

## *Introduction*

### **Prologue: Mussolini as Actor**

“We know that face: we know that rolling of the eyes. . . . We know that fist, forever closed in threat,” wrote Antonio Gramsci in 1924, words that perfectly sum up popular memory of the Italian dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> An imposing physical presence; a resonant, deep, and not unpleasant voice; a *je ne sais quoi* of charisma made Benito Mussolini into the legendary *Duce*, and he remains today the most enduring image of fascism’s twenty-plus years. Now – seven decades after his demise – the sight of him in extant newsreels prompts bemusement. And yet there is no doubt that Mussolini had performative talents. Even his enemies agreed.

Of him or his orations it was said:

“He, like few others, knows the art of speaking.”<sup>2</sup>

“His words ring out like a trumpet of war and sing like a sacred bronze.”<sup>3</sup>

“The Duce’s gestures are superb and beautiful.”<sup>4</sup>

He was “an expert orator, his own master.”<sup>5</sup>

Inventor of the Futurist movement, poet, playwright, and seasoned declaimer himself, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti celebrated his old pal’s “futurist eloquence, well-chewed by iron teeth, plastically molded by his intelligent hand,”<sup>6</sup> while a more disturbed Aby Warburg was “amazed at his lip play: an evil beautiful caesarian mouth.”<sup>7</sup> Both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels were excited by what a “great speaker” the Italian Duce was, with “all the *Volk* behind him.”<sup>8</sup>

But soon he became known as much more than that. A “marvelous actor,”<sup>9</sup> socialist exile Gaetano Salvemini called him, and he was not alone:

“As an actor, he truly is a genius,”<sup>10</sup> a syndicalist adversary declared.

“He became a practiced and accomplished actor,”<sup>11</sup> British Diplomat Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick remembered.

A Fox Movietone executive declared that “a dozen picture producers would be after him” if he ever abandoned politics,<sup>12</sup> while the Futurist Emilio Settimelli summed it up with, “A giant, this magnificent Mussolini!” (who stood just five feet six and a half inches tall).<sup>13</sup>

Still today, the notion of Mussolini as an actor is as ubiquitous in scholarly discourse as it is in the popular imagination. On one hand, this is harmless: long before Shakespeare dubbed all the world a stage there existed a tendency to speak of politicians, especially, moving about the *Theatrum Mundi*. Indeed, in his *Lives of the Caesars*, Roman historian Suetonius told of an Augustus who used his last breath to ask his friends if “he had played the comedy of life fitly” and then appealed, “Since well I’ve played my part, all clap your hands and from the stage dismiss me with applause.”<sup>14</sup> Much more recently, as part of a larger comment on the “manifestations of power that people require their leaders to personify and act out,” famed American playwright Arthur Miller mused in a Jefferson Lecture that “[t]he mystery of the leader-as-performer is as ancient as civilization.”<sup>15</sup> Born in 1915, however, Miller was a child in that precise historical moment when the birth of cinema, an emerging celebrity culture, and an unprecedented “marriage of politics and showmanship” meant that “a new season of mass-mediated governance” had begun.<sup>16</sup> In this context, and given the dictator’s popularity and widely recognized magnetism, one is easily conditioned to speak with this vocabulary.

On the other hand, in the case of Mussolini and Italian fascism, the use of the theatrical metaphor takes up – and relies upon – specifically charged and problematic undertones. Despite warnings against the dismissive (and, one might add, ethnicist) tone of those histories that paint fascism as “little more than a prolonged farce staged by histrionic Latins,” many scholars today cast Mussolini as the star buffoon of a show in which fascism itself is interpreted as aesthetic experience.<sup>17</sup> “Fascinating fascism.” Seductive spectacle. Theatre, and nothing more.

Underpinning arguments about the Duce’s presumed dishonesty, narcissism, and psychological instability, such depictions foreground the dictator’s personality rather than his politicking, essentially refusing to take him seriously as a political agent – this, of course, despite the fact that he created and was the cornerstone of one of the most enduring and destructive regimes of the modern era. In this way, they stop too many steps short of grappling with the realities of fascism and therefore ultimately fail to come to terms with it. The history of this narrative is worth unpacking, as it allows one to identify the historiographic and theoretical pitfalls it has produced – and which *Mussolini’s Theatre* sets out to overcome. The story

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of Mussolini as actor developed in three clear phases: first as a recognition of the Duce's undeniable presence, charisma, and talents as a speaker; then as quick and dirty epitaph for discrediting him; and finally, after his fall, as an explanation for how he managed to hold power for two decades. But in this explanation lay also exoneration.

