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Yugoslav Rock Opera *Gubec-beg* (1973–1984) – Theatrical Spectacle and Cultural Diplomacy*

ABSTRACT: The paper shows how the first Yugoslav rock opera *Gubec-beg* was created, how its spectacular stage production made its way into the repertoire of Zagreb's Komedija Theatre and the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall in Zagreb, how important it was for Yugoslav culture at home and cultural diplomacy abroad and for public opinion regarding this performance. The paper is written on the basis of documents from the Archives of Yugoslavia, the Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, the domestic press and periodicals (entertainment, music, daily, youth, political, musicological, theatre), and academic and scholarly literature.

KEY WORDS: Rock Opera *Gubec-beg*, cultural diplomacy, Komedija Theatre, Lisinski, Rock & Roll, Socialism, Yugoslavia

Rock and roll culture in Yugoslavia during the 1970s was largely positioned as the music of young Yugoslavs. In the analysis of the Youth League of Yugoslavia (*Savez omladine Jugoslavije*), the negative critique of rock and roll was ended as early as 1963, and affirmative guidelines were pointed out, by which the Yugoslav youth could boast of their inclination toward this new musical fashion from the West.¹ At the same time, rock

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1 Arhiv Jugoslavije (Archives of Yugoslavia - AJ), Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije, Fond 114, fasc. 71, Analiza „Aktuelni problemi kulturne politike i Savez

and roll later quickly proved to be an important link and an integrative factor of the ethnically diverse Yugoslav youth.² In this regard, by the end of the 1960s, a picture was created in Yugoslavia of an exemplary socialist youth that could be inclined favorably toward Western popular culture.³ A popular beat band Eclipse performing before Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito in 1966 and partial performance of the musical *Kosa (Hair)* for Tito in 1969 were important events that gave legitimacy to the young guitar-wielding Yugoslav rock and rollers and later to the long-haired Yugoslav hippies.⁴

However, during the Mass Movement of Croats (1970–1971), the entertainment and youth media in Zagreb and the Roman Catholic Church (Church of the Croats), took a more active nationalist role toward the youth in the Socialist Republic of Croatia. Therefore, the party leadership of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia imposed a reorganization of the Youth League of Yugoslavia in order to steer young people towards Marxism so they could successfully resist the growth of nationalism among its ranks. The Youth League believed that nationalism could be fought more effectively if the Yugoslav youth was part of the world trends in popular culture.⁵

In socialist Yugoslavia, a social environment had been created as of 1945 in such a way that a fusion could be made between the struggle of the workers and peasants and the new cultural trends among young people. The uprising of the Croatian and Slovene serfs, the Peasant Revolt of 1573 against Franjo Tahy (Ferenc Tahy), the cruel feudal lord of Stubica and Susedgrad, was the perfect way for achievement of this fusion. Many schools in Yugoslavia were named after Matija Gubec, the leader of the revolt, and generations of pupils visited the memorial built in his honor, as part of their extracurricular activities. Thus, Matija Gubec was a “rebel

omladine“ pripremljen nakon VII kongresa Saveza omladine Jugoslavije koji je održan u januaru 1963.

2 Aleksandar Raković, *Rokenrol u Jugoslaviji 1956–1968: izazov socijalističkom društvu*, (Beograd: Arhipelag, 2011), 461.

3 See: Raković, *Rokenrol u Jugoslaviji 1956–1968*; Zoran Janjetović, *Od internacionale do komercijale: popularna kultura u Jugoslaviji 1945–1991*, (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2011); Radina Vučetić, *Koka-kola socijalizam: amerikanizacija jugoslovenske popularne kulture šezdesetih godina 20. veka*, (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2012).

4 Raković, *Rokenrol u Jugoslaviji*, 513–514, 564.

5 Aleksandar Raković, „Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije i Muzička omladina Jugoslavije u sporu oko rokenrola (1971–1981)“, *Tokovi istorije* 3/2012, 166–170.

who in socialism becomes a hero.”⁶ So it should come as no surprise that in 1975 the rock opera *Gubec-beg* was staged at the Komedija Theatre in Zagreb, followed by a feature film *The Peasant Revolt of 1573 (Seljačka buna 1573)* directed and written by Vatroslav Mimica.

In this regard, the 1970s were a decade in which, in addition to other genres of rock and roll, rock opera had also become popular. Rock opera is a conceptual genre that merges rock and roll music and theatricality, where “songs were linked by a theme, like a song cycle”.⁷ In 1969 the British rock band The Who released a double studio album, the rock opera *Tommy*, and in 1973 the band also released another rock opera as a double studio album – *Quadrophenia*. *Tommy* was often considered the first rock opera, although the British band The Pretty Things released their own rock opera LP *S. F. Sorrow* in 1968.⁸ Rock opera *Tommy* by The Who was filmed in 1975 as a drama movie, written and directed by Ken Russell. Finally, *Tommy* was staged on Broadway in 1993.⁹

In 1970, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice released the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a studio album. This album was recorded by a rock sextet, Moog synthesizer, church organ and a symphony orchestra with Ian Gillan of the British hard rock band Deep Purple performing Jesus Christ.¹⁰ As early as 1971, *Jesus Christ Superstar* came to the Broadway theatre scene of the Mark Hellinger Theatre. The original Broadway production had more than 50 actors and choir members, accompanied by around 70 orchestra musicians.¹¹ *Jesus Christ Superstar* ran for 711 performances in the Mark Hellinger Theatre until 1973 when this show closed.¹² In 1973 Norman Jewison directed a drama movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*, based on Webber’s and Rice’s rock opera.¹³

When it comes to Yugoslavia, the musical *Kosa (Hair)* ran in Atelje 212 from 1969 to 1973. However, musicals and rock operas are two similar but not identical genres. At the same time, director Jovan Ristić

6 Igor Despot, „Kultura sjećanja na primjeru opsade Sigeta i Seljačke bune“, *Povijest u nastavi* 1/2017, 64.

7 Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, (Bloomington –Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 13.

8 Elisabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock. A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 77.

9 Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 13.

