

6 Roma creatives talk art, identity, and the fight for equality in Romania

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Working in theatre, TV, literature and music research, these six women tell daring and urgent stories of Roma oppression, survival, and power.

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Romania's one million Roma people have a long, yet little-known history of oppression. For five centuries, they were enslaved by Romanian noblemen and the Church. During the Second World War, 25,000 Romanian Roma people were deported to Transnistria, for being "dangerous to public order". Historians estimate that altogether, between 220,000 and 500,000 Romani were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War — between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of Europe's Roma population at the time — in either concentration camps or summary executions. More died during the deportations due to cold, hunger and disease. However, few Romanians — or, indeed, Roma people — are aware of these atrocities, as they are not taught in schools, or widely spoken about in the media.

Today, anti-Roma prejudice has remained in place. In Romania and across the rest of Europe, Roma people encounter systemic discrimination: being profiled by police, rejected by landlords, denied access to bank accounts, and lacking basic infrastructure in Roma neighbourhoods. Thanks to the work of charities, NGOs, and recent European legislation, things are slowly beginning to change — but those hoping to root out anti-Roma racism for good face a daunting uphill battle.

The Calvert Journal spoke to six Roma activists from the creative industries about the challenges both they and their communities face on a daily basis. Bold, creative, engaged and self-aware, these women have embraced their Roma heritage, and are fighting to make a difference in the way Roma people are perceived, and treated in Romanian society today.

Ioanida Costache

Musician, videographer, writer and researcher of Roma music at Stanford University

"You can never truly understand what it is like to be called a racial slur until one is addressed to you directly," Ioanida Costache told the crowds at an annual storytelling conference in Bucharest last autumn. "I knew from an early age that my ethnicity was something to hide."

Born and raised in the US, Costache returned to Romania to write her PhD on traditional Roma music at Stanford University, despite her parents fleeing the country to escape prejudice in 1985. Her pioneering research focuses on Romani music, spanning Holocaust songs to the recent scandals surrounding the contemporary Roma pop genre *manele*. After taking Romania by storm in the 1990s and early 2000s, *manele* has more recently sparked moral outrage over the glitzy lifestyle of its artists — although Costache says that much of the exaggerated opposition to *manele* as a genre “naturalises xenophobia, disgust and racism, disguised as thinly veiled aesthetic arguments.”

“On a personal level,” Costache explains, “this research project has been one of reclaiming, recovering, and recouping all the things I felt I lost when my parents emigrated.” Her father made both Costache and her brother learn how to play the violin from an early age, but as she now says: “The irony, of course, was that my brother and I were learning to play Bach and Mozart, which didn’t bring us (or my father) any closer to the music we’d been cut off from.”

Costache is now reconnecting with her roots, which is both painful, and rewarding.

“Living in Romania, I learned what it means to feel racism as a Roma person” — it’s like a constant TV background noise, she explains. “But, by meeting other Roma women, who weren’t my mother, for the first time, I also learned what it felt like to belong, what solidarity and sisterhood feel like.”

Luminița Cioabă

Poet, writer, filmmaker, translator and head of the Ion Cioabă Foundation

“I have always had a calling for writing,” says Luminița Cioabă. As one of the few remaining Roma people born into a semi-nomadic community, her earliest memory is of sitting by the bonfire, where people gathered after work to play music, dance, and tell folk tales. Many told stories about their experiences during the Holocaust, which they called “the lands of death”. One night, a five-year-old Cioabă held her hand up, and then quickly placed it on her chest, underneath her clothes. When her grandmother asked why, she explained, “I’m gathering stories.”

Decades later, and Cioabă is still collecting stories. She was the first to collect testimonies from Roma Holocaust survivors in Romania, and relate them in a documentary film, *Roma Tears*, as well as two books, titled *Deportations to Transnistria. Testimonials*, and *After 65 Years of Clear Silence*. For Cioabă, this work has a personal link: her father survived the deportations as a seven-year-old, and was only released because of his status as the son of the *bulibașa* — the head of a traditional Roma community. “It was my father’s idea to make books and films on the Holocaust,” says Cioabă, “and I tried to carry this project through after his death.”

