

# Romani Arts, Dance, and Advocacy Action in Wales: My Life and the Romani Cultural and Arts Company

## Isaac Blake

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Isaac Blake is a proud Gay Romany Gypsy and has worked as a professional dancer and choreographer. He is currently Executive Director of the Romani Cultural & Arts Company in Cardiff, UK, which is supported by a variety of major funders and government departments.



Isaac Blake is a proud, GAY<sup>[1]</sup> Romany Gypsy and Executive Director of the Romani Cultural & Arts Company (RCAC). He previously studied and worked as a choreographer and professional dancer and currently lives and works in Cardiff, Wales. As recently as 2019, Isaac lead a team of academics and researchers in collecting items and artefacts for the online digital RomArchive,<sup>[2]</sup> a growing collection of Romania and Traveller art of all types, complemented by historical documents and scholarly texts.

In his work with the RCAC since 2009, Isaac has developed art and performance programmes with communities living on Gypsy and Traveller caravan sites, in housing, and in accommodation. Isaac and the RCAC also work in Welsh schools and colleges, promoting arts and culture as a medium for advocacy, empowerment, and resilience for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. RCAC has engaged widely with non-Romani and Traveller communities to promote understanding between them and improve social cohesion, communal dialogue, and positive debate, contributing its voice to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) advocacy and empowerment in the UK.

Isaac and his team at RCAC have been instrumental in supporting LGBTQI rights for Romani and Traveller people in the UK, Europe, and beyond, while active in the wider movement for human rights. His story is an inspirational and powerful testament.

RCAC is funded by the BBC Children in Need Appeal, Arts Council Wales, the National Lottery Community Fund in Wales, and the Welsh government, among others.

## Growing up and Moving up

Born in Bromsgrove, England, I grew up and lived on Gypsy caravan sites until the age of 25. When I was 13, my family left the site at Stourport-on-Severn to move to South Wales. I had an ideal childhood in Stourport, as our site was next to a meadow, by the river. I used to walk along the river to get to school and into town each morning. I look back on that time with such happiness, as there were no barriers and I cannot remember any tension or animosity between the settled community and our site. I felt free and unconstrained as a child, as the site was for both Gypsies and Travellers; everyone existed in apparent harmony as one united community. The weather always seemed nice.

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<sup>1</sup> 'GAY' is an acronym, not a word itself, unless used in the archaic sense of to be 'happy and joyful', i.e. "The party was rather gay." As explained by Peter Tatchell, MP at Hornsey Town Hall in 1981, the term came from the Stonewall Inn Uprising, Greenwich Village, New York City, in June 1969, and meant 'Good As You'. It was shortened to GAY as a chant in the streets around Stonewall Inn during the ensuing riots at the club and at Christopher's End, also a bar, where the most violent confrontations took place. The clubs were all owned and run by the mafia, especially the Genovese family in New York, who bribed police to ignore them and extorted money from wealthy customers through blackmail. A raid on the inn, and the violent arrest of two Black transgender women on 28 June, sparked six days of rioting and led to the foudation of the Stonewall organization.

<sup>2</sup> See online: <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/the-romani-cultural-and-arts-company-proud-romarchive-wins-prestigious-awards>

My Aunt Jessie was a great inspiration during my early life; she was a matriarch in our community, someone with tremendous energy and enthusiasm. She may have been small in stature, but she was large in other ways, someone I could always count on for sound advice. I learned from her that it is important to have faith and belief in yourself. Growing up in a Romani and Traveller environment, I was encouraged to take on an adult role from an early age, find my path and stand on my own two feet. Sometimes things have happened in my life that knocked my confidence, such as the loss of loved ones, but I have always maintained hope in the power of the human imagination to overcome individual problems. If something in one part of my life is not working, it is probably that it's not right for me at that moment; so I just look for another area to grow and flourish.

The family moved to Wales when I was 13, and I have to say that it was not an easy transition. There was animosity between the settled community and the local Gypsy sites, making the atmosphere quite different to that of Stourport. In Cardiff, Gypsy and Traveller sites are starkly detached from the settled communities and from any interaction with wider society. As a teenager, I had to make a great effort before planning to go anywhere off the site; there wasn't even a bus route nearby to take us into town. At weekends, friends and I would be followed around shops by security staff; if they heard an Irish accent, they would assume that we were all Travellers and that we were there to steal. Prejudice about *all* Travellers shoplifting was very prevalent among shopworkers.

Despite antagonism from the settled community, or *gorgios*, I grew up in a close-knit extended family, both in Stourport and in Cardiff. As my sexuality became clear to me (and apparent to others), there were no issues within my immediate circle of friends and family. People had grown up with me and knew me as an individual, as part of a respected family and community. I always felt included and safe as a Gypsy on the sites, and at no point did I face any animosity. My brother is well respected as a clairvoyant, fortuneteller, and businessman, and it's possible this provided me with some level of additional protection from any prejudice or homophobia. Also my father was a well-known tap dancer within the community, and I admired his skills and the respect he gained as a result, from a very young age. Dance and musicality were part of my upbringing and integral to the community, the culture, and to my image of myself as I grew up.

