

Special Issue: A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism

Constructing a Hellenic modernism: Aeschylus at the ancient theatre of Syracuse (1914–30)

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This article examines the aesthetic means employed in classical performances produced by the Institute of Ancient Drama (INDA) in Syracuse between 1914 and 1930, with a particular focus on performances of Aeschylus' tragedies. The first part of this study traces the influences of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde movements on the Syracusan project, including the experiments pioneered by the radical French *gauche*, the German productions directed by Hans Oberländer with Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf in the role of dramaturg and translator, as well as Max Reinhardt's early engagements with ancient Greek drama and his vision of theatre (particularly his Theatre of the Five Thousand). It then discusses the aesthetic trajectory that productions of ancient Greek drama, and more specifically those of Aeschylus' plays, underwent from INDA's beginnings in 1914–30, when an all-fascist governing body was installed at its helm.

Abbreviations: APGRD: Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk), AFI: Archivio Fondazione INDA, PR: Press Release

Such are the opening words of the editorial board of the academic journal published by the *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico* (INDA; National Institute of Ancient Drama), an institute dedicated to performing Greek drama in the ancient Greek theatre in Syracuse which, though reaching back to 1914, was eventually given formal recognition and its official title only in 1925 by the Fascist state:

Today more than ever, [our Institute] appears as one of the bodies which the Fascist State has entrusted with the intellectual renewal of the Nation and the cultural expansion of Italy. And with today's triumphant movement to lead our Homeland back to its glorious classical tradition and re-discover the imperial heights of Greece and Rome, our Institution seems truly destined to be in the vanguard of such a movement, which has its roots in the

history as well as the future of Italy, and not in mere intellectualism. [Our Institute] gathers Italian people at the classical celebrations and educates them about their past.¹

The above words inaugurate the change of presidency at INDA's headquarters: Professor of Archaeology and the History of Classical Art in Pisa and newly re-elected member of the Chamber for Sicily in the National Fascist Party, Biagio Pace, had been installed as head of INDA in place of Count Mario Tommaso Gargallo, INDA's initiator and main financial sponsor. This new presidency was also accompanied by a reshuffle of core committee members, with the inclusion of the General Director of Antiquity and Fine Arts Roberto Paribeni as well as Ministry of Education member Guido Ruberti.² The director of the *Regia scuola di recitazione 'Eleonora Duse'* (Royal School of Acting 'Eleonora Duse') Franco Liberati also collaborated with Pace from 1930, oversaw the production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*,³ and is reported to have participated in INDA's committee meetings from 13 April 1931⁴ (he also acted as the stand-in artistic director of the 1936 performances in Syracuse while Pace was fighting in the second Italo-Ethiopian war).⁵

But the above quotation also highlights the (seemingly) new course that the Institute would be taking from then onwards. In addition to documenting INDA's involvement with, and contribution to, Fascism's overall project of refashioning classical culture (Italy's return to 'its glorious classical tradition'), the editorial board's words perfectly encapsulate the apparently dichotomic combination of past and future in the construction of what Roger Griffin has eloquently termed 'rooted modernism'. Aesthetically, in the classical performances discussed here, this combination of past and future translated into a Hellenic modernism; that is, the repurposing of ancient Greek theatre with modernist traits.⁶ Indeed, if Fascism was a return to the past, a historically recognized past in this case (ancient Greek theatre and its repertoire), such a return, it was claimed, was also the foundation of a different, new and better future. In other words, the key to Fascism's hoped-for paligenetic rebirth of the nation and of the new Italian was the reconstruction of Italy's mythical past by means of the introduction of a new 'totalizing nomos' which opposed itself to the existing one.⁷ The special combination of this newly refashioned mythical past (in which ancient Greek theatre, in particular, was repurposed so as to become central to this mythicization) and the absorption, incorporation and supplanting of existing modernity thus grounded Fascism's 'alternative modernity'.⁸

The aesthetic traits of this 'alternative modernity' will be at the heart of this article. The absorption, betterment and eventual supplanting of the previous modernity, together with the reconfiguration of the Hellenic past, are apparent in the aesthetic trajectory followed by

¹ *Dioniso* (1929: 215). The very same words were published again in 1939 by the head of the Press Office of the Theatre Directorate from 1935, Mario Corsi, in his recollection of the development of open-air theatre under Fascism (1939: 76). Henceforward, all translations from the Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² See Introduction and 'Memorandum' 11 November 1929 in AFI b 65, fasc. 1, which contain the minutes from the very first INDA committee meeting with Pace as president, and which note the presence of both Paribeni and Ruberti.