Cioabă’s relationship with her father — the famous Romani king Ion Cioabă — was at times tumultuous, to a certain extent thanks to her determination as a teenager to oppose her parents’ will to marry her early, as the customs in their traditional community dictated. Instead, Cioabă fought to finish school, study literature at university, and pursue her vocation as a writer. She published her first poems at 17. Now she leads a cultural foundation in her father’s name.

Cioabă’s prose and poetry also celebrate Roma culture, as well as relaying past tragedies. Her book *The Lost Country* is a collection of vivid folk Roma stories, told by female narrators, which explain nomadic Roma traditions through myth. Yet, with integration and migration, Cioabă fears that Roma communities are losing their language and identity. To counter that, she has just finished translating the Bible into Romani — a first for Romani language, and a Gargantuan task that took three years of intense work. “There are about 300 Romani authors in the world at the moment, as Romani writing

only gained momentum in the 1950s," following the Holocaust, and thanks to the rise of public education in Europe, and around the world. "We have a lot of ground to cover," Cioabă says, hopeful.

Mihaela Drăgan

Actor, writer, and co-founder of the first Roma theatre company, Giuvlipen

After graduating from drama school in 2013, Mihaela Drăgan wrote and acted in her first one-woman show, *Del Duma* (or *Tell Them About Me* in Romani). The play interweaves the stories of several Roma women, ranging from a girl in a traditional Roma community who wants to keep studying, despite her parents' desire to see her married early, to a cosmopolitan woman who finds herself exoticised by the white men she dates. "I thought it would be a one-off thing, and then I'd return to 'noble theatre', Shakespeare and all," Drăgan laughs. "But with *Del Duma*, my civic and political consciousness developed, and I realised I did not want to be part of a dominant white culture, or contribute to a mainstream which I can barely access anyway."

Instead she founded Giuvlipen, Romania's first Roma theatre company. Its name means "feminism" in the Romani language — a term Drăgan and her colleague Zita Moldovan coined themselves by joining the Romani word for "woman" and "collective". "As the first Roma theatre, we often felt that there was this pressure on us to be educational," Drăgan says.

But Giuvlipen employs a range of genres: docu-drama, elements of cabaret, and even musical theatre, drawing on both hip hop and traditional Roma music. They collaborate with several directors, and a dozen of actors. Since its founding in 2013, Giuvlipen has put on two productions per year in independent venues and state theatres, such as the Jewish Theatre in Bucharest. They also tour in Roma communities across the country.

Yet some Roma actors working for mainstream theatres refuse to act in Giuvlipen productions because they don't want to be labeled as Roma actors. "They say that acting is universal, that there is no ideology in theatre," Drăgan argues. "But then they only get casted in stereotypical roles. They're in denial."

Zita Moldovan

Co-founder of Giuvlipen, actor, journalist and TV presenter

Growing up in a middle class family in the Romanian city Cluj, it was only as a journalist that Zita Moldovan came into contact with rural and poorer Roma communities. "It's thanks to my journalistic work that I became aware of my privilege, and the problems Roma communities are coping with," she admits. "Water, electricity, and concrete roads, always end where Roma neighbourhoods begin."

Moldovan currently presents *I was also born in Romania*, a weekly TV programme that commits to portraying Roma people in non-stereotypical ways, beyond their domineering media image as beggars, thieves and criminals, which still plagues Romanian television.

At the beginning of her career over 20 years ago, it was sometimes hard especially for the more traditional Roma men to accept Moldovan as a Roma woman. "How are you Roma if you're not wearing a long skirt?" they would ask. Many criticised her for her revealing clothes. "But they've gotten used to it," Moldovan explains.

