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FROM CULTURAL APPROPRIATION TO SELF-REPRESENTATION

A History of Roma Theatre in Romania

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*This essay was originally published on [HowlRound Theatre Commons](#) on December 3, 2021

In artistic and literary discourses, Romani people are so often negatively represented. Our stories are frequently appropriated by non-Roma people, and many times the characters presented are stereotypical, falling into the archetype of villains who, by the end of the story, are severely punished. To counteract this narrative, over the last few years my collective Giuvlipen and I have been generating a repertoire of plays that focus on our Roma identity, each one displaying a different worldview of Romani people living in Romania.

As academic Suciú Pavel Cristian describes, the dominant representations of Roma place them in the marginal and/or exotic category, like noble savages or members of an abject race. "Beginning in the fifteenth century, Roma inspired an impressive corpus of visual and literary representations. The striking contrast between this inclusion in art and literature and their social exclusion has no simple explanation," he writes. "The analysis becomes all the more complicated by the fact that writers who put into circulation idealized images of the Gypsies were often indifferent, at best, if not hostile, at worst, to the real population."

Theatre has borrowed many of these violent perceptions and has contributed to the reinforcement of stereotypes about Roma, constructing and disseminating negative typologies and archetypes of Romani characters such as the fortune-teller, the thief, and the criminal, as well as romanticized characters like the passionate or rebellious "Gypsy." These dehumanizing caricatures have been assimilated in public discourse, paving the way for both the rampant cultural appropriation of Romani culture today and the anti-Roma sentiment that has historically plagued European society and continues to rear its ugly head.

As a founding member of the [Roma Actor's Association](#) and [Giuvlipen](#), an independent Roma feminist theatre company based in Romania, I work with fellow artists towards the construction of a full Roma cultural identity while also seeking to dismantle widespread stereotypes.

Despite the fact that Romania has the most developed network of minority theatres in Europe—the country is host to nine Hungarian state theatres, two German ones, and one Jewish one—no theatre space exists for Roma minority, the country's second largest minority. (Unofficially, Roma are, in fact, Romania's largest ethnic minority, but, given the deeply seated stigma surrounding Roma identity and thus the shame of self-declaration, these statistics are skewed.) One

would think that the long history of Romani persecution in Romania—five centuries of slavery and eleven thousand Roma who perished in the Holocaust—would render the establishment of a Roma theatre a moral obligation of the state.

However, when the Roma Actor's Association approached cultural authorities to help establish a Roma state theatre, the responses we received time after time were offensive against Roma; they intoned inaccurate stereotypes, arguing that we don't have a theatrical tradition. But, contrary to widely accepted and false notions that Romani have not cultivated a tradition of theatre art, new [research](#) by theatre director Mihai Lukacs shows that Roma slaves laid the foundations of early modern theatre in the Romanian Principalities:

Once the jesters were integrated into the history of Romanian theatre, their ethnicity and lowly slave status were forgotten, thereby denying the symbolic importance of Roma participation in the construction of a national culture. The rediscovery of Roma jesters is a gesture of recognition of Roma theatrical tradition, which preceded that of Romanian theatre and deeply influenced it.

The forgotten tradition of the Roma slave jesters, who for three hundred years were the only performers of the epoch, shows us how their early contribution in the building of a Romanian national culture was erased. Moreover, we learn from Lukacs' research how the compositions and texts of jesters and lautari (Romani musicians) were the "intellectual property" of the lords who owned them. Therefore, the creations of the Romani cultural slaves were automatically transferred to their owners, meaning Roma themselves received no credit for their artistic work.

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Historical events, such as the deportations of Roma to Transnistria under the fascist regime of the Romanian government during the Second World War, thwarted Roma theatre culture, which included troupes, puppetry, and circus arts. In the period that followed the Romani Holocaust, Roma artistic production was

completely absent from Romanian theatre, yet examples of Romani cultural appropriation proliferated. The most significant example is the socialist play *Rhapsody of the Gypsies* by Mircea Ștefănescu, which premiered in 1957 and takes place during the period of Roma slavery. Despite being performed with the accompaniment of a band of Roma musicians, the Romani characters were performed by non-Roma actors.

It wasn't until 2010 that the long period of invisibility of Roma in theatre came to an end with the appearance of the first Romani theatre production in contemporary Romania. The play, *Jekh răț lisăme* (*A Stormy Night*), was an adaptation of a story by the illustrious Romanian playwright, I. L. Caragiale, translated into Romanes (the Romani language) by Romani actor Sorin Sandu, directed by him and another Romani actor, Rudy Moca, and performed and disseminated by professional actors who assumed their Roma ethnicity: Marcel Costea, Zita Moldovan, Sorin-Aurel Sandu, Madalin Mandin, Dragoș Dumitru. Although the show enjoyed immediate success, the reaction from the public wasn't free from hateful public opinions; some considered it offensive that a play written by Caragiale, a symbol of Romanian national culture, was performed in the Romani language and "appropriated" by a team of Roma artists.

While *Jekh răț lisăme* is a classic comedy whose subject does not necessarily have a connection with the Roma, the gesture of translating it into Romani language and having it performed by Roma actors became a political statement of de-marginalization of Romani culture and, in particular, of Romani theatre. The fact that the piece inspired negative reactions demonstrates the racism of Romanian society—a society that is comfortable with negative images about Roma found in the media and entertainment industry but unprepared for an affirmative cultural view of the same ethnic group. But for Roma actors, *Jekh răț lisăme* symbolized a gesture of encouragement to initiate other Romani theatrical productions, as well as a glorious beginning for Romani theatre, which became increasingly "political" in the years to follow.

