

BOOK REVIEW

Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics

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Patricia Gaborik's revised English version of her 2013 thesis, 'Mussolini, uomo di teatro', examines the Duce's influence on what was performed on Italian stages during the time of his premiership. As the title suggests, this book is about Mussolini and not about stage practices in Fascist Italy, or about the organisation of theatre as an institution during the *ventennio* (which she herself has treated in 2012 in her excellent essay 'Lo spettacolo del fascismo'). Gaborik's choice to concentrate on the person Mussolini and his vision of theatre means that her focus lies rather narrowly on a small number of playwrights, directors and ensembles in which the Duce took a particular interest. The broad spectrum of other dramatists and impresarios, what they presented on stage and how, falls outside her focus of attention. Therefore, performance studies experts with an interest in Fascist theatre aesthetics may well be disappointed with this volume, which is primarily geared towards cultural and political historians. In Chapter 1, Gaborik discusses three dramatists Mussolini was particularly fond of: D'Annunzio, Pirandello and Shaw. Chapter 2 focuses on two directors, Pirandello and Bragaglia, and three theatre companies to which the Duce offered generous subsidies: the Teatro degli Indipendenti (1923–30), Teatro d'Arte (1924–8) and Teatro delle Arti (1937–43). Chapter 3 analyses Mussolini's collaboration with the playwright Giovacchino Forzano, Chapter 4 is dedicated to Leopoldo Zurlo's censorship practice, and Chapter 5 tells the story of the Carri di Tespi, classic drama produced in ancient open-air theatres and the foundation of Italy's first theatre academies.

In her introduction, Gaborik discusses Mussolini as a thespian, i.e. as an actor playing his role of *duce*, *condottiere* and Napoleonic leader. As many contemporaries observed, histrionics and exhibitionism were part of Mussolini's character. Gaborik criticises existing studies for being 'largely limited to censorship, the production apparatus, or propagandistic themes' (p. 265), but, in fact – as my summary 'Contents' above shows – her study falls into a very similar category, except that she blends out ideology and concentrates on art. But the art of the stage – acting, movement, vocal delivery, gesture, direction, stage and costume design – is not given much consideration. Gaborik's study presents Mussolini's interest in the theatre as an artistic medium with the potential to reach and influence large sections of society. She explains how his public appearances were modelled on thespian precedents, how he tried his hand at becoming a playwright himself, and how he attempted to win over a handful of theatre directors and dramatists to emulate his notion of 'good theatre' (p. 20) in order 'to educate taste and sensibility' (p. 20) and to shape 'a new faith and new tomorrow' (p. 69).

In Chapter 2, Gaborik recounts the already well-researched founding history of the three ensembles mentioned above and uses these *teatri di eccezione* (art or experimental theatres) to counter the often-voiced opinion that Fascism sounded the death knell for avant-garde and progressive art. Mussolini's provision of state funds for selected theatres brought him, according to Gaborik, 'considerable popularity among intellectuals and artists' (p. 85). The problem with her focus on the early years of Fascism and a few flagship enterprises run by exceptional personalities is that she blends out the situation in provincial and middle-ranking theatres, which, according to Doug Thompson (quoted on p. 278), had 'to comply rigidly with all the legal obligations and directives – official, unofficial, or merely rumoured. The end result was a rigorous process of self-censorship, which led to a safe but frequently dull repertoire.'

The 'dullness' of Italian theatre during the Fascist period is briefly alluded to when Gaborik states that 81 per cent of its repertoire consisted of comedies that amounted to little more than 'standard commercial fare' (p. 188). Theatre historians and political scientists would probably be interested to read more about the other 19 per cent. How much of this could be deemed 'Fascist' drama, and did it transport Fascist ideology by means of a Fascist theatre aesthetics? These are not questions Gaborik asks in this volume.

Mussolini was a playwright (p. 22), but as he rightfully mistrusted his abilities in this field, he availed himself of Forzano as a ghostwriter to give his dramatic visions concrete shape. Gaborik dedicates many pages to detailed analyses of three plays, ending up with a long list of their failings (p. 121), in clear contradiction to an earlier statement where she promises to concentrate in this study on 'good theatre' (p. 21). Chapter 4, on censorship, also goes over rather familiar ground, but contains some interesting observations on the banning of racial issues (dramatic representation of miscegenation, black people, Jews), on hagiographic plays concerned with *duce* figures past and present, and on Mussolini's rather idiosyncratic decisions on what should be banned and what could be performed. The final chapter deals with the well-known Carri di Tespi and, more interestingly, with the newly founded Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and student theatres (*Teatri-GUF*). Although Gaborik bypasses the actors' training in these schools (i.e. the performance styles and acting methods taught there) and is more interested in the plays they presented than in how they performed them, she rightly points out that in the relatively protected space of these training institutions a new generation of (often a-fascist or even antifascist) theatre folks emerged who played a major role in the recovery of Italian theatre after the Second World War. The sub-chapter on the Volta Congress in 1934, largely based on Ilona Fried's excellent research, offers Gaborik an opportunity to compare 'Mussolini's theatre' with Soviet agitprop and Nazi *Thingspiel*. She rightly highlights the fact that the Fascist vision of theatrical innovation was considerably more open, versatile and accommodating. This was not simply the result of the insufficient degree of totalitarianism but clearly due to Mussolini's conception of the performing arts.

In this respect, Gaborik's volume is a welcome addition to the literature on Italian theatre during the *ventennio*. *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* is written in a very accessible style and can therefore reach a non-academic readership. But any scholar looking for a lucid analysis of what constitutes Fascist theatre aesthetics will have to wait for a more broadly based study.