

“I MANAGED THE FIRST YUGOSLAV PRIVATE BALLET TROUPE” (INTERVIEW WITH LEPOSAVA LOKICA STEFANOVIĆ)

MARKO ZUBAK (ZAGREB)

Leposava Lokica Stefanović is a choreographer and a pioneer of Yugoslav jazz dance. Her troupe Lokice performed with Zdravko Čolić on his 1978 tour ‘Travelling Earthquake’, becoming an instant sensation. Lokica became a recognisable symbol of the genuine dance craze that swept Yugoslavia in the late 1970s.¹ The interview was conducted in Belgrade in 2015.

Marko Zubak (MZ): In the late 1970s you became known across Yugoslavia for leading the all-female dance troupe Lokice. But you were dancing in public a whole decade earlier. How and when did your career take off?

Leposava Lokica Stefanović (LLZ): It started long before disco music. And before the first discotheques emerged in Belgrade in 1968, with the so-called discotheque Kod Laze Šećera (‘By Sugar Laza’), followed by Cepelin (‘Zepellin’) near Tašmajdan, and later Aquarians (‘Aquarians’) at Slavia Square, all the way to smaller clubs which opened at local community centres. My dance career preceded all that. I graduated from the classical ballet school, but never went for a single audition for a classic ballerina. I was not interested in any of that. Already during my basic ballet training, I had begun dancing in mid 1960s at the Boris Radak studio where I learned new different steps. Radak introduced jazz dance to Belgrade. He learned it from Broadway choreographer Ray Harrison who came here in 1960 under the USA Cultural Exchange program and directed musicals throughout Yugoslavia. I also watched choreographer Don Lurio who defined the style of Italian TV variety shows, imagining myself dancing with him.

MZ: This is when you formed your first dance troupe Jazz-Ball?

LLS: Yes, I saw that many of my friends, fellow graduates from the ballet school, weren’t working – we were an exceptionally large generation, about twenty of us graduated in the same year, in 1967. So, I simply asked a few of them if they wished to dance with me. So, in 1967, I formed a dance troupe called Jazz-Ball with my colleagues. ‘Jazz-Ball’ is a portmanteau of jazz and ballet, even though this is the

1 See also Adriana Sabo’s article in this volume.

wrong term. That was jazz dance, while ballet is ballet, its form is well known. We practiced in a hall belonging to the amateur folk ensemble, whenever it was available. And we performed in the first great TV music shows, such as *Koncert za ludi mladi svet* ('Concert for Crazy Young People') directed by Jovan Joca Ristić, who was among the first in the world to illustrate songs, turning local pop tracks into music videos, like MTV would do twenty years later. Another Yugoslav TV visionary, Zagreb director Antun Marti invited us to dance in his show for 5 minutes straight, unprecedented at the time, since dance TV acts lasted up to 2,5 minutes tops. With his magic and my choreography, we danced to a medley consisting of three James Bond theme songs, seemingly instantly changing our outfits as the tunes changed. All the other dance troupes that performed on TV were composed of dancers from their respective city theatres. But Jazz-Ball was the first private ballet group in Yugoslavia and I was also its leader and manager. The troupe performed till 1970. Some girls went on to dance in the theatre, and others went elsewhere. And I also had enough. You know, my father was an engineer and since I was the only child, I began studying architecture. It was the closest thing to art. I studied for ten years since during this time I was dancing professionally, so I just wished to finish and get my degree.

MZ: In the latter part of the 1970s you along with your new troupe became the familiar face of many TV music and variety shows. Yet television was not your first choice, right?

LLS: No, that was theatre. Theatre was my greatest passion. There I could feel the audience, which I loved. And I began working in theatre productions primarily as a choreographer not as a dancer. In fact, after graduating from ballet school, even before Jazz-Ball was formed, I initially did some choreographies for the Dadov amateur theatre in Belgrade. I was working on a monodrama where the main actor moved like a fox. After Jazz-Ball dissolved and I finally graduated from the university, I again went back first to theatre productions. For two seasons, from 1975 to 1977, I was a choreographer at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade. I redesigned their top floor into a ballet hall, so that actors could properly train with mirrors, and not just on stage. I also got to work on the canonical Marin Držić's renaissance comedy *Dundo Maroje* where all the roles, both male and female, were played by men. I created such a choreography that each time when the festivities at the square commenced, audiences would clap so intensely that the performance had to be halted, which was inconceivable back then, till the actors bowed, even with requests that the whole scene be repeated.

