

# Viral Interstitiality and Unlikely Resources: Gender and Labour in Turkish Public Theatre During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The growing literature on Covid-19 and theatre has demonstrated how the pandemic has intensified gendered precarities in theatrical labour.<sup>1</sup> However, the pandemic has also provided feminist theatre makers with unexpected or unlikely resources, albeit with limitations. The Istanbul Municipal Theatre's (İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Şehir Tiyatroları or İBBŞT) production of *Melek* that premiered in 2020 is an indicative example of such rare and largely invisible cases of pandemic theatre. Critically engaging with the archives and repertoires of tuberculosis (TB) melodrama and the Turkish lives of the genre, *Melek* conducts an experiential mapping of the performativity of death and the porous borders between everyday performance and artistic performance. The production offered independent feminist theatre practitioners, who otherwise maintain a precarious existence in Turkey's theatre world, access to new spaces, resources and audiences. Combining archival with ethnographic research, I will demonstrate how, in the case of *Melek*, the intersections between actual and fictive viral contagion – what I define as *viral interstitiality* – constitute inclusive economies amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. In somatics, the interstitial is theorized and enacted as *suspensions* of static schisms that shape relational empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon this grasp of the interstitial as connective thresholds, viral interstitiality sheds light on the practices and the economies of care that emerge from the porous dynamism between the viral and the theatrical.

## Performative failure and viral reconfiguration

Written by Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, *Melek* is a monodramatic performance about the Turkish actor Melek Kobra's (1915–1939) deterioration and death at Cerrahpaşa Hospital. The play occurs during the formative years of the Republic of Turkey when women were exploring new opportunities regarding their participation in national reproduction and female actors were at the forefront of these dynamics, both as performance professionals and as symbols of the new regime.<sup>3</sup> The transition from the ethno-religiously diverse Ottoman Empire to the homogenized entity of the modernized and secularized Turkish nation, however, caused many tensions for female performers. On the one hand, Muslim Turkish women gained access to professional theatre careers at the expense of the non-Muslim female actors who previously dominated the field.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the conflicting expectations from these women often caused them to pay a high price for their careers.

Far from merely enjoying the empowering potentialities of the new status quo, female performers had to negotiate any projected affinities between the birth of the nation and the healthy, often infantilized, and heteronormatively reproducible female body. Due to her illness Kobra ‘failed’ these gendered performances of nationhood and lost access to the economies of theatre production. Altınay became interested in Kobra while ‘researching the changing embodied norms and performances of citizenship, and how people resisted or failed to invest in them, throughout the history of the nation-state’.<sup>5</sup> He was inspired by Kobra’s diaries<sup>6</sup> that documented her personal and performative explorations of her relationship with TB. In *Melek*, as she navigates her clinical condition, Kobra performs various popular scenes and roles of fictional characters who also experienced TB.<sup>7</sup> Unemployed and confined to a hospital room – ‘a failed symbol of the secular nation-building program’<sup>8</sup> – she utilizes performance to reconfigure her viral infection and to reposition herself as an actor.

*Melek* was initially produced in Istanbul in 2013 by the feminist independent company Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş (Theatre Painted Bird). Self-identifying as the ‘alternative to the alternative theatre’ the company’s co-founder and artistic director, Jale Karabekir, who also directed *Melek*, countered the national expectations imposed onto Kobra regarding reproductive and performance labour with minor aesthetics. The production’s minimalism<sup>9</sup> allowed the stage to be imagined both as an operetta theatre and a hospital room as Kobra embodied and enacted a spectacularized gendered dying body. By exploring the interstitial spaces between Kobra’s fictive and everyday practices of TB management, the feminist director proposed performance as a tool for negotiating the tensions between death administration and the gendered responsibilities of citizenship.

Performed by Yeşim Koçak, Kobra lives in the liminal spaces of viral interstitiality and the equitable potentialities of failure. By introducing Kobra through multiple layers of performative contagion and the intersections between viral actuality and spectacle, Koçak enacts economies of relational self-care. *Melek*’s emphasis on performative failure and relationality laid the grounds for the economies of the 2020 production.

### **Pandemic economies and unlikely resources**

As public theatre companies struggled to cater to their audiences during the pandemic, İBBŞT’s artistic director at the time, Mehmet Ergen, switched to a ‘minimal season’ that produced short plays with a maximum of three actors on stage. *Melek* emerged as a particularly desirable choice. As an İBBŞT employee, Koçak proposed the play to Ergen. *Melek* was not only thematically relevant; it was a monodrama, it would require fewer rehearsals since it had been staged before, and the production’s minimalism involved minimum stage management labour (Fig 1). Furthermore, Kobra’s past affiliation with İBBŞT contributed to *Melek*’s relevance.

İBBŞT has been an integral part of Turkey’s nation-building programme and its conflictive afterlives. İBBŞT’s predecessors that appeared during the beginning and middle of the twentieth century negotiated tensions between Turkey’s modernization



FIG. 1 The minimalist aesthetics of Kobra's asylum room involved a limited number of props and furniture. Photograph: Nesrin Kadioğlu Istanbul Municipal Theatre.

project, which also built on European models of the nation-state, and the making of Turkey as a culturally distinct and unified nation.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary İBBŞT serves as a site where the tensions between state and municipal politics play out. According to both Koçak and Karabekir, İBBŞT's employees had been rendered precarious long before the pandemic under the governance of the neoliberal Islamist Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party/AKP). As Koçak shared, many İBBŞT employees had switched from being public servants to navigating the uncertainties of the job market as subcontracted workers of a private company: 'We might still enjoy some benefits but we can be fired and hired anytime with no notice or justification.'<sup>11</sup> In spite of these challenges, however, İBBŞT is considered a more stable source of income than private theatre. For Altınay, public theatre comes with the 'expectation that you make relatively more money and enjoy more job security' than in most private theatres.