³ In the same first meeting, it is reported that Liberati oversaw the selection of the actors and contributed to the preparation of the 1930 performances (cf. 'Memorandum' 11 November 1929 in AFI b 65, fasc. 1).

⁴ Cf. 'Memorandum' 13 April 1931 in AFI b. 80, fasc. 1. Head of Press Office of the Theatre Directorate Nicola De Pirro, who also functioned as INDA's president in Pace's absence (1935-1936), sat on the committee from 22 May 1936.

⁵ Pace left for Ethiopia in 1935: De Pirro stepped in as INDA's president while Liberati acted as the actual director of the 1936 Syracusan performances (cf. 'Letter from Vincenzo Bonajuto to Biagio Pace' 4 January 1936 in AFI b. 96, fasc. 1).

⁶ Griffin (2016: 128).

⁷ Griffin (2016: 122).

⁸ Griffin (2016: 119).

INDA in its various productions from 1914 onwards, especially those of Aeschylus' plays. This begins with the very first Syracusan production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in 1914, passes through the *Libation Bearers* in 1921 and the *Seven Against Thebes* in 1924 (performed again in Ostia in 1927), and concludes with yet another *Agamemnon*, in 1930, the last production of any Aeschylean play on the Syracusan stage until after the fall of Fascism.

Absorbing and Incorporating Modernity

As has been convincingly argued,⁹ late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernist, avant-garde cultural movements, with their claim to an all-encompassing spiritual revolution, played a huge part in the formation of Fascism's cultural and intellectual life as it developed in the *ventennio*.¹⁰ This is especially true of some of this period's most prominent theatrical experiments,¹¹ which grounded the beginnings of the INDA project (particularly its production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in 1914 and *Libation Bearers* in 1921) and were later subsumed into Fascism's programmatic and strategic use of theatre.¹²

The numerous accounts recounting INDA's origins, published from the 1920s to the 1930s, emphasize French and German avant-garde theatre as well as Gabriele D'Annunzio's (unrealized) theatre project as the main precursors for Syracuse's return to Greek tragedy and open-air performance. Italian open-air theatre, it was argued repeatedly in the scholarship of the time, looked back to the popular theatrical experiments heralded by the radical French *gauche*. Maurice Pottecher's open-air performances in Bussang and his disciple Romain Rolland's *Le Théâtre du Peuple* (The People's Theatre; 1902) were frequently mentioned, as were the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1888) and *Eumenides* (1897) at the Roman Theatre of Orange, both famously featuring Comédie Française actors.¹³ The idea underlying these productions was to transform the theatre-going demographic from the preserve of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie into a People's Theatre; indeed a project that would be later repurposed and introduced as new by the Fascist state.¹⁴

As mentioned, these Syracusan beginnings also had a direct forerunner in D'Annunzio's engagement with Greek tragedy.¹⁵ As Witt argues, his attempt at translating Nietzsche's theories into the creation of a modern tragedy fused 'aestheticism' with 'nascent twentieth-century antidemocratic nationalist and imperialist ideology'; in other words, modern (Nietzschean) tragedy was part of the early-century spiritual and cultural revolution that was hoped would come about and create a new and better civilization.¹⁶ The ideological underpinnings of D'Annunzio's engagement with theatre and tragedy were a combination of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Nietzsche's Dionysian reading of Greek

⁹ Cf. especially Witt (2001).

¹⁰ Cf. Gentile (1996: 27): 'Cultural movements like the modernist avant-garde [...] proposed a spiritual revolution that, starting from a philosophy or art, should affect all areas of life, including the world of politics'; see also Adamson (1993); Sternhell (1994) and Griffin (2016: 111ff.).

¹¹ Cf. especially Witt (2001: 2ff.).

¹² See Di Martino (2019, 2024, Chapter 5).