Since that moment, Romania has enjoyed many productions that tackle subjects relating to discrimination and persecution of Roma—plays that directly attack racism (*I Declare On My Own Responsibility*, a one-woman show with and by Alina Serban about individual discrimination), police abuses against Roma (*You Did Not See Anything!*, a one-man show with and by Alexandru Fifea about the real story of a young Roma killed by the Romanian police), or bullying, stigma, and the

segregation of Roma children in schools (*I Am Roma, Too!*, directed by Andrei Serban, and *Looking Through the Skin*, written and directed by Alexandru Berceanu). Other plays depict the forced evictions of entire Roma communities (*Without Support* by Bogdan Georgescu, and *La Harneala*, written and directed by me and Lukacs) or early marriages (*Del Duma / Talk About Me!*, an one-woman feminist show written and performed by me).

Almost all of these plays were built as documentary theatre, using interviews as the basis for the storytelling, and exist in the broader category of social/political theatre. Many of the Romani actors who work in the field have been influenced by the work of director David Schwartz, who calls his artistic practice “political theatre”—theatre that is positioned from and assumes a leftist perspective.

Schwartz believes that all theatre is political because it is public discourse, part of the continuous transformation of power relations in the organization of a society. However, because the idea that art contains an implicit political dimension is still being challenged and minimized in Romania, it is important for Schwartz to explicitly label the theatre he’s making. “Political theatre is a theatre that aims to question, provoke and take uncomfortable positions in relation to dominant discourse,” he explains. “It’s theatre that attempts to attack social and economic issues head-on and to go into the profound analysis of the causes and dynamics of these issues.”

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Beyond these definitions, this type of theatre involves artistic responsibility and ethical conduct. In an artistic creation, artists cannot speak authentically and respectfully about race, minority, gender, or sexuality except from a left-wing political perspective. However, there are many productions in Romania that are directly about the Romani experience that are deeply problematic.

Sometimes these productions are documentary theatre, based on true stories about Roma, but are performed by non-Roma actors. They expose intimate parts of Roma’s lives, exploit their suffering, and are not only appropriative in terms of story and costume, but also present stereotypical depictions of Romani people. The plays speak on behalf of the Roma community from a perspective of the privileged white majority and are seen by a majority white audience. And even if

the audiences may be moved to tears, those tears do not change the ingrained racist mentalities that denigrate Roma and reduce them to the status of absolute victims, nor do they change Roma people's realities.

Even with the best intentions, talking about Roma without Roma—and, specifically, non-Roma actors playing Roma characters—is dangerous and damaging for the Roma artists who occupy a position of marginality and struggle to make their voices heard on local stages. Romani people have a whole history of oppression and silence behind us, such that no non-Romani artist has the right to represent us in their artistic projects without our voices. That approach only helps to preserve the status of marginalization and precariousness of Roma theatre and Roma artists.

When I founded Giuvlipen with Lukacs and actress Zita Moldovan in 2014, we wanted to respond to these misrepresentations of Romani people and also offer an alternative option to the Roma actors from Romania in order to reclaim our culture. We refused to pigeonhole ourselves in the category of social or activist theatre, as we felt the connotation that came with the label placed primary emphasis on Roma as a social problem rather than on the artistic value of the cultural product. We preferred instead to identify as a “contemporary Roma feminist theatre.” Our goal was to develop our own practice and methods—not to create documentary theatre but to create fiction, to develop a type of experimental Roma theatre with an intersectional and progressive discourse, one that tells stories of empowerment about our Roma identity.

It was the first time a Roma theatre group formed in Romania, consistently assuming the role of producing theatre. Over time we collaborated with the majority of Roma actors in the country, and we now have six productions in our repertoire: *Gadjo Dildo*, *Who Killed Szomna Grancsa?*, *Orange Blue*, *Urban Body*, *Kali Traś / Dark Fear*, and *The Cult of Personality*. With an intersectional, feminist, anti-racist, and queer agenda, Giuvlipen was named by [Reuters](#) in 2017 “the vanguard of the Romani revolution in Romania, a counter-attack, through art and activism against centuries of oppression.”

Although a Roma state theatre still does not exist in Romania, one step was made last year when, for the first time, a state theatre joined forces with Giuvlipen to co-produce a Roma show. The piece, *Kali Traś*, which depicts the Roma Holocaust in Romania, is part of the repertoire of the [Jewish State Theatre](#) in Bucharest. In

the following years, as we seek to ensure the continuity of Roma theatre productions in the Romanian national space, our intention with Giuvlipen is to collaborate with other state theatres. Our years of experience in the independent scene have taught us that the precariousness and lack of space threatens our sustainability.

Roma theatre in Europe has been consistently marginalized because of the segregation and discrimination of Romani people as a group. We Romani artists are looking to reclaim our place in the world of theatre with our bodies and voices.

As professionals, we are interested in using theatre as a way to speak about our experiences, as a response and as recourse to the lack of inclusion and marginalization we have faced. We want to get rid of the idea that Roma theatre is sad and overwhelmingly focused on our oppressive experiences. We celebrate our identity and resistance through theatre, we take a lot of pride and joy from being Roma on stage and we want to contribute to a new type of drama that is more inclusive with minorities and non-white theatremakers.