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When Benito Andrea Amilcare Mussolini came to power in 1922, the connection between oratorical eloquence and roscian excellence was much closer than it is today. A long tradition saw the arts of oration and stage impersonation explicitly linked, as reflected in the Italian word for acting, *recitare*, which derives from the Latin and can refer to reciting by memory as it can to acting for the stage. In Mussolini's day, manuals covered acting and public speaking in tandem, and it is only with careful interpretation of these texts that a contemporary reader can discern when their authors were thinking of the pulpit and when of the boards. The reason for this indistinction is clear: for the public speaker and the stage performer in equal measure, mastering the *actio* of rhetoric (that is, the physical and vocal delivery) is fundamental to the task. One will never be a great orator or a great actor without absolute control over his or her body and voice, or the ability to manipulate both to certain effect on a given crowd.

Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, theatrical acting saw a constant if leisurely migration away from the rather static, even bombastic, vocal delivery that had characterized classical rhetoric toward what we recognize today as a more naturalistic style of interpreting a character.<sup>18</sup> In Italy, where great ultra-histrionic performers ruled, the turn into the twentieth century saw a rapid transition in this direction, so much so that the author of *Dizione e recitazione* could in 1959 proclaim that *declamazione* (reciting with “rather exaggerated and emphatic expression and gesture”) had reigned until the end of the 1800s but *recitazione* (a simpler and more natural style, “rich with color, with passages, with nuance”) was now preferred.<sup>19</sup> Still, during the twenty-odd years of Italian fascism known as the *ventennio*, the distance between orator and thespian was much shorter than it is today.

The son of Alessandro, a socialist politician and agitator, Benito mastered the *actio* of rhetoric at a young age. He raised hell in the school yard, and when it came time to commemorate Giuseppe Verdi upon his death in 1901, the lad's headmaster, brother of the poet and future Nobel laureate Giosue Carducci, selected him to deliver the school's speech in

the composer's honor. The seventeen-year-old Mussolini went on stage, first as The Inspector General Gregor in the school play, *The Triumph of Justice*, alongside his friend and future playwright of decent success Rino Alessi (who would benefit from their bond), and then to deliver the homage. Such an impassioned – and political – speech it was that it earned him a few lines in the local paper. It revealed a knack (however uncultivated) for swaying the crowd and betrayed a precocious propensity to see things politically, for out of the paean to Verdi the future Duce crafted a discussion of unification-era Italy.<sup>20</sup>

From there, he would hone his skills. Two of the thinkers who most impacted him, Vilfredo Pareto and the French syndicalist Georges Sorel, had both grappled with the works of social psychologist Gustave Le Bon, whose 1895 *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* argued that the ignorant and unruly masses needed – even appreciated – a strong hand to mold them. An orator who intuited their feelings and thus could modulate the effect he had, Le Bon argued, would win control of the otherwise dangerous, because irrational, crowd. Mussolini returned to Le Bon's opus again and again, placing his intuitions at the heart of his own oratorical technique.<sup>21</sup> Analyses of the dictator's public speaking show power, consistency, precision of speech and movement, and a perfect coordination of the two. It's quite possible that he had read up on the mechanics of persuasion as well, for he executed the techniques to a T: a broad stance to convey solidity, a nearly exclusive use of the right hand and arm for gesturing, defined and rhythmic movements that lent cadence and whose repetitiveness underscored his vocal reiterations.<sup>22</sup>

Still, experts were careful to distinguish the scope and context of acting and orating. The thespian was not himself. His words were not his own but the playwright's. The emotions not his own but those of the character. The situation on stage was a fiction. The orator, conversely, was always himself; he spoke his own words and feelings; and the situation was true life.<sup>23</sup> In this light, one must acknowledge that Benito Mussolini simply wasn't an actor. The words were his own. Expressed emotions were his and those he wanted to instill. He was himself, even if himself in an official role. It's not even important that his methods of communicating with the crowd were much different from a player's. What is important is that when Mussolini stood in parliament and accepted responsibility for the murder of the socialist leader of the opposition, Giacomo Matteotti, in 1924, when he announced the creation of the empire from his Palazzo Venezia balcony in May of 1936, or when he stood on the stage of Milan's Lyric Theatre on December 16, 1944, to give his last speech as Duce, it was all real.