While Kobra was dispossessed of a stage and an audience, her performative viral reconfiguration offered structural catharsis by providing precarious feminist practitioners with unlikely access to İBBŞT's spaces and resources during times of actual viral contagion. As a minimalist feminist production, deconstructive of the connections between ableism, gender and nationhood, *Melek* altered İBBŞT's means of theatre production and blurred the boundaries between Turkish private and public theatre.

Texts and actors intersect public and private spheres more easily. Karabekir's translation of *A Doll's House* was produced by İBBŞT in 2018 and Koçak worked in the private sector as well. As an early career playwright with few connections in the industry, Altınay, however, 'could not even imagine being part of the municipal

theatre but the pandemic made *Melek* a perfect fit'.<sup>12</sup> Just like many theatre practitioners struggled with unemployment due to the pandemic, TB caused the interruption of Kobra's affiliation with İBBŞT shortly after she was hired. In addition to offering unlikely resources to precarious practitioners, *Melek's* 2020 production also provided İBBŞT's audience with access to the work of feminist independent theatre makers whose ticket prices, however modest, may still be too high for some members of the general audience that public theatre caters to.

*Melek's* capacity to provide both feminist practitioners and audiences with access to spaces and unlikely resources was in sync with Ergen's priorities. Ergen's hire in 2019 was part of the efforts of both the main opposition Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party/CHP) and Istanbul's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu from CHP, to present themselves as an alternative to AKP's anti-feminism. Ergen had been producing political theatre that empowered resistance against oppression long before his İBBŞT appointment.<sup>13</sup> As İBBŞT's artistic director he particularly focused on dismantling gendered discrimination. Regarding the 2020 season, Ergen stated that 'For the first time in the 106 year-long history of the institution women constitute more than half of the season's creative team, among directors and playwrights'.<sup>14</sup> Amending a long history of male domination, he also commissioned previously fired or neglected female practitioners.<sup>15</sup>

*Melek's* content and economies of production aligned well with Ergen's endeavours. In 2020, *Melek's* aesthetics of fictive viral contagion are directly informed by the practices of relational care and viral entrenchment required by the actual viral situation. For instance, the cast and the crew avoided touch. Koçak 'did not have a dresser' and was setting the stage props herself.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 2). According to Koçak 'everyone was there but not on stage so that they did not touch anything'. Karabekir also 'did not step on the stage during the rehearsals'.<sup>17</sup> As opposed to the 2020 production, in the original production Koçak coughed intensely on stage. As Koçak shared, she still avoids coughing depending on whether the people in the audience are masked and/or are coughing 'so that [the coughing] does not spread'. While theatre generates affect through relying on the visceral aspects of emotional 'contagion', *Melek's* aesthetic and performative choices during the pandemic minimized the materiality of sensorial interaction. İBBŞT's spacious theatre venues contributed to this minimization.

*Melek's* focus on the interdependencies between vulnerability, performance labour, differential access to resources, and the shaping of equitable economies is inseparable from Koçak's and Karabekir's own experiences with TB. Both feminist practitioners are TB survivors. They both shared how performers are vulnerable to TB due to their labouring conditions that involve working long hours in dark and humid spaces. While performance making exposes them to precarity, it also provides them with access to the means of survival. As Karabekir shared, Kobra performed 'because that's the only way she could survive TB. Just like us during the pandemic'.<sup>18</sup> While the 2013 production deconstructed the disproportionately gendered responsibilities regarding national reproduction, the 2020 production horizontalized the differential access to social reproduction as well. *Melek's* 2020 production was more profitable than the one in 2013. It reached a wider audience, since tickets in Turkish public



FIG. 2 As an act of relational care, Koçak set up the props on stage herself. Photograph: Nesrin Kadioğlu Istanbul Municipal Theatre.

theatres are cheaper than in private theatres. Furthermore, İBBŞT has its own venues, means of promotion, and the plays tour around the city. *Melek*'s 2020 production has so far entailed 109 shows and approximately 16,000 spectators, while the one in 2013 involved twenty-nine shows at much smaller venues.

### Conclusion

The literature on theatre labour and the pandemic tends to emphasize the gendered loss of access demonstrating how the pandemic also provided some feminist theatre makers with access to new spaces and resources. The production's minimalism as well as its mapped connections between the staged aestheticization of care and actual survival tactics make it an exceptional case study of pandemic theatre. While Covid-19 affected theatre practitioners disproportionately, *Melek* blurred the boundaries between public and independent feminist theatre in ways that shaped opportunities for both sectors in Turkey under an authoritarian regime. Exploring the intersections between actual and fictive viral contagion, *Melek*'s viral interstitiality maps practices of relational care constitutive of diverse economies disruptive of differential access to resources.

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#### NOTES

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