10 Ethan Mordden, *One More Kiss: The Broadway Musical in the 1970s*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15.

11 Original Broadway Cast, access date 5. 10. 2021, JesusChristsuperstarzone.com

12 Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock*, 94.

13 Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 64–65.

suggested to a band Kornj grupa to make a rock opera like the ones that were being played in the West. The band decided to create *The Musical Poem 1941* based on the verses of writer Branko Ćopić. *The Musical Poem 1941* was recorded in 1971 for Belgrade Television on the 30th anniversary of the socialist revolution in Yugoslavia, performed by the Kornj grupa, with vocalists Dado Topić and Josipa Lisac. The album with this musical poem was released only in 1979.¹⁴ In addition to *Hair*, another Broadway show arrived, also in a Yugoslav performance, on the stage of Atelje 212 – the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. This rock opera ran in Belgrade from 1972 to 1973.¹⁵

Neither *Hair* nor *Jesus Christ Superstar* could, of course, be considered Yugoslav performances. In addition, the *Musical Poem 1941* was just a music show broadcasted once in 1971 which became more important only later when the music album was released. Therefore, the Zagreb-based *Studio* entertainment magazine was correct when it wrote in 1975 that *Gubec-beg* was the “first rock opera of our country.”¹⁶ Such a view was accepted by the general public and *Gubec-beg* was considered the first Yugoslav rock opera.

The Preparation of Gubec-beg: Yugoslav Rock Opera as a Connection in Socialist Society

Ivica Krajač, the leader of the 4M Quartet, said that he had got the idea for the musical performance of *Gubec-beg* in 1973, when the nations that made up Yugoslavia celebrated the 400th anniversary of the Peasant Revolt.¹⁷ Krajač initially intended to write a musical¹⁸ and at the same time feared that his endeavor would be understood as kitsch. So he consulted with many people about whether even to start writing this musical.¹⁹ During those consultations, Vlado Štefančić, the director of the Ko-

14 Raković, *Rokenrol u Jugoslaviji*, 518.

15 See: Aleksandar Raković, „Mjuzikl *Kosa* u Ateljeu 212 (1969–1973)“, *Tokovi istorije* 2/2017, 85–114; Aleksandar Raković, „Rok opera *Isus Hristos superstar* u Ateljeu 212 (1972–1973)“, *Tokovi istorije* 2/2018, 177–197; Radina Vučetić, *Monopol na istinu: partija, kultura i cenzura u Srbiji šezdesetih i sedamdesetih godina XX veka*, (Beograd: Clio, 2016), 337–339.

16 „Gubec s mikrofonom“, *Studio*, 1. 3. 1975.

17 „Rok opera u Zagrebu“, *Ilustrovana politika*, 27. 11. 1973.

18 „Gubec’ u rock ruhu“, *Studio*, 20. 10. 1973.

19 „Rok opera u Zagrebu“.

medija Theatre, convinced Krajač that *Gubec-beg* should be a rock opera and not a musical.²⁰

Karlo Metikoš, a popular Yugoslav old-school rock and roll singer, accepted Krajač's offer to work with him in writing the rock opera *Gubec-beg*. They intended to offer it to the Komedija Theatre first. However, Vlado Štefančić told them: "For God's sake, don't put Gubec in the Komedija Theatre." This redirected the authors to seek support from the Croatian National Theatre (*Hrvatsko narodno kazalište*).²¹ In October of 1973, the librettist Ivica Krajač and composer Karlo Metikoš were about to finish writing the rock opera *Gubec-beg*.²²

Rock and roll critic Danilo Štrbac wrote in 1975 that the libretto of *Gubec-beg* was clearly based on the motives of the novel *The Peasant Revolt (Seljačka buna)* by August Šenoa and that the music written by Karlo Metikoš had been inspired by the rock operas *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Štrbac believed that by inserting folklore motifs, Metikoš had intended to provide authenticity, but he did so borrowing motifs from Macedonian folklore even though the revolt involved Croatian and Slovenian serfs. However, Krajač and Metikoš claimed that Macedonian music had "imposed itself" on them during the writing of *Gubec-beg*.²³

And while even before the premiere some people felt that a "synthesis of national mythology and rock music" could be "blasphemous," there were also those who underlined that there was less "real rock" in *Gubec-beg* than there should be. Krajač and Metikoš explained that in addition to ballads and jazz, there was also rock and roll but they argued that it was "our own brand of Yugoslav rock; modern pop music with elements of our folklore."²⁴

For this complicated concoction, Krajač and Metikoš hired the conductor and arranger Miljenko Prohaska to do the orchestration for *Gubec-beg*. They were joined by Petar Šarčević, stage director and manager of drama at the Croatian National Theatre.²⁵ They worked on the rock opera day and night and played on the piano in the residence of Karlo Metikoš and his wife Josipa Lisac.²⁶ Opera singers, actors, and ballet art-

20 „Gubec' u rock ruhu“.

21 „Rok-buna u veštačkim oblacima“, *Radio TV revija*, 7. 3. 1975.

22 „Gubec' u rock ruhu“.

23 „Grandiozan spektakl s propustima“, *Radio TV revija*, 14. 3. 1975.

24 „Glazbena buna“, *Studio*, 5. 10. 1974.

25 „Gubec' u rock ruhu“.