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Nevertheless, the label of actor was relentlessly applied. In Italy, a minority did so positively. Playwright sympathizers Luigi Pirandello and Orio Vergani, for example, spoke of a Mussolini who was “in a certain sense, the actor of his own character,” while some fascist faithful saw him as an über-actor: “When author and actor come together in the same person, when the part is so necessary and so important, playing it is no longer an art, but a rite.”<sup>24</sup> Typically, however, the tag was a catch-all pejorative. For detractors, the chief blackshirt was “merely” an actor – a speechifier – and not a true, thinking politician. Liberal journalist and theatre critic Piero Gobetti (who died in Paris in 1926, at age twenty-four, having been pummeled by fascist squads) betrayed this sentiment when he called him “actor more than artist,”<sup>25</sup> as did another contemporary when he scoffed that “Mussolini, like one of Daudet’s comic characters, doesn’t think; he speaks.”<sup>26</sup>

If some simply dismissed Mussolini in this way, others used “actor” as a shorthand for something more sinister: a master of illusions like Cipolla, the hypnotist of Thomas Mann’s 1929 *Mario and the Magician*. They saw his “performances” – threshing grain for the camera, daredevil on horse or in a plane, speaking from so many balconies across the peninsula – as acts of deception. Everything was a show put on to hide what the blackshirts were up to, or the fact that even they didn’t really know. Exiled foe Camillo Berneri held that the Duce’s greatness as a politician was based on his thespian superiority – and this wasn’t a compliment, he specified. (His text was entitled *Mussolini, grande attore*.)<sup>27</sup> Syndicalist, early ally, then staunch opponent who was also exiled, Alceste De Ambris likewise argued that Mussolini’s lack of scruples, impudence, egoism, and histrionic virtuosity combined to make him successful. The latter was key:

He lives – or rather, has always lived – playing a “part” like an actor on the stage: as intransigent socialist revolutionary; as fierce neutralist; as rabid interventionist; as audacious renovator; as supreme reactionary. And it’s honest of us to recognize that each of these “parts” he has always played to perfection. The best excuse for those who yet today are deceived by his acting abilities is that even previously he has always managed to deceive everyone he’s wanted to deceive, without exception. Men of notable intelligence, of acute judgment, of consummate experience. They fell for him no less than the ignorant masses upon whom he first rehearsed. [...] I believe that Mussolini even manages to deceive himself, because he doesn’t even stop acting his “part” before himself. It’s not enough to say that histrionics are for him a “second nature.” No, they are his nature, without the more or less.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 0.1 *Il Becco Giallo* cartoon: Mussolini's "ongoing show," 1929.  
 Courtesy of the ACS (SPD-CR-B51)

Comparable opinions were frequently expressed in less articulate and more sarcastic terms: it wasn't difficult to come across quips like playwright Sem Benelli's "not all buffoons are actors" or castigations of the Mussolini show, as seen in a cartoon from the satirical rag *Il Becco Giallo*, which presents Mussolini as a fairground performer (see Figure 0.1).<sup>29</sup>

Thus began a slippage where "actor" no longer meant "master orator" or even "merely an orator." Instead, it came to mean, quite simply, "liar." Mussolini's taking up of a position – revolutionary or reactionary as it



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were – became playing a role. Playing a role became concealing the truth. The better he “lied,” the better an actor he was considered. This is the logic of an old prejudice dating back to Plato, which holds that the theatre is as dangerous as it is powerful for its deceptive potential.<sup>30</sup> Here, in the earliest years of fascist rule, this bias swiftly reared its head in denigration of the new regime.

