

HONG KONG

ARTS



A performer rehearses her moves for *Matches*, a contemporary dance that was originally scheduled to be staged last year. Photo: Handout

Eight quit show over security law fears

Performers grew jittery when protest song was added to the performance

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Eight members of a dance troupe preparing for a contemporary performance quit the show before its opening last December over fears it might contravene the national security law, the *Post* has learned.

They were uncomfortable that *Matches*, a production by established dance company Y-Space, ended with the melody of *Glory to Hong Kong*, the de facto anthem of 2019's anti-government protesters.

Although the song is not outlawed in Hong Kong, education authorities have banned it in the city's schools under the national security law, saying it is linked closely to illegal and violent acts.

Victor Ma Choi-wo, artistic director of Y-Space, said some dancers and backstage staff were

concerned when the song was added at the end of the sports-themed performance which also featured the national anthem, *March of the Volunteers*.

He called a meeting of the dancers and crew in the middle of November, and 30 of them spoke up.

"Some were worried that the arrangements would affect their future performances in mainland China and they could even be banned from crossing the border," Ma said.

"Others feared that their participation could affect their families' plans to emigrate, and said lawyers had advised them to withdraw from the show."

In the end, eight members, including two dancers, chose to drop out.

"It was the first time I encountered self-censorship by team members in my three-decade career," said Ma, who co-founded

Y-Space in 1995. He managed to get replacements and, as a compromise, switched the national anthem with a minute's silence.

The show was expected to run at the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui from December 11 to December 13, but had to go online instead after live performances were banned amid the fourth wave of Covid-19 infections.

The national security law, which Beijing imposed on Hong Kong last June 30, outlaws acts of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces.

Legal scholars and opposition politicians have warned the law, with its vaguely defined offences and broad powers for the police and mainland agents, posed a threat to freedom in the city.

The national anthem law took effect last June too, defining how people should behave when it is played, it also criminalises insults to the anthem.

"We don't think any elements of our show violated the national security law," Ma said. "Artists shouldn't exercise self-censorship before the authorities step in. We are facing invisible red lines since the introduction of the law."

Y-Space, a prominent contemporary dance group that has performed overseas many times, including at international arts festivals, is supported financially by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

Ma said the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, which manages the Cultural Centre where the performance was meant to be held, did not intervene during the company's preparations.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one of the eight who dropped out said she quit because she was concerned about the possible impact on the safety of team members.

"You can't rule out anything since the implementation of the national security law," she said.