

## In Memoriam, Selena Rakočević

Dunja NJARADI<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Assoc. Prof., University of Arts in Belgrade, Faculty of Music, Department of Ethnomusicology, Belgrade, Serbia

### IN MEMORIAM

Professor of Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreology Selena Rakočević, (1971–2022)

Selena Rakočević, a Professor of Ethnochoreology at the University of Arts in Belgrade Faculty of Music Department of Ethnomusicology, passed away on May 18, 2022 after losing a battle with a short but serious illness. The news found me while traveling to meet with the dance research network CoDa in Brussels. Upon arriving in Brussels, I found that the news had travelled faster than myself, and many colleagues from the network were shocked and saddened by her death. The news caused ripples among the professional communities of dancers, dance scholars, and ethnomusicologists in Serbia and across the world. Selena Rakočević left us too soon, but not before leaving a strong mark on international music and dance scholarship.

Born on October 26, 1971 in Belgrade, Selena Rakočević (née Litvinović) spent her childhood and youth in Pančevo. She received music education at primary and secondary levels, was an accomplished pianist, and was also a talented singer and performer within the pop and jazz music genres.

I met Selena in Berovo, Macedonia at the ICTM conference in 2012. I was a postdoc researcher at the University of Chester, a fresh graduate from the Lancaster University Theatre Studies Department. We took an instant liking to each other. Being a dance anthropologist interested in contemporary dance, Berovo marked a turning point for me, as for the first time I was confronted with a rich tradition of ethnochoreology, as well as ethnomusicology, dealing with various forms of traditional performance in Southeast Europe. Selena was my window into that world. On the other hand, direct and open as she was, she showed an immediate interest toward the different kinds of dance and different methodological traditions from my background. Our dialogue started in Berovo in 2012 and lasted for almost a decade. During this time, I joined the Department for Ethnomusicology in Belgrade and formed a team together with a colleague Zdravko Ranisavljević dedicated to developing multiple perspectives on dance research. We often passionately disagreed on matters, but those disagreements helped me immensely in clarifying my own research position over time. I matured as a scholar with Selena and was also a witness to her extraordinary skills as a pedagogue. She was admired and loved by the students to whom she'd dedicated a generous amount of time and patience. Most of all, she managed to pass on love and passion for dance as her passion for dance and teaching was matched only by her equal passion for life. Her days began at dawn. She was strongly dedicated both to her family (her two sons and husband) as well as to her scholarship. Apart from her many academic engagements, she performed at numerous national and international scientific meetings, collaborated with many artistic associations of the Serbian diaspora, and was a jury member at shows and festivals regarding traditional music and dance. Her colleagues from the ICTM group on ethnochoreology remember her as a great organizer and as someone who could make things happen. She wanted to collaborate and was always in dialogue with others. She ventured bravely forward with her ideas and allowed herself to be vulnerable. Even her last days were filled with passion and love for her work, her students, and her colleagues. Surrounded by the love of her family, she fought to the very end.

### Research on the Banat Region (Vojvodina)

Selena Rakočević's academic thought showed remarkable developments over time. When I first met her, Selena Rakočević's pedagogical and scientific research interests were focused on the music and dance traditions of the Banat region in light of multiculturalism and the multiethnic context, as well as on the history of ethnochoreology as an independent scientific discipline. During the early years of her career, Selena Rakočević conducted rich research for her PhD in the Banat region, exploring its multilayered dance tradition over time and space, as well as certain aspects of ritual behavior known as folk theatre (e.g., the *revena* ritual from Taraš and the *kalušari* from Grebenac). In the good tradition of anthropology and ethnomusicology, Selena had

Corresponding Author/Sorumlu Yazar: Dunja NJARADI E-mail/E-posta: dunjasa82@gmail.com

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her own dedicated fieldwork, a long-term research on dance in the village of Svinjica (Romanian: Sviñița) in the Danube Gorge in Romania. Populated by a Serb population, this village had remained quite isolated until very recently and proved for Selena to be a rich context for exploring heterogeneous and complex contemporary dance practices. She visited Svinjica regularly, usually around Easter or in August for the *Festival Smokava* [Festival of Figs], to observe rich dance events that accompanied these occasions. These dance events displayed a mixture of diverse repertoire, as well as diverse dance structures performed as predictable dance texts. The performers in these events mixed different dance practices, such as traditional Serbian and Romanian dances from Banat, traditional dances from Central and Northeastern Serbia, as well as couple and solo dancing typical for contemporary Romanian society. She remained forever immersed in the dynamic history of today's Vojvodina, a place that has affected the traditional heritage of Serbs in an outstanding trans-cultural manner. In this respect, a densely knitted net had appeared of the possible ways people dance, and its surface was shaped in accordance with the regions' cultural circumstances.

