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Tragedy strikes on and offstage for Croatian theatre workers

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In December 2020, an opera singer of the Croatian National Theatre, Ante Topić, died from the effects of coronavirus. Although it is impossible to establish for certain whether the singer became infected whilst at work in the theatre, his death brought to public attention the dissatisfaction of the employees of Croatia's largest theatre house with safety measures at work during the pandemic and their relations with the management. These tensions reflect a wider dissatisfaction with the problems of precarious work and unsafe working conditions faced by many Croatian cultural workers.

On a cold Saturday afternoon, colleagues and friends of the opera singer Ante Topić gathered in front of the building of the Croatian National Theatre in the centre of the Croatian capital, Zagreb. With lighted candles and lanterns, they wanted to pay their last respects to the 62-year-old, who had died the day before after a long battle with coronavirus and whose erudition, kindness and optimism were praised by the media, who called him “the benevolent spirit of the Croatian National Theatre”.

However, the death of this opera performer placed the alleged failures of the management of the Croatian National Theatre in protecting workers under close public and media scrutiny. Dissatisfied employees spoke out about the inadequate implementation of measures to protect workers during the pandemic, often precarious working conditions, and troubled relations between some employees and the management of Croatia's largest theatre house.

In Croatia, the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic began to spread in 2020. The government rapidly introduced restrictive measures: schools, nurseries and colleges were closed in March, together with cafes, restaurants and all non-essential shops and cultural establishments; people were urged not to gather and to maintain social distancing. Theatres and other cultural establishments gradually started to

open only in mid-May, when employees of the Croatian National Theatre returned to work in complete confusion as to how to organise their rehearsals and performances.

“Even then, it was known that choral singing is very risky because loud singing spreads more aerosols through the air,” recalls Mario Bokun, an opera singer and trade union representative of the Croatian National Theatre choir. Bokun is a lifelong lover of singing, who has worked in the theatre for 21 years and has been a trade union representative since 2018.

“The Civil Protection Authority, which adopts epidemiological measures in the country, adopted no measures for ensembles at that time. We repeatedly asked for an epidemiologist to be brought in who could look at the premises where we work and establish how we can hold rehearsals, how many people can stay where, and for how long and in what way. But, so far, we've been unable to do so,” he adds.

The only open theatre

In spite of a lack of information and “some friction” in relations with the management, the operas performed in spring were mainly staged as concerts (without excessive acting and movement on stage) in reduced composition, and Bokun considers that, on the whole, it was “done correctly”. However,

problems began in the autumn when the number of new infections in the country began to rise rapidly as the theatre prepared for the new season as if there were no pandemic. The media reported how the Croatian National Theatre was successfully putting on performances while the world's major theatre houses were closed or operating at reduced capacity.

“At the time, we were still performing Lucia di Lammermoor, and preparing the Barber of Seville, the Magic Flute and Carmen. The Barber of Seville was performed under direction [with acting on stage] and, although some minor modifications were made, there were no major special adjustments to the new pandemic conditions,” explains Bokun. “It is a performance in which the composition of the choir is reduced, and we also spread out on stage on our own initiative. But the Magic Flute has around 20 soloists, plus a choir and extras. Why put on such a performance at this time?!”

In the week of 23 October, when the premiere of Carmen was held at the Croatian National Theatre, in a country of about four million inhabitants there were over 10 000 active cases of infection (264 cases per 100 000 inhabitants). In addition, the number of hospital admissions and patients on a respirator was increasing daily. Measures to limit the number of people at weddings, funerals and other private gatherings

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were in force, and there was a ban on organising large demonstrations and visits to hospitals and nursing homes, as well as a ban on the public attending sporting competitions.

But the Croatian National Theatre was open. And while the audience in the auditorium sat socially distanced wearing masks, on the stage, where the story of the love triangle between the fiery Carmen, the soldier Don José and the bullfighter Escamilla in Spain was being played out, the performers were running up and down the stage, singing in close contact.