26 *Gubec-beg*, *Zagrebačko gradsko kazalište Komedija*, Komediya.hr/www/arhiva-predstava/gubec-beg-2.

ists were there to take part in *Gubec-beg*, accompanied by a rock and roll group. The press wrote that with this rock opera Yugoslavia would be one of only a few countries in the world to have that particular genre on music albums and in theatres.²⁷

Krajač and Metikoš then offered *Gubec-beg* to the Croatian National Theatre manager Mladen Škiljan and an audition was scheduled at the music and drama college of the Croatian National Theatre. Having passed that audition successfully in late 1973, *Gubec-beg* was accepted by the Croatian National Theatre as a mixed performance of drama, opera, and ballet. They were given a year to complete the cast, prepare the scenography, costumes, and sound system. In September of 1974, the Croatian National Theatre included *Gubec-beg* in its program for the next season.²⁸

But then something went wrong. Although *Gubec-beg* was supposed to open the 1974 season at the Croatian National Theatre, that did not happen. The authors of *Gubec-beg* allegedly decided abruptly that this rock opera would be performed in the Komedija Theatre after all, because, as Metikoš said, this theatre had given them more free space in their preparations. According to Metikoš, it was all about how the pop singers and musicians would manage on stage with the Croatian National Theatre's drama and opera ensemble. Moreover, there seemed to have been some concern that *Gubec-beg* could "choke in the ambience of such a large and serious theatre house." The Komedija Theatre was chosen also because the musicals *Yalta, Yalta* and *Uncle Maroje*²⁹ had achieved success on its stage. When this rock opera was transferred to the Komedija Theatre, Vlado Štefančić took over as director of the production.³⁰

Of course this explanation regarding the change of venue was not convincing even then. In reality, the reasons for abandoning the Croatian National Theatre were completely different. Namely, when Krajač, Metikoš, Prohaska, and Josipa Lisac appeared at the Croatian National Theatre to see the stage and space for the rock and roll orchestra, it caused an outrage in their ensembles, which were against the arrival of "cheap entertainment" in a theatre of such high-level drama culture. Therefore, the next day, after their visit, Škiljan issued an apology to the employees for the "unfortunate, arbitrary, and blasphemous" arrival of the "entertain-

27 „Gubec' u rock ruhu“.

28 „Rok opera u Zagrebu“.

29 „Rok-buna u veštačkim oblacima“.

30 „Glazbena buna“.

ers” and in this regard he emphasized that no rock opera could be on the program of the Croatian National Theatre.³¹

When it came to casting the actors, the leading female role went to Josipa Lisac. Krajač and Metikoš also offered roles to prominent pop singers Krunoslav Kićo Slabinac, Darko Domijan, and Dado Topić. They emphasized that they wanted the Kornij grupa and their vocalist Zlatko Pejaković to make up the basic frame of the orchestra. However, none of those plans came to fruition.³² At the same time, Krajač and Metikoš felt that the male pop singers in the key roles were not masculine enough. Finally, they decided to offer the main role of Matija Gubec to pop singer Branko Blaće.³³

From the beginning, the rehearsals always included two actors for each role because the project was too expensive to risk delays due to the illness of an actor. Branko Blaće and Marijan Jurišić rehearsed for the role of Matija Gubec, who was portrayed as a young man, Josipa Lisac and Lukrecija Brešković rehearsed for the role of the young peasant girl Jana, Tomislav Borić and Roland Šuster rehearsed for the role of the peasant leader Andrija Pasanec, the role of the young Đuro Mogaić was played by Miro Ungar, while Kićo Slabinac, who was also supposed to interpret that role, had gone abroad in the meantime.³⁴

The plan was to have about 200 actors on stage. Since the Komediya Theatre had accepted to include *Gubec-beg* in its repertoire, the production included the theatre’s choir and large mixed orchestra and the rock and roll musicians who had participated in the recording of the LP music album *Gubec-beg: Ante Mažuran* (electric solo guitar), Branko Kezele (electric bass guitar), Berislav Puhlovski (percussion), Rajko Dujmić (electric organ), Zlatko Tanodi (electric piano), Slaven Rački and Marijan Makar (both on electric twelve-string guitar).³⁵

But initially there were also some essential problems. *Gubec-beg* had started preparations without the singers and dancers from the “Lado”, “Joža Vlahović” and “Ladarice” ensembles. The “Lado” ensemble was indecisive about accepting the verbal offer for *Gubec-beg*, and their art director Ivan Ivančan ultimately turned down the offer, supposedly because of their busy schedule. The “Joža Vlahović” ensemble also declined, although they did like the idea at first. However, this cultural-artistic association

31 *Gubec-beg, Zagrebačko gradsko kazalište Komediya.*

32 „Glazbena buna“.

33 „Rok-buna u veštačkim oblacima“.

34 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

35 „Gubec s mikrofonom“; *Gubec-beg rock opera*, LP album, (Zagreb: Jugoton, 1975).

had regular rehearsals three times a week and its scheduled performances made it impossible for them to participate in *Gubec-beg*. Finally, “Ladarice” were enthusiastic at first and even started rehearsing. However, “Ladarice”, although an independent group, were members of the “Lado” ensemble and they had to keep their obligations to the ensemble, which had declined participating in *Gubec-beg* due to their busy schedule in the country and abroad.³⁶

Gubec-beg director Vlado Štefančić was not convinced in the sincerity of those negative responses. When those ensembles could not meet their demands, the Zagreb-based Studio for Contemporary Dance, led by choreographer Tihana Škrinjarić, was hired for the dance scenes and the “Tempo” karate club from Zagreb was hired for the martial arts sequences. In addition, many amateurs and extras were included in the program. As far as Štefančić was concerned, those who had refused to cooperate, “Lado” and “Joža Vlahović,” had proven to be redundant.³⁷ A few months later, Krajač said that those cancellations were “normal drawbacks that accompanied this project just like all other major domestic projects in our Zagreb milieu” and that they were “outside and inside challenges.”³⁸

Gubec-beg was scheduled to premiere on March 5, 1975 at the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall in Zagreb.³⁹ That venue had one of the biggest stages in Europe, 30 meters wide and 18 meters deep,⁴⁰ more than enough to accommodate some 200 actors and extras who took part in the scenes of the Battle of Stubica.⁴¹ Krajač and Metikoš traveled to London to buy a fog machine like the one used by the Rolling Stones and Elton John at their concerts. They also procured artificial clouds and various wind and thunder effects hoping to portray more faithfully the revolt of the Croatian and Slovenian serfs. Three wagons full of trees were delivered to evoke on the stage the rolling Zagorje hillside.⁴² The castle of nobleman Ferenc Tahy⁴³ was also depicted on the stage. Set designer Drago Turina was in charge of the stage scenography.⁴⁴ Since the stage design of *Gubec-beg* required the use of the entire stage, a number of front-row

36 „Narodnjaci napustili Gupca“, *Studio*, 15. 3. 1975.