MZ: However, eventually you went in the other direction, to television, which was also experiencing a boom. The move coincided with the emergence of your second dance troupe, Lokice: how did it come into being?

LLS: I was doing a choreography at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre for some vaudeville, and since I was close to composer Aleksandar Sanja Ilić, who lived just a block away and I considered him kind of like my younger brother, it was natural for me to ask him to compose some music for it. Soon he had a TV show featuring his own tunes, and asked me to make a choreography for a few of his tracks. I warned him that I didn't have a troupe anymore, but he told me not to worry and brought four of his female friends, who he knew from the city. On that show, I was only a choreographer, while the girls danced. But soon, in June 1977, there was another similar show. I can't remember who the director was but he wished to have more dancers in it. So, I called one of my old friends and, after seven years of inactivity, I quickly got back in shape. In just two weeks I lost weight and began dancing again. One of the girls soon left for America, but the six of us continued to work as Lokice. The age gap between me and the youngest dancer was huge, ten years, but people had no idea because we all kind of looked the same.

MZ: You were known for your strict discipline within Lokice.

LLS: I told the girls from the very beginning: I am a difficult person to work with, very demanding, you need to be a bit crazy to do it. But I can promise you that in six months you will have your TV show. They agreed and we started working. I didn't tolerate lateness. If you were late, it was deducted from your fee. For each mistake during the show, it was 10% off. Later, it became even more strict once we began performing solo as a troupe. Iron discipline ruled. While we were on tour, after concerts we would eat and then go to sleep because the next day we had to travel and look good again. We had to wash our hair. It had to be clean for each show, since hair was our trademark. Ever since I'd been a kid, I told others in the playground what to do, was careful that all was well organized and everyone felt ok. A few of my girls studied and I promised their parents that they could dance with us but only if they studied. I knew that from my own experience. My father only let me lead Jazz-Ball troupe if I took exams. The funniest thing was that even when we returned home, the girls would still phone me asking things. I said: "Do you have a mother? Ask her!" They just got used to me taking care of them. They had a full make-up kit, but I had everything else, from antibiotics to bandages, and nylon stockings that tightened twisted ankles but remained invisible. There was no way my dancers would perform without stockings. Legs just looked better with them. We had the precise, special darker shade for the summer, and lighter for the winter since there was no solarium at the time.

MZ: Lokice became known as the attractive dancers that accompanied singer Zdravko Čolić from Sarajevo who, after releasing his 1978 LP *Ako priđeš bliže* ('If You Come Closer'), became the biggest pop star in Yugoslavia, in part due to incorporating dance rhythms into his tunes.

LLS: His manager Maksa Čatović, who worked with Čolić at the time, invited us to join him at the 1977 Zagreb music festival. For a while we were around him, accompanying him at occasions. Each year, the popular TV show *From Head to Toe* would proclaim the personality of the year, and in 1978 it was Čolić. The show was on my birthday on March 31, shot at the Zemun Pinki hall in Belgrade with Raffaella Carrà as a special guest. The following month, in April, we had already joined Čolić on his famous tour *Travelling Earthquake*, which lasted until the end of summer.

MZ: How did the tour look from your perspective?

LLS: Well, it was something different, certainly never seen before in Yugoslavia. There had never been such an all-female dance group, all good-looking at the scene. At the beginning of each concert we were specially introduced, along with other guests. "Good evening friends", the announcer said, and then Čolić would enter and immediately all hell broke loose. We danced together, danced alone, a true spectacle not yet seen before. Sport halls were sold out in April and May while it was still cold, and then during summer major stadiums like Belgrade's Marakana and Sajarevo's Koševo. I picked a few of his tunes which I liked the most like "Glavo luda" ('Crazy Head') and "Pjevam danju pjevam noću" ('I Sing All Day, I Sing All Night') and made a choreography. At first, it was a bit shaky to get everything right, but eventually everything clicked just fine. There is this recording of "Glavo luda" where we dance at Kalemegdan fortress for the Yugoslav-Hungarian TV co-production *Duplex*. It was at the end of the tour, we just came from the sea, all tanned and Čolić was simply great there, his legs moved like a ballet dancer, he looked amazing.