Such a perspective was put into far weightier and more sophisticated terms by Walter Benjamin, who was writing as a militant Marxist critic when he penned his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in the late thirties. For Benjamin, a German Jew who would commit suicide while fleeing the Nazis in 1940, fascism called the ever-expanding proletarian masses to gatherings in city squares, replacing their right to change property relations with the opportunity to express themselves. This was the “aestheticization of politics”: the “introduction of aesthetics into political life” and the means with which the black (or brown) shirts fooled the citizenry into “experienc[ing] its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” With the optimistic vehemence of a combatant, Benjamin further claimed that “Communism responds by politicizing art,” and thus provided a new formula for characterizing modern governance of the masses: the fascist mode was inherently performative, irrational, and coercive while the communist one was rational and instructive.<sup>31</sup> Benjamin met a tragically premature death. But the influence of this valiant formula – which has gained the stature of a “fetish” – lives on.<sup>32</sup>

After fascism’s pillage and plunder was complete; after Mussolini had been shot dead by partisans, his corpse strung up for all to see and then laid to rest in an unmarked grave; after the Italian Republic was established in 1946, the significance of characterizations of the Duce as actor and of fascism as “pantomime” saw an extreme, ideologically ambiguous shift, as historian Sergio Luzzatto has noted.<sup>33</sup> If already in 1940 the fascist Minister of Education Giuseppe Bottai would write in his private diary that Mussolini’s versatility and ease of imitation turned him into the sort of “great ‘universalist’” that once graced the Italian stage, and confessed to the consequent fear that fascism would be mistaken for representation, by 1946 the ex-Minister (and ex-fascist) declared his former self prescient: the Duce had fallen victim to his own cult of personality. He had been condemned to perform because “[t]he people created theatre around him. Italians saw him more as a character than as a person.”<sup>34</sup> This explanation wasn’t without elements of truth: “the cult of the Duce” was instrumental to the regime’s success. But with it, Bottai exculpated not

only his much-admired leader but himself and fellow hierarchs as well. He shifted the blame to the masses who had spent twenty-some years clenched firmly in their grip.

Even compatriots less sympathetic toward the defunct Duce were complicit, perhaps sometimes unwittingly, in transferring the blame, taking refuge in the anthropological characterizations already given them by the likes of British author E. M. Forster, who in his 1905 novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* had written that “Italians are essentially dramatic: they look on death and love as spectacles.”<sup>35</sup> Florentine writer Aldo Palazzeschi, who had been active in avant-garde and Futurist circles prior to the Great War but was never seduced by fascism, nonetheless described the Duce as “flesh of our flesh,” writing in 1946, “we created him in a moment of vanity.” Another author, Paolo Monelli, stressed that theatricality was a distinctive trait of all Italians, and so Mussolini was merely a “typical representative of a large part of us.”<sup>36</sup> But the most memorable reflections of the sort – vulgar, vitriolic, and misogynist – came from Carlo Emilio Gadda, a veteran of World War I, initial Mussolini enthusiast, and one of twentieth-century Italy’s most important writers. For Gadda, the cult of the Duce was largely driven by women’s desire for him (a theme recalled in Ettore Scola’s 1977 film *A Special Day*, in which the housewife protagonist played by Sophia Loren keeps a photo album of the admired Mussolini). Even if his sexually explicit language shifted focus, Gadda, too, wrote of performativity: fascism became twenty years of the virile dictator strutting his stuff for hot and bothered women in the square below.

The *mea culpa*, however, was only apparent. Such liquidations of the immediate past, as a matter of fact, sparked heated debate, for, as Luzzatto pithily put it, if everybody was guilty, nobody was: “was there really a difference between collective incrimination and general absolution?”<sup>37</sup> For Italians who had lived through (and participated in) fascism, the appeal of such explanations is clear. Far easier to accept that everyone had gotten caught up in the show than to really interrogate – and perhaps take responsibility for – all that fascism had meant for a war-torn Europe and its slaughtered millions. For an entire swath of moderate Italy – the non- or no-longer fascist right, and the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC), the Christian Democrats who would rule Italy uninterrupted from 1945 to 1994 – this was the sense girding such characterizations: so much the better that Mussolini had presided with great pomp over a substanceless regime and that no one had really committed to the cause. This had meant the difference between fascism on paper and in practice, and fascism in practice might have led to something much worse: total elimination of the



enemy, gas chambers and gulags, something akin to Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. But Italy, they consoled themselves (not wholly inaccurately), hadn't ever gone so extreme.<sup>38</sup> For the DC leaders of the new Italian Republic, this was a convenient narrative, since important posts in their ranks were filled with ex-fascists despite the purges that should have removed them. When they came to power, they were not engaged in an anti-fascist battle, but instead were on an anti-communist crusade.