“In some scenes, a colleague literally lay on top of me and sang 10 centimetres or so from my face, without a mask,” recalls Tena Lebarić Rašković, an opera singer in the Croatian National Theatre choir. “Carmen is a lascivious performance, and I have nothing against that ... but why did we include Carmen in the programme during a pandemic? Perhaps we could have found a director creative enough to meet the challenge of putting on a performance which would enable us to act out all this lasciviousness whilst at the same time complying with the measures. But no, we staged orgies, coughing and vomiting during the performance.”

A predictable outbreak and management failure

Both Bokun and Lebarić Rašković tried, they say, to warn the management and the competent institutions that the performances were not adapted to epidemiological conditions. “Horried by the stage rehearsals, I posted a comment on the website of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia and invited the Minister to come to a performance of Carmen and see how the distancing measures were not being carried out,” says Lebarić Rašković. “If I can’t enter a chemist’s without a mask, how can I work like this in a theatre?” However, instead of a response from the competent ministry, she was called to a meeting with the Managing Director of the Croatian National Theatre, Dubravka Vrgoč, at which she was received by the Directors of Opera and Ballet. “They showed me a screenshot of my post on Face-

book (...), and Ms Vrgoč held my employment contract in front of her and turned it over in her hands. I was told that I was not allowed to go public with anything without consulting them first.”

Bokun says that, as the choir’s trade union representative, he reminded the Director of Opera, on 30 September, of the measures requiring that a distance of two metres be maintained between singers on the stage. “But our Director said that they are just recommendations, and we don’t necessarily have to stick to them,” he says. During this time, employees’ temperature was being measured at the entrance to the theatre, and they could not enter the building without a mask. However, for the most part, masks were not worn on stage. The choir was divided into three parts, but those three groups did not work on three different performances with no contact at all, but rather mixed together. “Only part of the choir sang in the Barber of Seville, but some of them were also in Carmen, Lucia di Lammermoor and the Magic Flute,” says Bokun. “We all mixed together instead of organising work so that, for example, we put on one opera for two weeks and then started another.”

Before long, there was an outbreak of the virus at the theatre. A performance of the Barber of Seville was held on 29 October. One of the extras in the performance got coronavirus symptoms two days later, on 31 October, and, after receiving a positive test result, informed the management about it. However, the management only informed two employees, says Bokun, and no one was placed in self-isolation. “We heard about it from a soloist colleague,” he recalls. “The Director and the Managing Director knew about it, but remained silent and did not inform the employees. Why? They are probably not allowed to remove performances from the programme. The show must go on!” A few days later, rehearsals were held for the Magic Flute, in which several infected people from the Barber of Seville took part.

Tena Lebarić Rašković became infected with coronavirus at that time. When she was tested on 8 November and received a positive result, she immediately informed the choir about it. “That email couldn’t be

ignored because I sent it to the choir email list, and it was received by 60 people.” Ante Topić, the now deceased member of the Croatian National Theatre choir, did not take part in the Barber of Seville, but was at the rehearsals at which several ensembles had mixed, including those which had been in contact with the infected extra.

No one can determine with confidence whether Lebarić Rašković, Ante Topić or the other Croatian National Theatre employees who got coronavirus at the same time became infected precisely at the Croatian National Theatre. However, as Lebarić Rašković points out, “It is not a matter of whether the virus ‘started’ at the National Theatre. But, if it came to the Croatian National Theatre through the extra or someone else, then others became infected as well. And those who became infected should have been placed in self-isolation.”

As a result of the suspicion that the management of the Croatian National Theatre had failed to follow the epidemiological instructions, which could have led to the virus spreading in the theatre, the Croatian Union of Cultural Workers (HSDK) filed, on 16 November, a criminal complaint against the Managing Director, Dubravka Vrgoč. “No one is happy that the situation escalated, but we called for dialogue, and none was forthcoming,” says Domagoj Rebić, Secretary General of the HSDK. “The advice and suggestions of people who have been working in the theatre for 20 or 25 years and know every nook and cranny of it, and who have proposed various measures, have not been heeded.” The criminal complaint was still in the defence process at the time of writing this article. The theatre’s management rejected all the accusations of non-compliance with the epidemiological measures and the Minister for Culture and Media, Nina Obuljen Koržinek, sided with the Managing Director and claimed that the allegations of negligence were “malicious”.

