Benito Mussolini has persistently been described as an “actor” – and also as a master of illusions. In her vividly narrated account of the Italian dictator’s relationship with the theatre, Patricia Gaborik discards any metaphorical notions of Il Duce as a performer and instead tells the story of his life as literal spectator, critic, impresario, dramatist and censor of the stage. Discussing the ways in which the autarch’s personal tastes and convictions shaped, in fascist Italy, theatrical programming, she explores Mussolini’s most significant dramatic influences, his association with important figures such as Luigi Pirandello, Gabriele D’Annunzio and George Bernard Shaw, his oversight of stage censorship, and his forays into playwriting. By focusing on its subject’s manoeuvres in the theatre, and manipulation of theatrical ideas, this consistently illuminating book transforms our understandings of fascism as a whole. It will have strong appeal to readers in both theatre studies and modern Italian history.

Patricia Gaborik teaches at the University of Calabria and has been fellow of the American Academy in Rome (FAAR ’06). She has been visiting scholar at Stanford, UCLA, and Columbia University. She is the editor-translator of Massimo Bontempelli’s Watching the Moon and Other Plays (2013) and editor of the forthcoming Pirandello in Context.
MUSSOLINI’S THEATRE

Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics

PATRICIA GABORIK
For Edward Muir,
whose lectures on Galileo and Garibaldi led me to Rome
One who regards as trifling the question what kind of music a statesman loves has failed to understand the art of mental analysis, for in truth such matters exert a decisive influence upon action.

– Emil Ludwig,
Talks with Mussolini
## Contents

**List of Figures**  
*page viii*

**List of Tables**  
*ix*

**Acknowledgments**  
*x*

**List of Fascist Organizations and Offices, Acronyms, and Titles**  
*xiii*

### Introduction

1. Mussolini the Critic  
2. Mussolini the Impresario, I. Fascism and the Art Theatre  
3. Mussolini the Dramatist  
4. Mussolini the Censor  
5. Mussolini the Impresario, II. Fascism and the Theatre for Masses

**Epilogue**  
*254*

**Reference Matter**  
*259*

**Notes**  
*262*

**Index**  
*302*
Figures

0.1 *Il Becco Giallo* cartoon: Mussolini’s “ongoing show,” 1929  page 6
1.1 Photo postcard of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Mussolini, 
Gardone, 1925  
1.2 Bernard Shaw imitates Mussolini in a 1928 film  
2.1 Breaking the fourth wall: Fritz Lang's *Mabuse the Gambler*, 
1922  
2.2 *Il Becco Giallo* cartoon: “P. Randello’s Art Theatre is really diverting,” 1925  
3.1 A “Carro di Tespi” opera stage, Littoria (today Latina), 1937 
3.2 The map of the world, *Cesare*, act 3, 1940  
3.3 *Villafranca* on the cover of *Comoedia*, February 1932  
3.4 Mussolini/Forzano productions in Germanic territories, 
1932–42  
4.1 The theatre censor, Leopoldo Zurlo, under Mussolini’s 
watchful gaze, 1935 
4.2 Ichikawa Sadanji as Mussolini, 1928  
5.1 Open-air performances: festivals and special events  
5.2 OND-sponsored shows  
5.3 Thespian Truck tours, 1937  
5.4 Laborers heading to a Theatrical Saturday performance, 
Rome 1936  
5.5 The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts students fencing, 
Rome 1936  
5.6 Principal Teatri-GUF locations, 1942 
5.7 *Ajax*, the Greek Theatre at Siracusa, 1939  
5.8 Mussolini at *Oedipus Rex*, Sabratha 1937  
6.1 Mussolini speaks at the Milan Lyric Theatre, 
December 16, 1944
Tables

2.1 Pirandello’s Teatro d’Arte repertoire: source texts by author nationality 110
2.2 Bragaglia’s Teatro degli Indipendenti Repertoire: source texts by author nationality 111
2.3 Bragaglia’s repertoires: source texts by composition date 111
3.1 Yearly breakdown of the Mussolini/Forzano play performances in Germanic territories, 1932–42 150
3.2 Location, years, and numbers of the Mussolini/Forzano play performances in Germanic territories, 1932–42 151
4.1 Foreign play productions, by author nationality, 1937 166
4.2 Foreign play productions, by author nationality, 1941 166
4.3 Censorship action, Ministry of the Interior vs. Ministry of Popular Culture 185
4.4 Censorship decisions by genre 187
5.1 Academy recitals academic years 1935/36–1942/43: source texts by composition date 217
5.2 Academy recitals academic years 1935/36–1942/43: source texts by author nationality 218
5.3 Comparative repertoires, Italian vs. foreign authorship 219
5.4 Comparative repertoires, pre-twentieth-century vs. twentieth-century authorship 219
Acknowledgments

My thanks must begin with the American Academy in Rome, where in 2005–06 as a postdoctoral fellow I started imagining this book (although I was there to write my previous one). Research completed during an NEH Summer Seminar on the History and Interpretations of Fascism in 2005 has found its way into this book, and I thank Frank Snowden for brilliant guidance of that seminar and friendship ever since. At the University of Rome 1–La Sapienza, I benefited from the expertise of my advisor Antonella Ottai when completing a second PhD; my dissertation, Mussolini, uomo di teatro (defended in the fall of 2013) was a first draft of some portions of this manuscript.