### ***Kolo* and Dance as Heritage**

Although Selena remained dedicated to the research of the Banat region, her research interests widened over time while simultaneously coming into greater focus. She moved onto the topics of dance politics in relation to the idea of dance as heritage, focusing in particular on the notion of safeguarding as a nexus of national and international debates on heritage and identity formation. She envisioned the role of ethnochoreology as an active participant in harnessing dance practice in order to reclaim the nation's heritage. In this respect, she is crucially noted alongside Zdravko Ranisavljević to have been responsible for the success in applying to have the traditional dance *kolo* from Serbia be inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This was certainly a result of her unwavering dedication to the application process, and I am certain this was also due to her extensive and long-lasting relationships with relevant stakeholders. Selena remained throughout everything dedicated to various communities of performance in Serbia and beyond. If such a thing as an academic ivory tower were to exist, she did not inhabit it. She continued her research into the aspects of safeguarding that were promoted by international organizations such as UNESCO and the way these are being translated into local politics and policies. She presented this string of research in a series of lectures for the Choreomundus program in Clermont, France in 2021.

### **Formal Analysis of Dance and Labanotation**

The other aspect of her work she pushed forward was her special vision for the development of ethnochoreology. She envisioned ethnochoreology as an all-encompassing study of dance, or in her own words: "If it is understood broadly enough as a globally distinguished scholarly field no matter its diverse institutional histories, [ethnochoreology] has a potential for gathering together all diverse approaches to the exploration of dance as a creative human activity" (Rakočević, 2021, p. 44). Always keeping in mind the local context, she was interested in harnessing local schools of ethnochoreology in Serbia. Although ethnochoreology in Serbia had developed as an integral part of the European tradition of ethnochoreology, Selena Rakočević articulated a local tradition of ethnochoreology that relied on a strong emphasis on music and an extensive use of labanotation. Many colleagues who worked closely with Selena during that time can testify that Selena was very accomplished in using labanotation with the passion to further develop this expert knowledge.

Selena's last publication was a plenary she gave at the *Young Musicology Conference* in 2021 and is an extraordinary piece of academic overview on the discipline alongside her very reflective and personal travels through various disciplinary formations over the last couple of decades. In this speech she gave at the plenary (Rakočević, 2021, p. 36), Selena discussed the basic issues of ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology, which she described as sister disciplines, as research fields influenced by diverse multidimensional challenges of contemporaneity including the recent reality of doing field research on dance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This speech also relied on Arjun Appadurai's theoretical concepts of global flows, as it considered "how various modes of local and global socio-cultural processes influence our scholarly thinking and the ways we deal with traditional music and dance. Further paraphrasing Appadurai in thinking from the position of 'post-socialist' subjectivity" (Rakočević, 2021, p. 37), Selena gave her thoughts and experiences on having practiced ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological research since the mid-1990s to the very contemporary moment. However, in doing this, she adopted the basic methodological approach that tends toward polyvocality, including the views and standpoints of colleagues from Serbia and other former Yugoslav countries. This is a long, thorough, and extraordinary piece of work, and in a sense, Selena in her own words marked her lifetime of achievements with her defining features of precision, clarity, and humbleness in this piece.

Selena loved to travel. Her passion for ethnochoreology and her dynamic personality came to light at conferences and study group meetings. Wherever she went, she was always reaching out and making connections with local scholars and various kinds of scholarship. No matter how accomplished a scholar she became, she always wanted to learn more, and to learn from others. Since 2018, she had devoted herself significantly to the transmission of knowledge, the presentation of the Serbian ethnochoreological

school, and the spread of the Serbian cultural heritage from the perspective of pedagogy in the international framework. And as her colleagues, we can only endeavor to continue her work.

#### **ORCID ID of the author**

Dunja NJARADI 0000-0002-6970-9582

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