37 „Gubec s mikrofonom“; „Narodnjaci napustili Gupca“.

38 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“, *Džuboks*, Oktobar 1975.

39 „Rok-buna u veštačkim oblacima“.

40 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“

41 „Grandiozan spektakl s propustima“.

42 „Rok-buna u veštačkim oblacima“.

43 „Grandiozan spektakl s propustima“.

44 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

seats had to be removed to accommodate the orchestra. The stage and the space around it were cluttered with cables, microphones, and speakers.⁴⁵

Krajač and Metikoš said that *Gubec-beg* was the “biggest theatrical undertaking in Europe” at that time.⁴⁶ Although *Gubec-beg* followed the rock operas *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* in terms of genre, Krajač insisted that there was none of the entertainment in his rock opera that rock and roll music normally carried but that it was a new musical expression associated with wrath and revolts expressed in the rebellion led by Matija Gubec. According to Krajač, the goal was to bring that historical event closer to the younger generation. Krajač insisted that the rock opera *Gubec-beg* was not a show but that it had the same parts, an overture and a finale, just like a classical opera.⁴⁷ *Politikin zabavnik*, a popular magazine that had the purpose of educating young people, wrote that *Gubec-beg* was supposed to “remind us of this significant event in our history, a great victory of the Croatian and Slovenian serfs.”⁴⁸

The premiere of *Gubec-beg* was briefly called into question in late February of 1975 after Krajač’s car was stolen along with everything in it, including exclusive musical material from the second part of the opera, complete scores and piano excerpts. Fortunately, only two days later the car was found and Krajač’s material was retrieved intact.⁴⁹ After five days and five nights of preparation on the Lisinski stage, the rock opera *Gubec-beg* was ready for its first performance.⁵⁰

Even during the preparations for *Gubec-beg*, the Yugoslav character of this play was continually underlined, expressed through contemporary Macedonian folklore combined with the historical event of the Croatian and Slovenian people. Furthermore, the Belgrade press called this an “illustrious event in our history” while the Zagreb newspapers pointed out that *Gubec-beg* incorporated “our own, Yugoslav rock.” The media underlined the prestigious fact that Yugoslavia was one of only a few countries, in addition to Great Britain and the United States, to have its very own authentic rock opera.

45 Ana Unkić, „Programsko-prostorni aspekti i društvena uloga Koncertne dvorane Vatroslava Lisinskog u Zagrebu“, (PhD Dissertation, Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2021), 69, 113.

46 „Rok-buna u veštačkim oblacima“.

47 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

48 „Prva jugoslovenska rok-opera ‘Gubec-beg’“, *Politikin zabavnik*, 4. 4. 1975.

49 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

50 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“

Gubec-beg at Home: Major Success and Intentions for Recognition as a High Culture Performance

The pre-premiere and the next two pre-premieres of the rock opera *Gubec-beg* were held at the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall in Zagreb on March 5, 6, and 7, 1975.⁵¹ After all three pre-premieres, music critic and opera director Nenad Turkalj wrote in Zagreb's daily *Večernji list* on March 10, 1975: "Now, with the huge success of the premiere of Metikoš, Krajač, and Prohaska's *Gubec-beg* in Lisinski Concert Hall behind us, after hearing the audience's enthusiastic applause and standing ovations, we can safely say that there had been many skeptics with all possible objections to this rock opera and its performance, objections that cast doubt both on the authors and the genre [given the chosen historical-heroic theme] and the ensemble. But the very opposite happened; the authors presented themselves on a very high, truly international level, the theme of the historic peasant revolt and its leader Gubec sounded authentic in its melodic expression and rhythms of the genre marked as 'rock-opera,' the ensemble of the Komedija Theatre with its many outside associates achieved a highly professional performance, which, without a doubt, is one of the most significant program achievements so far in Zagreb's new concert hall."⁵²

On March 14, 1975, rock and roll critic Danilo Štrbac praised the newly discovered acting qualities of Josipa Lisac, who had already been widely recognized as an accomplished vocalist. He said that Branko Blaće was outstanding in his role as Matija Gubec. Thus, this little-known singer of popular music, who appeared unnoticed at the Zagreb Festival only two years earlier, got a new chance at success. Štrbac wrote that the greatest discovery of *Gubec-beg* was Marijan Kašaj, the drummer of the band Grešnici, who played the blind old man Jurko. On the whole, Štrbac said, despite all its shortcomings, the rock opera *Gubec-beg* is a "work that evokes respect for its enormous effort, enralls with its magnificence, and whose individual scenes leave a stunning impression on the viewer."⁵³

By the summer of 1975, all twenty performances at Lisinski were sold out well in advance.⁵⁴ The interest did not subside until the end of the year. From its first performances in March of 1975 to mid-December of 1975, *Gubec-beg* was performed 50 times at the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall and was seen by around 100,000 people, who had come by

51 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

52 „Djelo dostojno naslova“, *Večernji list*, 10. 3. 1975.

53 „Grandiozan spektakl s propustima“.

54 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

bus from Bjelovar, Karlovac, Varaždin, and the wider Zagreb area. Allegedly, the city of Ljubljana had bought tickets for as many as seven performances of *Gubec-beg* for people from the Slovenian capital arriving in Zagreb to see the performance. So, then it was felt that the time had come for the rock opera to “move from Zagreb.” But there were technical problems. The lesser problem was to transport the group of 236 people, but a much bigger problem was transporting the scenery with all the metal and wood and finding a stage that could accommodate around 200 actors all at once. It was announced that *Gubec-beg* should be performed in Sarajevo in March of 1976.⁵⁵ However, that never happened.

After the first three performances Krajač and Metikoš felt that *Gubec-beg* was one of the best rock operas in the world.⁵⁶ As far as Štefančić was concerned, *Gubec-beg* was “total theatre” never recorded in Yugoslavia before.⁵⁷ The public mostly acknowledged the artistic value of this rock opera, but there was some resistance among young people because for them *Gubec-beg* was not a rock and roll performance.⁵⁸ So, it was important for the iconic Yugoslav rock and roll magazine *Džuboks* (*Jukebox*) to deliver its judgment about this rock and roll opera. Namely, while young people expressed their doubts about the rock and roll character of *Gubec-beg*, the authors of this rock opera, driven by its preparation and initial success, seemed to steer clear of the public seeing their work as a part of a rock and roll culture.

