Market. We gave each citizen a flower to vote for one of the kiosks and that's how we chose a kiosk model for district 2.

Kalia: 'Em big kiosks cost ten thousand euros. Well, maybe between six thousand and ten thousand. And we paid 'em with our money. We thought that the European Union would give us fundin', but they gave us nothin', they forced us to pay. We took loans from banks, we gone out of our ways to do that. We said, let's fall in line 'cuz that's our daily bread.

Florin: After that I went to the mayor of district 3, to Liviu Negoită, who didn't want the same kind of kiosks. "Okay, we'll make another model!" I told him.

Negoită: Fine, but I'm not breaking the law!

Florin: Which law?

Negoită: Law no. 50/1990 which says that you can only sell on public domain at desks, tables, and stalls.

Florin: Wait a minute, are you settin' us back fifty years? That's a law from 1990.

Negoiță: Okay, we'll give you the permits, but only for one year!

Florin: I had nothin' else to do but accept. And in 2007, Negoiță changed his mind.

Negoiță: Friday at 2 o'clock there should be no flower kiosk in district 3!

Florin: He hired three demolition companies, and, in a few hours, they came with cranes and bulldozers and tore down all the flower kiosks in district 3. After that I put on a show of force. For ten days, we held a rally in front of the mayor's office in district 3, a few hundred people. Eventually, Băsescu, the president of Romania at that time, called Videanu.

Băsescu: Helloooo, what's going on with that gypsy mess in front of the mayor's office in district 3?

Florin: Everybody knew about us 'cuz journalists came and interviewed us.

Băsescu: Dude, what's that Liviu doing? He must end that gypsy rally immediately. He couldn't get rid of those gypsies in a week?!

Florin: And then Negoiță called me again:

Negoiță: What kiosk models do you have? Look, I want this one, but with some changes!

Florin: Sir, whatever you want, but give people somethin'! They're elders, that's what they live off. Will you give 'em jobs or social assistance? (to the audience) And now, after ten years, the latest rally we held a few months ago was to continue fightin' for concessions. There are districts that still give us permits for only three months. They say that they don' have the legal framework to give 'em for longer, but they twist the law how they like.

Kalia: You can't even sign a contract for electricity 'cuz you need a permit for at least one year, and many florists have problems 'cuz of that. In fact, they wanna make us dependent on them, they like us to come and beg, kiss their hands, humiliate ourselves in front of 'em, and we must bribe them every time to extend the vending permits. And we're their ace in the hole in elections! (...)

SCENE 7 - THE END

(...)

Alex: Through her efforts to keep the street florists' community united, Bambina remains a role model for all of us.

(...)

Alex: Bambina's last wish was for Boldens to carry on her legacy and create a new flower species that would return the empire of street florists to its past glory.