At first, we all got along well, we hung out after concerts. It was a big crew, with musicians and us. Sure, like in any family when you're always together, inevitably some trouble erupts, especially when so many different personalities are in one place. Someone is vain, another likes to tease, others like to quarrel. And manager Džarovski was notorious for his intrigues. Once, after the concert we had to return to Belgrade because two girls had their exams. Džarovski reluctantly agreed and arranged the next day for a car to pick us up and return to the gig in the next town. But exams were moved to the afternoon and we couldn't make it on time but Džaro nevertheless instructed the ticket clerks to tell the fans that Lokice will be there.

Čolić overheard this, and asked him why was he lying. And Džaro uttered then that sentence which buried everything: “Well, they bring you half of the audience!” This was in the middle of the tour, we still had two months left, but at that moment we disappeared. Zdravko also fell in love with my dancer Jasna and grumbled about the strict regime I imposed. He was angry with me and I was always fine with everyone hating me as long as everything was under control, at least while we were under contract. Afterwards they could do whatever they pleased.

MZ: Jovan Ristić shot a documentary about this tour, which captured some of this ambience.

LLS: Again and again, I keep coming back to that movie that was supposed to open in cinemas after all these shows were over and somehow still remain interesting to fans. There is that scene in it with me training, choreographing “Robot Man”, Čolić’s euro-disco track, which targeted the German market. The film crew arrived and Ristić turned to me: “Listen, we were just in Sarajevo, and they all praised him so much, his teacher, his neighbours, pedestrians on the streets, saying how he wonderful he is, good with parents, excellent at school, great at sports. Do me a favour. Everyone sees that he is not a natural dancer, so just say it. That will help the film, at least he will not appear perfect.” I said: “Ok”. It’s not difficult for me to tell the truth, especially if it is for the good cause. And I said those famous words into camera: “Zdravko is not a talented dancer. He is tall, and a little stiff, but he practices, and you can see the results.” And he really danced great at the end. Well, he got mad at me for this. He soon went to serve the army and we never worked with him again. We didn’t see each other for 12 years.

MZ: While he was still in the army you performed together in 1979, at the New Year’s Eve at Tito’s Brijuni Islands residence? A famous photo immortalized the event.²

LLS: In fact, I danced three times for Tito. The first time with my Jazz-Ball troupe back in the late 1960s. A newspaper photo showed us dancing in front of Tito and his wife Jovanka in the Belgrade Youth Centre. *Politika*, the biggest Belgrade daily, reported: “Tito especially liked the game between beat and folk music performed by the Jazz-Ball dance troupe.” The second time was that famed performance in Brijuni Islands at the New Year’s Eve of 1979. We arrived there straight from Zagreb where we were shooting the New Year’s TV show. Two Mercedes picked us up and drove as fast as if they were on a modern highway. That evening we danced with Čolić in the hotel. Tito was not feeling well and stayed with us only till 1am.

2 A photo taken on this occasion is featured on the cover of this issue of TheMA.

The photo is actually from the following day, when we were invited to his White Villa residence. It was cold, it even started to snow. We hopped on the bus, all dressed up in costumes from our TV show where we danced to old evergreens, such as “Fever” or “16 Tons”. When our turn came, we went upstairs to the saloon where Tito was sitting with his poodle and entourage beside him. I had a solo, and as I was walking towards him, the poodle began barking at me. Afterwards, as we were sipping our drinks, I asked if we could take a photo with Tito, since he always took so many photos. So, we stopped by his side, and some army major dragged Čolić, wearing his army uniform, into the frame. That’s how that photo was made. We entertained Tito one final time, half a year later, for his birthday. We’d just landed from New York and they picked us up from the runway and drove us to Dobanovci. Actor Ljubivoje Ršumović who led that program, later said that after the end Tito asked for “Loknice” [a pun – the mispronounced name of the troupe now meant hair curls] to go once more, as an encore. If only I’d heard it back then. Well, at least I have something to remember.

MZ: You parted ways with Čolić but this was not the end of Lokice?