According to the October 1975 issue of *Džuboks*, the Komedija Theatre achieved a “very successful and high-quality performance.” In this regard, *Džuboks* applauded the efforts of the management, urging as many people as possible in “our country” to see *Gubec-beg*, because “the 200-member cast of this unique production in our country, has passed this exam with flying colors.” Josipa Lisac said to *Džuboks* that she had been preparing for this show for two years and that after the album *Dnevnik jedne ljubavi* (*Diary of a Love*) she had not recorded anything else. “Everything,” she said, “has been sacrificed for this rock opera.”⁵⁹

When it came to the musical character of this play, *Džuboks* asked assistant director Boris Pavlenić, who also played the villain Šimun Drmečić, whether *Gubec-beg* was indeed a rock opera. Pavlenić re-

55 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“, „Na ‘Gupca’ iz New Yorka“, *Studio*, 7. 2. 1976.

56 „Filmski ‘Tommy’“, *Studio*, 12. 4. 1975.

57 „Gubec s mikrofonom“.

58 „Filmski ‘Tommy’“.

59 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“

plied: "I think there is a lot of pessimism among our people who underestimate everything that has been created in our country. Someone had to start first. In fact, this should be supported in every way in order to stimulate the emergence of new authors." Opera singer Djani Šegina played Ferenc Tahy. A generation older, with a rich 25-year career in the Komedi-ja Theatre in operettas, operas, and comedies, Šegina said that he "finally made it into rock opera," which is "certainly a new medium, not to mention that I never sang rock as rock," and "now I was supposed to try to be stylistically equal to the young forces that have arrived and pulled off a huge success." In the end, Karlo Metikoš said that his rock and roll experience had helped him write this rock opera.⁶⁰

So, there was never a clear answer to the question of whether *Gubec-beg* was really a rock opera in the true concept of rock and roll culture. If the answer had been clear and also honest, it would undoubtedly have been said that *Gubec-beg* was not a rock and roll performance and that it differed from rock operas such as *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* in whose footsteps it originally started. At that time, when the genre of rock opera was gaining popularity in the West, initially the authors were keen to promote *Gubec-beg* as such but later digressed from the entirety of rock and roll culture.

Danilo Štrbac wrote that there was a controversial moment in *Gubec-beg* for the generally atheist-oriented Yugoslav society of that time. Although the authors of *Gubec-Beg* publicly claimed that the scene of the Roman Catholic Mass in Stubica, which was disrupted by Ferenc Tahy, was supposed to indicate that "there is no God, except for the rich and powerful," there was the impression of a certain affirmation of the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, the main advisor for the Roman Catholic Mass scene, Fra Josip Kroppek, allegedly made the scene into something radically different from what was originally planned. Štrbac interpreted that as a "stumble in the creative enthusiasm of the author and the entire performing cast."⁶¹

In 1976 *Gubec-beg* was performed in Kruševac (Serbia) in an obviously more modest format, as part of an event called "Celebrations of Freedom" in the area of the "Slobodište" memorial complex. Since 1965, this was a place for commemorating the victory of the socialist revolution, Yugoslavia's freedom, and the fallen patriots and victims of fascist terror in the Kruševac area. The formal memorial program included works of

60 *Ibid.*

61 „Grandiozan spektakl s propustima“.

drama and music “with a revolutionary-libertarian and general humanistic content.”⁶²

The importance of the rock opera *Gubec-beg* for Yugoslav culture is also shown by the fact that it was performed at the closing of the Congress of the Jeunesses Musicales International (The International Federation of Musical Youth), held in Zagreb from August 20 to 29, 1979. This congress had a rich and diverse program of classical and traditional music, with a concert by the famous rock and roll group Bijelo dugme at Maksimir Stadium, together with the Branko Krsmanović Symphony Orchestra and Mixed Choir from Belgrade (August 26, 1979).⁶³

It is interesting to note that within that program neither *Gubec-beg* nor Bijelo dugme were seen as explicit examples of rock and roll culture in the activities of Musical Youth of Yugoslavia, but more likely as an influence of rock and roll in the field of classical music or at least as a test for the future activities of this organization, whose task was to nurture a sophisticated understanding of music among young Yugoslavs. Namely, throughout the seventies, the Musical Youth of Yugoslavia was under a lot of pressure from the Youth League of Yugoslavia (later named the Socialist Youth League of Yugoslavia) to include rock and roll in the extracurricular musical activities of the Yugoslav youth, which highly educated music artists considered completely unacceptable and resisted for up to 10 years.⁶⁴

It was only when the rock and roll band from Skopje *Leb i sol* held three concerts in Zagreb on April 19, 1981, organized by the Musical Youth, that the Fifth Congress of the Musical Youth of Yugoslavia (May 23–25, 1981) explained that these concerts were a “significant revolution” in the attitude of the Musical Youth toward rock and roll and the first “concrete action” to make rock and roll a segment of its activities.⁶⁵

According to the Komedija Theatre from Zagreb, *Gubec-beg* remained on the repertoire until October of 1984.⁶⁶ From 1975 to 1984, the rock opera *Gubec-beg* had 212 performances and was seen by 438,087 peo-

62 Zorica Duković, „Svečanost kao strategija kulturne politike u kreiranju kulturnog identiteta grada“, (PhD Dissertation, Fakultet dramskih umetnosti Univerziteta umetnosti u Beogradu, 2016), 66, 131.

63 „Muzika u svim porama“, *Studio*, 18. 8. 1979.

64 See: Aleksandar Raković, „Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije i Muzička omladina Jugoslavije u sporu oko rokenrola (1971–1981)“, *Tokovi istorije* 3/2012, 159–189.

65 AJ, Muzička omladina Jugoslavije, Fond 476, registratura 1, Bilten br. 2 Petog kongresa Muzičke omladine Jugoslavije, 24. maj 1981.