But this book is the result of a long and circuitous path that departed from the theatre, wandered into Italy, and finally found a love for historical research. I was guided and encouraged by generous scholars who were my professors – Edward Muir and W.B. Worthen at Northwestern, Barbara Clayton, Catherine Cole, Marc Silberman, Jon Snyder, Jane Tylus, Mike Vanden Heuvel, and Simon Williams during graduate studies at UCSB (1997–99) and UW-Madison (1999–2003) – and by others who were not: Claudio Fogu, Lucia Re, Jeffrey Schnapp, and Stefano Velotti. I am also grateful for talks over time with Beatrice Alfonzetti, Christopher Balme, Victoria de Grazia, Emilio Gentile, Ernesto Livorni, Sergio Luzzatto, Franco Moretti, Mirella Schino, Mike Sell, Daniele Vianello, Steve Wilmer, and Mary Ann Frese Witt. I am fortunate for many years of friendship and intellectual exchange with Melissa Friesen, Andrea Harris, Kimberly Jannarone, and Peach Pittenger. The same goes for Mia Fuller, whose conversation about this book, her own research, and the field more generally has been enlightening, sustaining, and a whole lotta fun.

I am grateful for three terms as Visiting Scholar (Stanford, 2010; UCLA, 2014; Columbia University’s European Institute, 2018) and to those who made them possible: Massimo Ciavolella, Victoria de Grazia, Thomas Harrison, Robert Harrison, Lucia Re, Carolyn Springer, Sunny Scott,
Acknowledgments

and Sharon Kim. Romain Descendre was great help in 2017 at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, where I dug into French scholarship. I warmly thank everyone in the School of Historical Studies, especially Professors Francesca Trivellato and Nicola Di Cosmo and librarian Karen Downing, at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where as an accompanying spouse I finished this manuscript in utmost tranquility in the spring of 2019. The book is all the better for opportunities I’ve had to discuss its parts in public presentations, and for those I thank Anna Celenza and the Italian Research Institute at Georgetown; Ernesto Livorni, Marc Silberman, the Department of French and Italian, and the Center for European Studies at Wisconsin; Pietro Frassica and The Princeton University Department of French and Italian; Mia Fuller, Barbara Spackman, and Alberto Ascoli in Italian Studies at Berkeley; Lucia Re and the UCLA Department of Italian; Odai Johnson and the University of Washington Rome Center; Pierpaolo Antonello and the Italian Department at The University of Cambridge; Raissa Raskina and the University of Cassino; and Mirella Schino at the University of Rome 3.

Portions of the book are indebted to previous publications: Chapter 2 is a much-extended version of “Il Duce’s Directors: Art Theatres as Instruments of the Fascist Revolution,” in Vanguard Performance Beyond Left and Right, ed. Kimberly Jannarone (University of Michigan, 2015), 37–59, in turn an expanded translation of “C’era Mussolini,” in Atlante della letteratura italiana 3, general editors Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà and volume editor Domenico Scarpa (Einaudi, 2012), 333–40. Much of Chapter 5’s statistical research was completed for “Lo spettacolo del fascismo” in that same work, 589–613; I thank the editors for their impegno on those pieces. Three of the maps here were re-elaborated from that source by The University of Alabama Press for my “Taking the Theatre to the People,” Theatre History Studies 37 (2018), 145–70; I thank Dan Waterman for those efforts and for use of the images.

The American Society for Theatre Research awarded me the 2019 Brooks McNamara Publishing Subvention to help cover image rights and reproduction.

I visited archives and libraries in six countries, and the list is too long to include here; but I am especially thankful to the staff of the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, Elena Servito at the Istituto Nazionale di Dramma Antico in Siracusa, Antonella Imolesi at the Biblioteca Comunale di Forlì, Linda Bernard at the Stanford University Hoover Institute, and Louise Hartmann at the Institut für Theater, Film, und Medienwissenschaft at the University of Vienna.
Finally, several friends, colleagues, and loved ones deserve a nod for contributions big and small. Nicola Williams was my research assistant one summer. Erik Butler helped with my German translations and provided others. Raphael Ebgi and Jean-Louis Fournel traipsed to Berlinese and Parisian libraries to recover rare documents. Reto Hofmann, Shelli Ryan, Tony Villani, and Joel Watson all helped with the images, and Elisabetta Tomassini designed two of the maps. Ted Barlow generously acted as non-academic feedback-giver. Anonymous peer reviewers read attentively and gave thoughtful responses. Anna Carocci most graciously undertook the thankless task of compiling the index, and Danielle Simon lent her eyes for a final proofread. I am fortunate to have worked with a wonderful publishing team that included Natasha Burton, Mathew Rohit, and Beth Morel, the most patient and eagle-eyed of copyeditors; and I am grateful for the work of Emily Hockley, who saw the book into production with enthusiasm, and Kate Brett, my original commissioning editor, who brought wit and wisdom to every conversation we had: the book’s final shape owes much to her. Victoria de Grazia and Mia Fuller offered characteristically incisive comments on drafts of the introduction. Emilio Gentile and Sergio Luzzatto read the entire manuscript with care and acumen. Gabriele Pedullà continuously surprised me with references he thought might be helpful, cooked thousands of dinners while I wrote, and then talked with me about Mussolini through many of them. He also read every word, and many more than once. But it would be remiss of me not to thank our daughter Emilia for her patience, too; no child should have to spend the first six years of her life competing with Mussolini – but it must be said that she held her own.
Fascist Organizations and Offices,
Acronyms, and Titles

AOI: Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa)
DG: Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo (Theatre Directorate/formerly Inspectorate)
GUF: Gruppi universitari fascisti (Fascist University Groups)
INDA: Istituto Nazionale del dramma antico (National Institute of Ancient Drama)
MinCulPop: Ministero della cultura popolare (Ministry of Popular Culture)
OND/Dopolavoro: Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (National Leisure Organization)
Performing Arts Corporation: Corporazione dello Spettacolo
PNF: Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party)
SIAE: Società italiana di autori e editori (Italian Society of Authors and Editors)
UCT: Ufficio Censura Teatrale (Theatre Censorship Office)

xiii