LLS: We performed as a troupe for another two years with a few changes. Zdravko’s girlfriend Jasna left the troupe, Boba went to London, and actress Jelena Tiska stepped in for four months. We worked mostly with the comedy music ensemble Sedmorica mladih (‘Seven Youngsters’), regularly appearing in their popular TV show *Sedam plus Sedam*. When they shot the pilot, we were still on tour and they employed some dancers from the theatre with whom they were not satisfied. Consequently, they called me, wishing to recreate something from the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, which was a huge hit, but I had yet to think about it, because we’d been away for so long. So, I showed them the film. And Čolić also had his last performance before the army. Risić asked me to prepare Sedmorica mladih so they could dance to “Glavo Ludo” dressed as us, Lokice. They were amazing, true comedians, coming up with jokes in an instant. Fantastic! We quickly became friends and they asked me to stay as their choreographer for the entire series. We had a sketch or an act in each episode of the show and were later featured in the opening and closing sequences. In fact, that was the first time we danced with partners. One time we arranged another dance medley with various national dances. There were Scottish, Can-Can, Spanish, and then Russian dances which we danced to, as well as “Moskau Moskau”, the euro disco track by Dschinghis Khan. Unfortunately, the segment was never aired since the Soviets had just invaded Afghanistan and it was cut from the show.

MZ: At the peak of your fame, Lokice released two singles and an LP, featuring a few disco songs, most notably “Disco Lady.” How did you end up singing?

LLS: I desperately wished to make a record. I thought it would be good to have some songs ready when Čolić returns from the army. So maybe we could do something new, a musical of a kind with a storyline where we would sing and dance together. I even went to New York and rehearsed there. That was the main idea behind it. Sanja Ilić, Dejan Petković and Đodre Novković composed the tracks and disco was in fashion then. I think it was interesting, people bought it at the time. The LP came naturally after the singles, since we already had four tracks and just needed another four to make it a full LP. It was good music, but difficult to sing. It might have been a bigger hit if someone else had recorded it, because we were primarily visually attractive, so we were best when we both sang and danced. However, that musical never materialized, since Čolić never contacted me. After leaving the army, he made some statements that were not fair to us, like he would never ever have any female dancers around.

MZ: Throughout most of that time you were actually employed and worked as an architect. Couldn't you make a living from dancing alone, from all those TV shows? After all, you were a major star yourself.

LLS: No, not a chance, no way. And appetites changed with time. With Jazz-Ball, we weren't paid much. I was ok with that, I liked dancing and didn't miss anything, especially after we could freely travel from the late 1960s on, when our passports became the most valuable in the world since we could enter some 120 states or so. But television in general later too paid us ridiculously, much less than singers who just opened their mouth. And they would have to return to us nine times for shooting, while singers would yawn and earn more. Secondly, television forced us to sign such unfavourable contracts where they retained all the rights, for all the frequent reruns, while we gave up everything and got the money for the original broadcast alone. Also, choreographers didn't get any royalties. So, it was not possible. The other girls were all freelancers, except me. I worked for five years at the office. I designed an eleven-story building in the centre of Priština. I worked even while I was on tour and used my days off then. Once we had a show in Zaječar, some 250 km away from Belgrade. I worked till 3 pm and then a car picked me up, dropped me at the venue and after the concert drove me back to Belgrade so that I could be at my workplace early the next morning. The following day the same procedure was repeated, only then they had to drive me to Bor, which was just 34 km away from Zaječar, but I had to travel some 1,000 kilometres just for these two concerts. I finally stopped working in 1980, when I passed the state exam and earned the status of an artist.

MZ: After forming the first private dance troupes you opened your own private ballet-recreational studio.

LLS: Yes, it opened in October 1981 in the former clothing store *Prvi Maj* ('First May') which had stood empty for a few years because it was envisaged for demolition. But they let me rent it. With my late husband I totally redesigned this huge, 250 m² space. We made one large hall, a smaller one, two dressing rooms, a waiting room for parents, two toilets, one bathroom, and a large office for me with a refrigerator and a bed where I could sleep.

MZ: You introduced also something resembling aerobics there, inspired by your visits to New York. Did you take some courses there? Was Jane Fonda your role model?

LLS: No, because she was still not into aerobics when I was there. I used to go to New York each winter and practice with Alvin Ailey at the American Dance Theatre. After my first visit, I took the whole troupe with me in May 1979, and brought them to Michael Shawn, another choreographer. When we were there, we spent a weekend at one mansion in Connecticut belonging to some scientist from Yugoslavia. It was a huge villa with an indoor pool where we swam before the dinner. There I saw two businessmen doing some exercises, claiming they could get rid of their belly with it in a week. Since everything about the body interested me, I approached them and they showed it to me, I could see that there was something there. Among the various books I brought from New York, there was a tiny booklet by Judi Sheppard Misset called *Jazzercise*, issued in 1976. Inside I saw some women doing some exercises, including jazz square, the step we learned at jazz dance plus some others. I began thinking if I could do something similar. I took one part from jazz dance, something from Judi and added the exercises from those businessmen. And I ordered a rhythm machine from my friend, an air-steward, to bring me from Singapore. Back then, people exercised without any music, they would just do it. I turned it on and tried out all the rhythms, then some music, wrote down everything for myself and called my friends to try something. So, when I opened my studio there were also these proto-aerobics there where these women exercised.