66 „Premijera glazbene predstave ‘Gubec-beg’ u Zagrebačkom gradskom kazalištu Komedija“, *Film-mag.net*, 21. 2. 2018.

ple. In the entire history of the Komedija Theatre, this was the most popular production the theatre had ever had on its program.⁶⁷ In February of 1979, the same authors, Krajač, Metikoš, and Prohaska, and the Komedija Theatre presented their new rock opera *Grička vještica* (*The Witch of Grič*) on the stage of the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall.⁶⁸

So, *Gubec-beg* was indeed a Yugoslav rock opera and the remark that called it into question to a very small degree was made in 1975 by the rock critic Danilo Štrbac. He was obviously stunned by the rising Croatian nationalism and suspected that the Church of Croats might have misused this play in the scene of the Roman Catholic Mass. However, despite the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which practically accepted the demands of the deposed leadership of the League of Communists of Croatia from the time of the Mass Movement, and despite the fact that the constitutional reforms had turned Yugoslavia into a confederation, there was nothing to be found in any source that could dispute the Yugoslav character of *Gubec-beg*.

The focus of the Yugoslav press on *Gubec-beg* intensified again when the play traveled abroad. The domestic performances, despite their spectacular production, had become a common routine after about a year. With *Gubec-beg* abroad it was confirmed what authors actually wanted – that this rock opera exited popular culture and entered the field of high culture.

Gubec-beg Abroad: Yugoslav Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Expectations regarding *Gubec-beg* were such that even before its debut it was rumored that the performance would go on tour abroad. At the end of September of 1974, when *Gubec-beg* was supposed to be on the program of the Croatian National Theatre, Ivica Krajač mentioned the possibility of *Gubec-beg* being performed in the Soviet Union through the Concert Directorate of Croatia, because the rock opera's theme was Slavic and as such appealed to the wider Soviet public.⁶⁹ However, in addition to this realistic option, there were also unrealistic expectations, for example a complete propaganda hoax in early 1976 about *Gubec-beg* possibly being performed in Hollywood.⁷⁰

67 „Gubec-beg“, *Zagrebačko gradsko kazalište Komedija*.

68 „Grička vještica‘ pred publikom“, *Studio*, 17. 2. 1979.

69 „Glazbena buna“.

70 „Na ‘Gupca‘ iz New Yorka“.

In October of 1975 Štefančić said that at that particular moment the only place abroad where *Gubec-beg* would play for sure would be Vienna because the rock opera had been proposed as part of a program of international cultural exchange between Yugoslavia and Austria.⁷¹ According to *Džuboks*, the Yugoslav Commission for International Cultural Relations had included the rock opera *Gubec-beg* in the program of international exchange with Austria for 1976.⁷² Rumor had it that *Gubec-beg* would be performed in Vienna in the fall of 1976.⁷³ However, *Gubec-beg* did not go to Austria. As far as international tours were concerned, the Komedijska Theatre said that *Gubec-beg* had performed in Italy, the Soviet Union, and Hungary,⁷⁴ in Trieste, Rome, Leningrad, and Budapest.⁷⁵

The authors of *Gubec-beg* hoped that their production would be performed in the United States. Štefančić said “it is 90% certain that the show will go on Broadway,” but that it was not sure what the format of the Yugoslav cast would be and that perhaps only the vocal soloists would go on tour.⁷⁶ In this regard, Brannigan Eisler Performing Arts International from New York was really interested in *Gubec-beg* playing on Broadway. Their representative Charles Eisler said that *Gubec-beg* should be adapted for the American audience because the viewers there knew nothing about Matija Gubec and the peasant revolt. Eisler offered a contract under which his agency was given 18-month rights for the distribution of *Gubec-beg* in the Western Hemisphere and in the English-speaking countries.⁷⁷

The guest appearance on Broadway would be produced by the Komedijska Theatre. Vlado Štefančić would still be the main director, but he would have a US consultant. Tihana Škrinjarić would be the choreographer, but she too would have an American consultant. Miljenko Prohaska would still be the conductor. Preparations for the US performance were supposed to begin at the end of 1976, provided the rock opera was performed in English and that the maximum number of performers on the stage could be 40 younger people, in accordance with the taste of the US audience.⁷⁸ However, in the end the contract fell through. Instead of *Gu-*

71 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“

72 „Gubec Beg u inozemstvu“, *Studio*, 12. 7. 1975.

73 „Na ‘Gupca’ iz New Yorka“.

74 „Gubec-beg“, *Zagrebačko gradsko kazalište Komedijska*.

75 „Josipa Lisac u operi ‘Gubec Beg’ oduševila prije 40 godina, a sada sprema reprizu“, *Dnevnik.hr*, 13. 11. 2015.

76 „Gubec-beg na Broadwayu?“

77 „Na ‘Gupca’ iz New Yorka“.

78 *Ibid.*

bec-beg, Josipa Lisac signed a contract with Brannigan Eisler to record the album in the United States. Josipa Lisac and Karlo Metikoš set off to New York City immediately after *Gubec-beg* had finished playing in Rome (May 3, 1977), where they hoped to continue their life and career.⁷⁹

These offers and opportunities to visit Austria, the United States, as well as Italy, convinced the authors of *Gubec-beg* of their huge success. Krajač and Metikoš, however, believed that their success was due to the fact that *Gubec-beg* was “not purely exclusive rock music because as such it would be short-lived, it would wear out quickly,” and “this is how we have, perhaps unwittingly, stumbled onto the right path.”⁸⁰ Thus, even when it came to touring internationally, they confirmed their departure from rock and roll culture.

