

of Latin American theatre and performance, and I look forward to teaching with it in courses ranging from undergraduate lectures to graduate seminars in years to come.

doi:10.1017/S0040557422000400

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Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics

By Patricia Gaborik. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021; pp. xiii + 312, 20 illustrations, 13 tables. \$39.99 cloth, \$32 e-book.

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With the dramatic global resurgence of far-Right politics, it behooves critics to come to terms with the legacies of Fascism and its relationship to cultural production. How did Mussolini attempt to guide or co-opt theatre for his own purposes? Many scholars have followed Walter Benjamin in arguing that Fascism aestheticized politics, that Mussolini himself used the actor's art to become a character in his own political play, that ultimately "the fascist mode was inherently performative, irrational, and coercive" (7). But, as Patricia Gaborik argues in her carefully argued and impressively documented *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics*, this focus on Fascism as an aestheticized political experiment neglects the actual situation of the theatre under Mussolini, acting "as if what was produced on stage doesn't actually matter—as if, that is, when it comes to fascism, art is not an issue" (12). What if, instead of assuming that all theatrical productions under Mussolini were only—could only be—so many forms of propaganda, we look instead at what was *actually produced* during the *ventennio*?

Gaborik shows that theatre under Mussolini was more complicated than we've imagined. Although some plays produced under Fascism toed the party line, most did not, nor were they punished for it. In fact, a kind of strategic aestheticism reigned: Mussolini consistently demonstrated a commitment to art "that went beyond the tactical" and elevated "spiritual valor over immediate propagandistic efficacy" (19). Why? Because, Gaborik argues, Mussolini approached the theatre in two complementary ways that highlighted his "faith in culture as a revolutionary tool" (45). First, he kept the theatre relatively free to demonstrate the alleged openness of his regime, to demonstrate that artists in Fascist Italy were free to follow their genius. Here he followed a strategy of diplomacy, recognizing that theatre

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was a form of “soft power” that could enhance his standing abroad (146). And second, Mussolini recognized that theatre as a political tool should have a primarily pedagogical function. Good plays could cultivate the masses’ sensibility to prepare them for the coming Fascist world. Mussolini had in mind an anthropological revolution, a desire to remake people along Fascist lines, and recognized that, in the theatre, “fascist myths could be created without depicting ‘fascist themes’” (85). Theatre was central to “the education of the new fascist man” and could shape “both popular and bourgeois tastes” (240). Instead of seeing in art produced under Mussolini “the blanket sameness of fascist censorship,” Gaborik argues that we should attend carefully to theatre under Fascism, not as we imagine it but as it really was (176).

Gaborik notes that Mussolini had a “legitimate passion for and understanding of the theatrical arts” (21). She structures her chapters accordingly, looking in turn at Mussolini as critic, benefactor, dramatist, and censor. Chapter 1, “Mussolini the Critic,” focuses on his engagements with Gabrielle D’Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, and George Bernard Shaw. These dramatists shared an antibourgeois spirit and promoted a kind of “vitalist Nietzschean philosophy” (33). D’Annunzio inspired Mussolini with a “theatrical conception of politics” and shared with him a vision of the world in which art and politics illuminated and conditioned each other (34). Mussolini drew from Pirandello the notion that “heretofore exclusive culture might be of broader use” in fronts political and cultural: avant-garde forms had their part to play under Fascism (45). And in Shaw, Mussolini saw a kinsman interested in realizing—or at least depicting—the Nietzschean Superman, whom the people needed to see onstage to reform them politically.

Chapters 2 and 5 investigate Mussolini’s role as artistic benefactor. Chapter 2 looks at his early support of art theatres and discusses his “impulse to back artists who believed in ... the stage’s revolutionary potential” (78). Perhaps surprisingly, Mussolini enthusiastically supported countercultural productions, encouraged avant-garde experimentation, and indirectly contributed to the development of “new dramaturgy, new performance methods, and new ideas” that have had lasting impacts (110). Chapter 5 discusses Mussolini’s later support for bringing theatre to the masses and focuses on his creation of traveling theatres and theatre academies that spread the dramatic gospel throughout Italy. Gaborik explores Mussolini’s interlaced goals of access, pedagogy, and innovation: How to bring theatre to as many Italians as possible? How to ensure that it led to their “cultural formation” (196)? And how to keep Italian theatre as up to date as possible?

Chapter 3 details Mussolini’s collaboration with Giovacchino Forzano on three historical tragedies that examine the lives of Napoleon, Caesar, and Count Cavour. Each of these productions recounts “the public and private trials” of their protagonists (123). Mussolini’s goal in producing these works was to “make of history a ‘didactic talisman’” (125) that could “provide framing, context, and comparison for the fascist experience” (126). Mussolini used these collaborations to explore the notion of the “future-present,” a telling of history that gave shape and texture to the Fascist experience; they were an attempt by Mussolini to create a kind of “meta-history” for the Fascist world he envisioned (132).

Chapter 4 investigates the role of censorship under Mussolini and looks especially at Leopoldo Zurlo, “*the* person whose judgment would determine whether

a play” received official approval (154). Gaborik notes that most liberal democracies at the time had some sort of censorship office—the difference here was “not in the matter but in the means” (156). Zurlo had to navigate not only the needs of the state but also Mussolini’s taste, which meant that censorship under Fascism was never as straightforward as it might seem from the outside. In a relatively liberal theatre-making environment, in which ideologically diverse plays were staged by myriad companies with divergent politics, only 9.4 percent of theatrical texts submitted to Zurlo were ultimately rejected. The picture that emerges is one of a censorship office engaged in a “relations-management task that went far beyond . . . ensuring orthodoxy in production” (162).

While I would be curious about Mussolini’s attitude toward the historical avant-gardes of futurism, dada, or surrealism—which all produced significant theatrical works during this period—I have nothing but praise for Gaborik’s work. It is carefully argued, engagingly written, exceptionally well documented, and full of surprising reversals of accepted wisdom. In letting the facts breathe and the history unfold before our eyes, Gaborik has produced an important work that will interest theatre scholars, art historians, and anyone curious about understanding not only how the interface between Fascism and art works, but also, perhaps, how to meet Fascism on this terrain in order to combat it.

doi:10.1017/S0040557422000412

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Performing Power: The Political Secrets of Gustav III (1771–1792)

By Maria Berlova. Edited by Michael Kroetch. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021; pp. viii + 242. \$136 cloth, \$48.95 e-book.

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King Gustav III of Sweden’s interest in the theatre is well known in Swedish cultural historical research, where he has often been referred to as the “King of the Theatre.” His great commitment to the theatre has sometimes led scholars to perceive his entire political and cultural work as part of a spectacle, be it onstage, in court life, or in politics. Because Gustav’s efforts are known only to a lesser extent outside of his national context, one of the great merits of Maria Berlova’s *Performing Power: The Political Secrets of Gustav III (1771–1792)* is that Gustav III and his efforts are highlighted for an international readership and can thereby be placed in a wider context.

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