With his 1964 best-selling book *The Italians*, Luigi Barzini, Jr. was perhaps the first to serve up the appetizing “greatest show on earth” idea for international mass consumption, able as he was to cite such experts in the field as Orson Welles, who had mused that “all Italians are actors.”<sup>39</sup> The son of an influential fascist journalist who had relationships with Benito and his brother Arnaldo, Barzini Jr., though not known to be a committed fascist, for a while palled around with Galeazzo Ciano, the Duce's son-in-law, but later found himself *persona non grata*. If in the mid-thirties he claimed that Mussolini had restored the Italian soul to “its natural essence,” by the time he penned *The Italians*, he wrote as if this were a fundamental spirit that became Italy's unchosen undoing.<sup>40</sup>

Most striking is Barzini's essential negation that there was any political relevance to Benito Mussolini at all:

He lost the war, power, his country, his mistress, his place in history, and his life, but he succeeded in what he had wanted to do since he took power. It was not to make his country safe and prosperous. It was not, obviously, to organize Italy for a modern war and for victory. He had dedicated his life just to putting up a good show, a stirring show. He had managed to do it extremely well.

The tragedy of fascism – the regime's two-decade rule and two-year collapse, the resultant civil and world wars and Holocaust – Barzini in turn described as the result of all that play-acting. The story he told, too, was one of deception, but it exonerated everyone involved:

He played a versatile and multifaceted role, that of Mussolini, a heroic mixture of the Renaissance *condottiere*, cold Machiavellian thinker, Lenin-like leader of a revolutionary minority, steely-minded dictator, humanitarian despot, Casanovan lover, and Nietzschean superman. He added later to his repertoire the Napoleonic genius. [. . .] He, too, confused appearances for reality, the veneer for the solid wood. Truth, for him also, was what it looked like and what most people liked to believe.

Mussolini and fascism unraveled, in short, because they fell prey to the lie that was their own spectacle. Italy's fate was scripted. The nation was in

a tragedy, and all Italians (disillusioned or deceived as the case may have been) were stuck unknowingly playing their parts to the tragic, yes, but above all inevitable end.

The chorus of voices culminating in *The Italians* has continued to reverberate through scholarly work on the *ventennio*. Already in 1971, one English biographer observed that Mussolini was merely “a baffled peasant playing Premier.”<sup>41</sup> Then came along Denis Mack Smith’s 1982 *Mussolini*, considered among the most authoritative biographies and still widely read today. Mack Smith describes the difficulty of understanding a figure like the Duce, who had no friends

nor any close associate to whom he revealed himself naturally and unambiguously. Always in his relations with other people he was, as it were, on stage, acting a part, or rather acting a continual and baffling series of parts that are not always easy to disentangle and reconcile.<sup>42</sup>

One further reads that the dictator was essentially a loafer who just pretended to be working all the time. “These discrepancies are best explained,” Mack Smith continues, “if one sees Mussolini as an actor, a dissimulator, an exhibitionist who changed his role from hour to hour to suit the occasion.”<sup>43</sup> (“As actor” has an entry in his index, the idea appears so frequently.)

Never mind that the assertion about the shirker is just silly. I’m not the first to observe that anyone who has worked in Rome’s Central State Archives must admit that the number of documents Mussolini read and personally responded to is astounding. The important issue here is another: despite the historical objectivity attributed to such portrayals, in reality they simply replicate earlier, very partial and invested ones. Mack Smith may emphasize his own detachment, but it mustn’t escape notice that the strategy used now to dismiss, now to acquit Mussolini sits at the heart of his analysis: he calls him an actor.

Mack Smith’s logic underpins several studies produced across the disciplines in recent decades. We find it, for instance, in the 1983 contention that there was no cinematic diva-ism during Italian fascism because Mussolini was the only *divo* of totalitarianism’s star system – the Rudolph Valentino of politics;<sup>44</sup> in the 1990 claim that the Duce’s public appearances “had all the elements of theatre in the most classic sense” because they took place in idealized urban spaces like Renaissance comedies;<sup>45</sup> in the 1997 assertion that Mussolini’s gesturings, which, as shown, were textbook oratorical moves, instead “mirrored the Hollywoodian mannerisms of film actors and actresses”;<sup>46</sup> or in the depressingly recent