Moldovan has also branched out further into acting, co-founding the Giuvlipen theatre group with Mihaela Drăgan, who she met in 2013. Her favourite Giuvlipen play, *Who killed Szomna Granca?* brings together both of her careers as a reporter and actress. The play is based on the real story of a young Roma woman in a western Romanian village, who hung herself in a barn, next to a sign that said "The school is me." She had been caught between her desire to finish school, her conservative parents' pressure to get married early, and societal racism. Moldovan had covered the case as a journalist in 2007, and was appalled by the way other reporters only vilified the girl's parents, rather than looking at society at large. In the play produced to commemorate 10 years since the tragedy, Moldovan attempted to build a more nuanced understanding of the case. "The girl did not find enough support anywhere," she says.

Nicoleta Ghiță

Rapper and actor at PlayHood and Giuvlipen

Community theatre changed Nicoleta Ghiță's life. At 12, she had just lost her mother and grandmother, and was living with her brother, aunt, and her three cousins in a cramped apartment. There she joined PlayHood, a community theatre based in Ferentari, a poor Roma neighbourhood in Bucharest. "I was an energetic child but I did not know how to use my energy, and that got me into trouble. I often got into fights, and was full of hatred," Ghiță says candidly. At PlayHood, Ghiță and her friends told real stories they had seen or experienced, and, guided by the theatre leader, translated them into plays. Within a few months, Ghiță became calmer, saw her grades improve, and she started solving conflicts through talking. She is still involved with the theatre group.

Ghiță later met Giuvlipen co-founders Drăgan and Moldovan at a drama workshop while she was still at school. Impressed by her talent and energy on stage, they asked Ghiță if she had considered going to drama school, and then joining their theatre company. But because of financial difficulties, Ghiță was forced to drop out of school at 16, and work in a kitchen to support herself. She thought her acting dream was over until Drăgan and Moldovan got in touch with her again, and invited her to join the company. "At first, I thought that there was a male boss that I hadn't seen," Ghiță recalls. There wasn't. Instead, Ghiță says, "It's from [Moldovan and Drăgan] that I learned about abuse, racism, sexism, homophobia, what a clitoris is, why you should use a condom during sex, why I should believe in sisterhood, equality and independence."

Together with Drăgan, she is planning to set up a feminist hip hop band, and tell her own life story via rap.

Bety Pisciă

Poet, Basca forum theatre actor, Giuvlipen collaborator, and acting student

"When I got my Baccalaureate diploma, my teachers told me I was a revolutionary," Bety Pisciă says proudly. Then she laughs: "They might have just been happy to get rid of me." Highly energetic, the Timișoara-based poet and acting student has long stood up against abuse, which gained her a reputation at school as a "problem-child".

In her direct and pulsating poems, Pisciă breaks new ground by speaking candidly and confidently about her Roma and gay identity — a first for Romanian literature. "it's not my fault that I was born a woman/ I'm the gypsy woman from the first floor / [...] dad's boy / sometimes I get good morning messages / — you, be hetero and stop dressing like a hobo / — are you lesbian? you weren't fucked

by the right person, come sleep at mine. [...] I interfere / I interfere, / I interfered / every time I could.// I am a girl, I listen to rap and I wear baggy clothes / my father taught me not to be afraid of anything / (except himself) / I stay / I stay / to protect my mother / it's not her fault that she was born a woman, " one of her poems powerfully states.

Pisică is a strong believer that individual acts can make a difference. She promotes this idea via forum theatre — a form of interactive drama, whereby, following scenes acted by actors on the stage, the audience is invited to become *spect-actors* — to choose a role, whether that is perpetrator, victim, witness, or person in a position of power, and try to change the turn of events presented in the sketch, leading to an alternative, happier ending. “The purpose of forum theatre is for people to act when they see an injustice happening on the streets, whether that is calling the police, or doing something else,” she explains.

Yet, despite her courage and self-assurance, Pisică is struggling with the gender expectations of drama school. “My tutor tells me I’m not good just because I don’t fit within her norms. I try to follow her guidance, but this has inhibited me both personally and professionally,” Pisică confesses. Her plan for the future? Joining Giuvlipen. “I can’t wait to graduate, move to Bucharest and be a revolutionary with Mihaela [Drăgan].”

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