As for *Gubec-beg* performing in Italy, they really did. In principle, an agreement was made with the Teatro Reggino from Turin that *Gubec-beg* would be showing in that city in 1976. Due to the size of the ensemble, the play was supposed to be performed in the spacious Palazzo dello Sport.⁸¹ However, this visit to Turin did not happen. On the other hand, the representatives of the Teatro Rossetti from Trieste, who had seen the play in Zagreb, invited *Gubec-beg* to visit their city.⁸² On April 14, 1976, *Gubec-beg* performed in Trieste.⁸³ Half of the ensemble was there, about 100 people, together with the choir and the Komediya Theatre orchestra. When Josipa Lisac finished performing the aria *Ave Maria*, the audience applauded so frenetically that the director had to stop the play and allow her to perform an encore.⁸⁴

This was followed by a much more important visit to Italy, as part of the “Month of Culture of SFR Yugoslavia,” from April 21 to May 28, 1977 in Rome. Magazine *Il dramma* especially announced the guest appearance of the rock opera *Gubec-beg*. The Italian audience was introduced to Yugoslav contemporary cultural achievements in theatre, classical music, ballet, cinematography, rock and roll, and folklore.⁸⁵ Rome was covered with posters announcing the “Month of Culture of SFR Yugoslavia,” a cultural

79 „Gubec osvojio Rimljane“, *Studio*, 21. 5. 1977.

80 „Na ‘Gupca’ iz New Yorka“.

81 „Gubec Beg u inozemstvu“.

82 „Na ‘Gupca’ iz New Yorka“.

83 „U Zagrebu mu je pozirala najseksi djevojka Jamesa Bonda“, *Večernji list*, 18. 4. 2015.

84 „Josipa Lisac u operi ‘Gubec Beg’ oduševila prije 40 godina, a sada sprema reprizu“.

85 *Il dramma*, April–May 1977, 108.

event that took place under the auspices of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito and Italian President Giovanni Leone.⁸⁶

During the month of Yugoslav culture in Rome, artists from all over Yugoslavia, from Ljubljana to Skopje, had taken turns performing. Of the announced events, only an art exhibition was not realized because no venue could be found that could accommodate the exhibition that included up to 70 painters and five sculptors. In addition to Yugoslav artists, the chefs of Belgrade's Yugoslavia Hotel were also there. In the "Trilus Tavern," always filled with curious Italians, they prepared a rich assortment of Yugoslav culinary specialties.⁸⁷

On May 3, 1977, *Gubec-beg* was playing at the Teatro Sistina in Rome. *La Unita* announced it as a play by the Komedija Theatre and said it would be performed as part of the "month of Yugoslav culture." In order to make this performance "with a 250-member cast" more intriguing for the Italian audience, the rock opera was announced under the Italian name "Fire Crown" – "La corona di fuoco (*Gubec-beg*)."⁸⁸ Given the size of the cast and the huge public attention, *Gubec-beg* was the main event of the "Month of Culture of SFR Yugoslavia", and it was certainly recognized as an important part of Yugoslav cultural diplomacy. There is no doubt that on May 3, 1977, *Gubec-beg* triumphed on the stage of the crowded Teatro Sistina in a performance for which all 1,000 tickets had been snatched up. Josipa Lisac was interrupted several times "with enthusiastic applause on the open stage" in her aria *Ave Maria*. Other performers also received wholehearted applause. *Studio* magazine wrote: "The crowded Teatro Sistina was proof that *Gubec-beg* was a complete success, not only of the Zagreb's Komedija Theatre, but also of our entire cultural event."⁸⁹

After the performance, the Yugoslav ambassador in Rome, Borislav Jović, and his wife visited the *Gubec-beg* troupe, congratulated them on their performance and took pictures with them for the Yugoslav press. The Italian state television RAI made a documentary on the play and the cast of *Gubec-beg*, which was broadcast on May 4, 1977 on RAI television. In addition, one of the private Italian televisions also made a video documentary on *Gubec-beg*. However, the next day, the Italian critics dropped the term "rock" and instead added "folk" to *Gubec-beg*. Immediately after this performance, the Metikoš-Lisac couple left for the United States

86 „Gubec osvojio Rimljane“.

87 *Ibid.*

88 „Schermi e ribalte“, *L'Unità*, 3. 5. 1977.

89 „Gubec osvojio Rimljane“.

to work there,⁹⁰ thus essentially abandoning the rock opera and the cast of *Gubec-beg*.

From June 30 to July 5, 1978, the Komedija Theatre staged six performances of *Gubec-beg* in the October Concert Hall in Leningrad, whose capacity of 3,800 seats was always filled. The role of Jana was played by pop singer Radojka Šverko, who replaced Josipa Lisac. *Studio* wrote that it was a “successful guest appearance and a pleasant musical experience for the Soviet audience, which appreciates the achievements of our entertainment industry.” The audience applauded each of *Gubec-beg*’s six performances. The production of *Gubec-beg* on the stage of the magnificent October Concert Hall showed how highly the hosts valued this Yugoslav rock opera. In addition to Radojka Šverko, other newcomers to the cast were Darko Domijan as Jurko and Ivo Pattiera who played Mogaić. After the performance on July 3, 1978, the ensemble went to the restaurant of the Oktyabrskaya Hotel, where they stayed past midnight and into the early hours of the next day, July 4, which was a Yugoslav holiday, marking the uprising of the peoples of Yugoslavia in 1941. Their celebration continued with revolutionary and partisan songs and most notably songs swearing loyalty to Comrade Tito.⁹¹

Studio wrote about the Leningrad performances as events on the border between theatre and show business. As customary when musicians from Yugoslavia toured in the Soviet Union, visitors to the performance of *Gubec-beg* in Leningrad were allowed to get a look at their instruments.⁹² This had become a habit from the many previous tours and concerts that Yugoslav singers and pop groups had in the Soviet Union. However, as far as Yugoslav state policy and diplomacy was concerned, there was no doubt that *Gubec-beg*’s visit represented art music.

Namely, *Gubec-beg* played in Leningrad as part of the ongoing Yugoslav-Soviet cultural cooperation program, initiated in 1974 as part of the Agreement on Cultural, Scientific, and Educational Cooperation. Prior to that, the Convention on Cultural Cooperation between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union had been in force since 1956. From 1956 to 1974, cooperation programs were renewed every two years, and from 1975 every three years. However, when it came to *Gubec-beg*, Yugoslavia’s Federal Institute for International Scientific, Educational, Cultural, and Technical Cooperation prepared a document on the elements of the cooperation pro-

90 *Ibid.*

91 „Horošo, Gubec-beg!“, *Studio*, 15. 7. 1978.

