

Patricia Gaborik. Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics

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Volume 43, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097789ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i1.40194>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (print)

2293-7382 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Magario, F. (2022). Patricia Gaborik. Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 43(1), 226–228.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i1.40194>

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Patricia Gaborik. *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 326. ISBN 9781108830591.

Patricia Gaborik's work is the result of a scrupulous historiographic and dramatic research conducted to overcome commonplaces of Mussolini's political and artistic endeavors. The recurrent depiction of the dictator as a performer-actor is, in fact, accepted by a multitude of scholars across disciplines, thereby limiting his partaking in the arts to a mere propagandistic act. With a focus on the reconciliation of aesthetic and political aspects of fascist theatrical productions, the aim of this captivating study is to cast aside such an overused characterization of Mussolini by offering an unconventional outlook on the Duce's variegated interests and beliefs, contributing to the revitalization of his portrayal in fields such as history and theatre studies. The author structures her book in five illuminating chapters, all of which delve into complementary facets of the Duce's strategic and artistic versatility: the critic, the entrepreneur, the dramatist, and the censor.

The first chapter, "Mussolini the Critic," renders a version of the Duce that is oftentimes overshadowed by his politicking, which is that of a cultured aficionado of the arts, an avid theatregoer, and a committed patron of dramaturgs. The author vividly depicts Mussolini as a politician who understood the political value of theatre and who cleverly chose to surround himself with "the triumvirate of contemporary playwrights" (33), namely Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, and George Bernard Shaw. The choice of highlighting the Duce's self-made affiliation with the illustrious—yet all so astoundingly dissimilar—artists is an effective framework for the chapter, as it not only clarifies the regime's desires to merge aesthetic and political aspects of fascist productions, but it also delves into the playwrights' contrasting motives for supporting the rising dictator.

With a swift stylistic change, Gaborik breathes literal life into the central performances discussed in the second chapter, "Mussolini the Impresario, I," a theme that will also return in chapter five. By providing a rich and vibrant recounting of the theatrical spectacles—including technical production details—the author draws readers of a variety of fields into the innovations of Pirandello's *Teatro d'Arte* first, and of Anton Giulio Bragaglia's experimental theatre second. The contrast between these two figures and their direct association with Mussolini the *impresario* skillfully demonstrates the extent of the Duce's willingness to fund projects and to support artists that were diametrically different, concretizing Gaborik's initial premise of reconciling aesthetic and political aspects of fascist productions.

Chapter three captures yet another facet of the Italian factotum that is as unconventional as it is unsurprising: the dramatist. Gaborik depicts Mussolini as an imaginative figure with an astounding theatrical sensibility, a trait that he shares with Giovacchino Forzano, his most devoted collaborator during the late twenties. Despite some of his brilliantly executed productions, Forzano is outlined as a precarious figure who allows the Duce's ideas to materialize into a theatrical trilogy consisting of *Campo di Maggio* (an international success), *Villafranca* (somewhat disappointing), and *Cesare* (a complete fiasco). By carefully examining the three plays, Gaborik dismisses the purely propagandistic nature of Mussolini's own intellectual creations and provides a deeply relevant commentary on their historiographical and philosophical influences, tracing a genealogy from history's great dramaturgs to the Duce's modern favorites.

Written from the perspective of the dictator's Prefect and "improbable right hand" (154) Leopoldo Zurlo, chapter four, "Mussolini the Censor," dissects the transformation of fascist censorship from its centralization in 1931 until the fall of the regime. Gaborik establishes the interconnectedness of moral, social, and political principles guiding Zurlo's choices in approving, adapting, or asking for one last opinion—Mussolini's—before censoring thousands of plays submitted for review. While the claim that the regime's apparent liberality had, at times, a positive, "transformative" influence on the theatrical milieu is to some degree unconvincing, the research behind Zurlo's strategies to handle contingent and personalized censorship is sound and well documented throughout the chapter. The intertwining of the Prefect's own recounts with the rigorous data recorded by the Blackshirts provides a well-rounded outlook on Mussolini's own plan to deal with intellectual and popular dissent.

The final chapter, "Mussolini the Impresario, II," returns to the regime's efforts to create a national theatre but shifts its focus from the failed vanguardist experiment to a more practical model that integrates pedagogical and social functions, specifically targeting a broader, popular audience. Gaborik outlines the Duce's agenda to develop Italian theatre following three distinct goals: access, to allow more of the urban proletariat and the rural peasantry to attend performances; pedagogy, to fascistize the nation through a "general "cultivation" of the Italian populace" (209); and innovation, to revitalize the entire institution.

The introductory narrative thread is deeply pertinent and compelling, tying the fragmented thematic blocks into a coherent structural unity. The major strength of this study is undoubtedly the discursive and descriptively rich style that is able to captivate a wide variety of audiences, painting an evocative overview

of the socio-cultural panorama of the *ventennio fascista*. The persuasive combination of historiographic and dramatic approaches also demonstrates the author to be well-versed in subjects and methodologies that complement one another in a productive and organic manner.

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