I was not a confident speaker, and I had a speech impediment as a child. This caused me some difficulty in expressing myself, and dance became an effective way to communicate and a way to explore my own heritage and culture through movement. I knew from a young age that my strength was using my physicality and body to express myself, without relying upon speech, so it seemed an obvious step to embrace dance as my life and that of my people. My family and community have supported my ambitions, and my upbringing added perspectives, cultural references, and experiences that many other dance students simply did not have. Although many people on the Gypsy sites found it difficult to understand, I took up an offer to go to university to train as a contemporary dancer. Despite their puzzlement, I did not face any backlash or negativity from my own community; I never have. On the contrary, people have made me feel proud, celebrating my achievements as a dancer.

I have also never faced any backlash for coming out as a GAY man.

I remember thinking, “If my father could see me now!” while studying at the Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London. The teachers were all established and well known in the world of music, theatre, and dance. Some were from companies such as Adventures in Motion Pictures, DV8, Candoco Dance Company, and the Royal Ballet School. Others were attached to the Martha Graham Dance Company and Merce Cunningham Dance Company. I was working with some of the biggest names in contemporary dance, then going home to live on a Gypsy and Traveller site; the two worlds seemed unimaginably different.

I am a passionate advocate for Romani, Gypsy, and Traveller culture, not just because I am from that background and am proud of where I come from, but because Romani culture is rich in many ways. Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people may not sometimes hold to ideas of a traditional education (often because of prejudice and discrimination parents experienced in their own schooling), but learning is part-and-parcel of Romani and Traveller culture all over the world, whether that means learning to mend a car engine and build fences, or dancing and playing musical instruments from a very young age (and many things in-between). “It’s not all wagons and horses!” as a well-known Romani leader once said; he went on to become a mayor of a large town in Essex and Chairperson of the Gypsy Council for many years, as well as restoring and selling antiques. “Gypsies are real people, too,” is a quote I hold dear.

## The Romani Cultural & Arts Company

After some time working in television and on a variety of creative ventures, I needed something more community-focused and humanitarian to provide me with stability and a sense of making a positive impact. With support and seed funding for a rough idea, I set up a project with local Gypsy and Traveller primary school pupils in Wales. The first project was small in scale and short term, centred on taking culturally relevant dance, arts, and crafts onto the Gypsy site where I grew up. It was a resounding success and grew steadily. It was clear that the warm welcome this initiative received signaled an opportunity to do more, so I gathered support to submit further bids for funding that aimed to establish a charity. My vision was based upon the power of the arts to enable community change and facilitate development.

The Romani Cultural and Arts Company (RCAC) was formed in September 2009 as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee (No. 07005660) and is a registered charity (No. 1138150). Working through the arts, the RCAC raises funds to take community development and educational projects onto Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller sites and into non-Gypsy communities across Wales. A recent Arts Council of Wales report cited the significance and high quality of the work that the RCAC carries out with Gypsies and Travellers.<sup>[3]</sup> In the review, the writers noted, “This review has uncovered nothing but praise for Isaac Blake – his work is universally acknowledged by academics, Gypsies, Travellers, politicians, public bodies

<sup>3</sup> See online: <http://romaniarts.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Beyond-the-Stereotypes.pdf>

and international organisations. This is a unique, Welsh-based company that should be supported in every possible way.”

All the RCAC’s projects and programmes build capacity from within the community so that Community Champions can go on to develop initiatives themselves. The arts projects on caravan sites develop children’s social skills, raise self-esteem, and encourage participation across the two distinct ethnic groups who live on them: Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers. Our projects for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller artists provide a structured programme and platform for them to showcase their work and become known in the wider world of arts and culture. Our women-only on-site projects support women to become more resilient in the face of social isolation, more interdependent and confident in standing on their own feet, and in liaising with agencies and public services.

The groundbreaking work of the RCAC is widely documented on the website, which displays a wealth of talent and experience across Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. This includes profiles of many proud LGBT Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers; among them are William Bila, Chris Lee, David Tišer, Daniel Baker, Dezső Máté, Gianni Jovanovic, and László Farkas.<sup>[4]</sup> The charity is proud of our community and the hard work that many community members carry out, as advocates and champions, ensuring that the colourful and vibrant heritage and culture of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers continues.

RCAC is a Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community development organisation at heart; it is led by Gypsies and Travellers, about Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers, and for Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers. We believe that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities can become fully acknowledged and active participants in mainstream society, while still retaining their distinct culture and heritage. Our mission statement is simple: racism is born of ignorance and poverty; the RCAC exists to promote a better understanding of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller culture and history, within and beyond these communities.