BIOGRAPHIES

Magdalena Fürnkranz is a Postdoctoral Fellow and Senior Scientist at the Department of Popular Music at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. As co-leader of the projects “Performing Diversity” and “Female Jazz Musicians in Austria”, her recent research has focused on performativity, gender and intersectionality in pop and rock music, Austrian music scenes, and gender/identity in jazz. She is co-editor of *Performing Sexual Identities. Nationalities on the Eurovision Stage* (2017), author of *Elizabeth I in Film und Fernsehen. De-/Konstruktion von weiblicher Herrschaft* (2019) and co-author of *Aufführungsrituale der Musik. Zur Konstituierung kultureller Vielfalt am Beispiel Österreich* (2021).

Juri Giannini studied Musicology and Slavic Studies in Cremona (Dott.) and Vienna (PhD), graduating with a monograph on Erwin Ratz’ theory of musical form and a dissertation on Hans Swarowsky as translator of opera textbooks. Since 2010, he has been teaching and researching at the Department of Musicology and Performance Studies (University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna), where he holds a permanent full Senior Scientist position. Further: journalistic work, especially on opera, twentieth century music, jazz, and Eastern European pop, and cultural education programs for children and adults. Current research focus: Issues of interculturality in the didactics of music history; Ideology and (Music) historiography; Relations between Translation Studies and Musicology; Cultural history of music. Publications: https://www.mdw.ac.at/imi/juri_giannini/.

Tanja Petrović is a principal research associate at the Institute of Culture and Memory Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. She is interested in the uses and meanings of socialist and Yugoslav legacies in post-Yugoslav societies, as well as in cultural, linguistic, political, and social processes that shape the reality of these societies. She is the author and editor of several books and a number of articles and essays in the fields of anthropology of post-socialism, memory studies, masculinity, gender history, heritage studies, linguistic anthropology, and labour history. Among them are her monographs *Yuropa: Jugoslawisches Erbe und Zukunftsstrategien in Postjugoslawischen Gesellschaften* (Verbrecher Verlag 2015), an edited volume *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe in Europeanization in Balkan Societies* (Brill Publishing 2014), as well as *Utopia of the Uniform: Affective Afterlives of the Yugoslav People’s Army* (Duke University Press 2024).

Adriana Sabo is a PhD candidate at the Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She was a PhD candidate at the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music in Belgrade (2014–2020), and was employed as a Junior Researcher and a Research Associate at the same institution. She holds master's degrees in musicology (2012) and gender studies (2015). She received a scholarship from the Ministry of Education, Science and Cultural Development of Serbia (2014–2018). Adriana is a member of the Serbian Musicological Society and the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, and a former contributor to the Center for Popular Music Research (Belgrade). She is one of the founders of the Association for the Study of Popular Music based in Belgrade.

Marko Zubak holds a PhD in history from the Central European University in Budapest. He works as a researcher at the Croatian Institute of History in Zagreb, focusing on popular and youth culture in socialist Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe, on which he taught at several universities (Zagreb, CEU Budapest, Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt). He has also published on these topics, including a monograph *The Yugoslav Youth Press (1968–1980): Student Movements, Youth Subcultures and Alternative Communist Media* (Srednja Europa, 2018). His recent work focusses on popular music and night cultures. With Flora Pitrolo he co-edited the collection *Disco Heterotopias: Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) and is currently co-editing another collection *Creative Dissent: Alternative Cultures during Socialism*. He is the curator of two exhibitions (*Yugoslav Youth Press as Underground Press: 1968–1972*; *Stayin' Alive: Socialist Disco Culture*) shown across the region (Zagreb, Rijeka, Belgrade, Vienna) and has collaborated on others, most recently on 'Restless Youth': 70 years of growing up in Europe, 1945 to now at the House of European History in Brussels.