In June 2021, a further criminal complaint was raised against the Managing Director. The Ministry of Internal Affairs lodged a complaint of bullying with the Municipal Public Prosecutor’s Office, following statements made by 30 employees of the Croatian National Theatre, the alleged victims of that bullying. This is not the first time that the Managing Director’s name has been mentioned in the context of workplace harassment. Vrgoč, however, strenuously denies all such accusations. In 2019, the Managing Director sued a psychiatrist who had alerted a number of institutions to the fact that certain employees of the Croatian National Theatre had complained of

being subjected to bullying. The Managing Director also sued Damir Kovač, a commissioner of the Croatian Union of Cultural Workers, of the performing arts branch of the Croatian National Theatre, for “damage to honour and reputation” because he had drawn public attention to poor working conditions and disorganisation. “This sets a precedent. To my knowledge, and I’m able to speak about the cultural institutions in which we operate, from theatres and museums to state archives, I do not know of the head of any institution suing a trade union representative in a private law suit in this way,” says HSDK’s Domagoj Rebić, adding that this case has not yet been concluded.

Coronavirus has exacerbated existing problems

In addition to the problems in interpersonal relations, many employees of the theatre and experts of the theatre scene point to the structural problems of the Croatian National Theatre. “The Croatian National Theatre is a theatre with three ensembles [opera, ballet and drama] with one stage. They are de facto three theatres in one,” explains Snježana Banović, director, writer and professor at the Academy of Dramatic Art at the University of Zagreb. “Every managing director says we need a new stage, but how are you going to build a new theatre after

the earthquake [which hit Zagreb in March 2020 and caused significant material damage] and the pandemic? This theatre needs re-organisation first.”

For years, Banović has sharply criticised the situation on the Croatian theatre scene, which she says has been “in free fall” since the 1990s, the war period and the post-war years. “I thought that the 1990s were terrible because national themes were pushed to the centre of everything. It wasn’t that that ruined us (...) but what came afterwards when the party favouritism and the placing of people close to parties in top positions started,” she explains. “Opera [at the Croatian National Theatre], for example, has never been at such a low point. The orchestra is neglected, there is a complete lack of knowledge of modern repertoire and events on the scene, and there is no investment in new singers,” believes Banović.

The dissatisfaction is also reflected in the issue of salaries and material working conditions. In 2019, salaries at the Croatian National Theatre were 20 per cent lower than at other city theatres. Moreover, under the current Law on Theatres, artistic ensembles in opera have contracts for two or four years, which are extended until they reach 20 years of service, after which they receive an indefinite contract. For most, this means not being able to take out a loan for a house, car or other needs until they have completed 20 years of service.

↓ A performance at the Croatian National Theatre during the pandemic, with the audience respecting social distancing.
Photo: © Belga



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Nonetheless, professional singers in Croatia still see the Croatian National Theatre as an institution which provides some kind of security. Those who graduate in singing today can join one of four national theatres in the country (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek), the Comedy Theatre in Zagreb, or the Croatian Radio and Television Choir, or opt for a career as a freelance artist. However, the precarious status of freelance artists has deteriorated further during the pandemic.

“The Ministry of Culture did put in place a number of aid measures for independent artists, but they were not sufficient,” explains Dunja Kučinac, a member of the curatorial collective BLOK (Local Base for Cultural Refreshment), which in July launched the campaign “For fair pay”. “Moreover, [artists] had to prove that their programmes had been cancelled, which meant a lot of paperwork, and one criterion for obtaining financial support was that the artist had to have a certain level of income earned the previous year, and the support was fixed on the basis of that. The problem is that these measures were temporary, namely for several months, although they were repeated for another cycle this year.”

At the Croatian National Theatre the employees are waiting for the results of the selection of a new managing director. The person selected will lead the Croatian National Theatre for the next four years. ●