92 *Ibid.*

gram on March 7, 1979 and submitted it to the Yugoslav Secretariat for Foreign Affairs on April 10, 1979. The text stated, among other things, that the “most fruitful cooperation” between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union was “achieved in the field of music and the performing arts.” In this regard, it was stated that in 1978 the “fruitful cooperation” continued because the following cultural institutions had been guests in the Soviet Union: the Yugoslav Drama Theatre (*Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište*), the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, the Red Rose Festival Ensemble (*Crvena ruža*), the Folklore Ensemble from Pljevlja, the Abrašević Art and Culture Society from Belgrade, the Goce Delčev Ensemble, the Komediya Theatre from Zagreb with the play *Gubec-beg*, the Guest Theatre, as well as “numerous vocalists, pop groups, etc.”⁹³ Therefore, *Gubec-beg* was definitely categorized as culture, not entertainment.

The rock opera *Gubec-beg* was the flagship of the series of events of Yugoslav culture in Rome in 1977, whose patron was Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito himself. Ambassador Borisav Jović’s visit to the cast of *Gubec-beg*, after a standing ovation on the Roman stage, confirmed the significance of this play for Yugoslavia. In addition, the great success of *Gubec-beg* in Leningrad made this play, with its mass scenes, a part of Yugoslavia’s soft power efforts toward the Soviet Union. The Yugoslav public was especially made aware of the fact that during the Leningrad tour, members of production and cast had sung partisan songs and celebrated the socialist revolution during their off-stage break.

These major foreign tours were an opportunity for the authors of *Gubec-beg* to reiterate that they did not like carrying the burden of the term “rock opera.” At the same time, socialist youth organization newspapers like *Mladost*, *Polet* and *Naši dani* did not publish any texts about *Gubec-beg* because obviously they did not see that play as a part of the culture of young Yugoslavs whose lifeblood was rock and roll. However, the impressive scenes from Rome and Leningrad further elevated the ambitions of *Gubec-beg* and gave its authors the impression that it was better for their work to be interpreted as high culture instead of popular culture.

In the end, the standing ovations on big international stages and the huge domestic success of *Gubec-beg* had to be of great satisfaction to

93 Diplomatski arhiv Ministarstva spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije (Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia - DAMSPRS), Politička arhiva, Fond Sovjetski Savez, fasc. 135, 1979, br. 421010, 17. april 1979, Dokument „Neki elementi za izradu jugoslovenskog nacrtu programa kulturno-prosvetne saradnje za 1980, 1981. i 1982. godinu“.

the authors because of the fact that the Croatian National Theatre had once rebuffed them as “entertainers.” In addition, *Gubec-beg* was also chosen for the Congress of the Jeunesses Musicales International. However, despite the great popularity of the play, none of the serious political weekly magazines (*NIN*, *Oko*, *Start*) or musicological and theatrical periodicals (i.e. *Pro muzika* and *Teatron*) had written anything about *Gubec-beg*. From today’s perspective, stripped of all contemporaneous prejudices, no one could deny that *Gubec-beg* had stepped into the field of high musical culture.

Summary

The idea for the musical performance of *Gubec-beg* was born in 1973, when the nations of Yugoslavia celebrated the 400th anniversary of the Peasant Revolt – the uprising of the Croatian and Slovene serfs against the feudal lord Franjo Tahí (1573). In socialist Yugoslavia, a social environment had been created as of 1945 in such a way that a fusion could be made between the struggle of the workers and peasants and the new cultural trends among young people. Thus, the public always underlined the Yugoslav character of rock-opera *Gubec-beg*.

The pre-premiere of the rock opera *Gubec-beg* by the Zagreb’s Komedijski Theatre was held at the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall in Zagreb on 5 March 1975. *Gubec-beg* was considered the biggest spectacle ever performed on Yugoslav theatrical stages. Rock-opera *Gubec-beg* had special importance abroad where it gained great success within Yugoslav cultural diplomacy towards Italy, the Soviet Union and Hungary.

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- *Pro musica* (Beograd)
- *Radio TV revija* (Beograd)
- *Start* (Zagreb)
- *Studio* (Zagreb)
- *Teatron* (Beograd)

Резиме

Александар Раковић

Југословенска рок опера *Губец-бег* (1973–1984) – Позоришни спектакл и културна дипломатија

АПСТРАКТ: Рад показује како је настала прва југословенска рок опера *Губец-бег*, приказује пут којим је спектакуларна представа стигла на репертоар Загребачког градског казалишта „Комедија“ и сцену концертне дворане „Ватрослав Лисински“. Поред тога представља какву важност је ова рок опера имала за културу у Југославији, али и у иностранству, где је постала вид југословенске културне дипломатије, и показује однос јавности према овој представи. Рад је писан на основу архивске грађе из Архива Југославије, Дипломатског архива Министарства спољних послова Републике Србије, домаће штампе и периодике (забавне, музичке, дневне, омладинске, политичке, музиколошке, позоришне), научне и стручне литературе.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: рок опера *Губец-бег*, културна дипломатија, казалиште Комедија, Лисински, рокенрол, социјализам, Југославија

Идеја о музичком извођењу *Губец-бега* створена је 1973. када су југословенски народи славили 400 година од Сељачке буне хрватских и словеначких кметова против феудалног господара Фрање Тахија (1573). У социјалистичкој Југославији друштвени амбијент је од 1945. креиран тако да се могла направити и фузија између борбе радника и сељака и нових омладинских и културних трендова. Стога је у јавности увек подвлачен југословенски карактер ове рок опере.

Прво праизвођење рок опере *Губец-бег* загребачког казалишта „Комедија“ одржано је у концертној дворани „Ватрослав Лисински“ у Загребу 5. марта 1975. *Губец-бег* је сматран највећим спектаклом који је до тада игран на југословенским позоришним сценама. Посебан значај ова рок опера је имала у иностранству, где је остварила велики успех у оквиру југословенске културне дипломатије према Италији, Совјетском Савезу и Мађарској.