Our work, which initially centred on supporting young children through the arts, has developed over 12 years into something far broader in reach and impact. As we are Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller-led, we have a strong bond and trust with our communities, stable and consistent in the support of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers. The drive for greater inclusion, tolerance, and understanding between the mainstream community and the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community is critical to our work. As a result, RCAC sits on a number of national forums such as the Gypsy Roma Traveller Police Association, the Wales Race Forum, and the Cross Party Group for Gypsies and Travellers of the Welsh National Assembly.

There have been so many thresholds passed and hurdles jumped to reach what has been achieved so far. It cannot be done alone, and the RCAC is proud to have a range of partners and Community Champions from across the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community. Many of these champions are LGTBQI. Chris Lee is an example of one of our LGTBQI Community Champions who has become a strong advocate for both the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities of Wales and the LGTBQI community. She became known

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<sup>4</sup> See online: <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/profiles>

to the charity through a partner, and due to her Romani heritage she took on a significant volunteering and paid consultancy role, working across many different projects.

Chris Lee is a Lesbian Romani Gypsy woman. In 2015, she represented the RCAC and Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers in Wales at a Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller LGBT conference in Prague. This historic international conference highlighted and explored the many challenges facing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Romani and Traveller people in Europe and elsewhere. The programme included presentations and discussions on international and European rights and standards, in relation to discrimination, and how national legislation impacts upon the lives of LGBT Romani people in the Czech Republic, Spain, Slovakia, and UK.

Chris also represented the RCAC and the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community in Wales, at an event with Rainbow Pilgrims, an organisation that focuses on the Rites and Passages of LGBTQI migrants in the Britain.<sup>[5]</sup> Rainbow Pilgrims was a landmark project that discovered the hidden history of LGBTQI migrants in the UK in the past and present. The project covered the period from the first Jewish *Kindertransports* to Britain (1938–1940) to today. Rainbow Pilgrims explored the narratives around rites and passages, documenting the interconnection among faith, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, by using oral history, film, and photography. Rainbow Pilgrims culminated in a touring exhibition and pop-up events, a symposium, cutting-edge learning tools, and an archive collection. This collection was the first source of LGBT and migration in a faith context in Britain.

Chris represented the RCAC and GRT communities in Wales, once again at the Second International Roma LGBT Conference in Prague, 11–12 August 2016. Chris also attended the “Prague Pride Parade” on 13 August. The important exchange of information and lively debate among the delegates resulted in the drafting of a *Roma LGBTQI Prague Declaration* by 28 representatives of Romani LGBTQI professional associations, civil society, and academia. Chris then represented the RCAC in Budapest and at a follow-up meeting of the Roma LGBTQI Conference, held in Strasbourg in June 2017. This important event was organised and funded by the Council of Europe. Representatives of several European countries, including the UK, participated in training designed to mobilise communities and further establish networks.

Many Romani LGBTQI people remain invisible and conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is important that more confident Gypsies, such as Chris Lee and myself, be visible and proud for the sake of others. The LGBTQI movement itself does not always prove inclusive and responsive enough to the needs of LGBTQI people belonging to minority ethnic groups. The stigma they face has a detrimental impact on their life chances. The cultural clash between sexual orientation and gender identity, on the one hand, and Romani traditions and societal expectations, on the other, place LGBTQI Romani people at the intersection of discrimination.

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5 See online: <https://www.rainbowpilgrims.com/rainbow-pilgrims-symposium-photostory>

The Romani Cultural & Arts Company was very proud to hold the first Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller LGBTQI International Conference in the UK on 4 July 2019 at the *Senedd* – the National Assembly of Wales. The event featured an international selection of speakers, including activists, academics, artists, and Community Champions focusing on the current and historic experience of GRT LGBTQI people and the future possibilities for improving equality and opportunity across our communities. The Romani Cultural & Arts Company gratefully acknowledged the Welsh government for supporting this important event.

As an organisation, we have a track record of delivering high-quality international conferences on a variety of GRT-related issues and topics. Since 2009, we have organised seven symposiums focused on political and social issues as well as the LGBTQI agenda. We always have excellent attendance, and many sectors, as well as our own community, are well represented and have their say. We are proud to be the voice of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers and to stand up for their rights.

We have achieved so much over the first twelve years of operation, and we have grand plans for the future. We believe we are unique as an organisation and that our potential and that of our community has not yet been reached. It is so important that Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers; particularly LGBTQI, have visibility and use this visibility to be positive role models for others. I am proud to be a Gay Romani Gypsy. I feel excited by what the future may hold and excited by the opportunities being a GAY Romani Gypsy will bring me in the upcoming years.