¹³ Cf. Gargallo in a speech in 1913 (2014: 33), Gargallo (1924: 6–7), Corsi (1939: 38–9); it isn't a coincidence that De Pirro's (1938) recollection of the Fascist return to theatre is an almost word-for-word translation of Romain Rolland's *Le Théâtre du Peuple: Teatro per il Popolo* (Theatre for the People), with the subtle but necessary change of preposition from 'of' to 'for', which overturns the role of the 'people' from subjects to the receiving objects of (Fascism's) theatre.

¹⁴ According to the rhetoric of Fascism, this was the first time the theatre was finally brought to the masses, see De Pirro (1938: 15). Cf. also Scarpellini (1989: 114) and Schnapp (1996: 15).

¹⁵ On D'Annunzio as the immediate forerunner of early INDA, see Bonajuto (1929: 72), Corsi (1939: 38), and Gargallo in a speech given in 1923 (2014: 89).

¹⁶ Witt (2001: 15).

tragedy but grounded in the French-derived ‘people’s theatre’ and thus intent on creating a Latin-Mediterranean project that would rival its German counterpart, Bayreuth.¹⁷ Though his ambitious theatrical project, the *Teatro d’Albano* (named after Lake Albano, a small lake in the Alban hills of Lazio where he intended to build his new theatre) was never realized, its foundations were to find fertile ground in what would become the longest-running modern festival of ancient Greek drama at the ancient theatre of Syracuse.

Wagner and Nietzsche were endemically present in fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century modernist experimentation with theatricality *tout court*, which sought for a language of theatre through and in performance:¹⁸ both provided a reconfiguration of classical and theatrical traditions that moved away from the Romantic ideal of Greek antiquity and proposed a new Greece, one that would soon find its scenery in Schliemann’s newly uncovered Mycenae, and its muse in Aeschylus and his *Agamemnon* in particular (Aeschylus’ trilogy had been central to Wagner’s own trilogy, the *Ring* cycle, which inaugurated the Bayreuth festival in 1876, and throughout his career).¹⁹ Not only was this Greece the setting for a number of open-air productions of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* all over Europe and beyond;²⁰ it was also the backdrop against which D’Annunzio orchestrated his modern characters in the tragedy *Città Morta* (Dead City),²¹ a play reminiscent of Schliemann’s discoveries in many ways — particularly with its main character Alessandro, an archaeologist who has gone to Mycenae with his sister Bianca Maria to conduct excavations.

Wagner with his holistic, almost religious, and community-building experience of theatre, and Nietzsche with his programmatically anti-Romantic repurposing of tragedy as a communal and choric victory of the Dionysian and of its spiritually elevating powers (an idea of theatre that foregrounded the Syracusean project and which Mussolini would later reuse) had paved the way for a new type of theatre and theatricality.²² Syracuse was referred to by Count Gargallo as the ‘temple’ in which theatre as a ‘rite’ would be celebrated and re-established. In this ‘temple’, contrary to the actual realization of Wagnerian opera, in which music had taken over words, all the ‘different arts would unite together in grand glorification’ (with a nod to Nietzsche and Wagner).²³ Bayreuth was explicitly rival and counterpart to the ‘Latin Renaissance’ which had begun with the reopening of the Roman

¹⁷ On the Nietzschean inspiration of D’Annunzio’s theatre project, see Treves (1991) 103–5, Witt (2001: 15ff.), Ugolini (2014), Gaborik (2021: 39ff.). Wagnerian and French theatrical influence on D’Annunzio’s idea of tragedy and theatre are variously argued in Witt (2001: 15ff.) and Gaborik (2021: 39ff.). See also D’Annunzio’s own mention of Maurice Pottecher’s theatrical experiments at Bussang and of the theatre in his ‘La Rinascenza della Tragedia’ (The Renaissance of Tragedy; published on 2 August 1897, but see D’Annunzio [2003]), and his debt to Rolland’s idea of a People’s Theatre in a letter to his friend and translator Georges Hérelle, in which he confirmed that *Revue d’Art Dramatique* (a theatrical journal then directed by Rolland) ‘répond à mes idées sur le théâtre’ (‘corresponds to my ideas on theatre’; in Valentini 1992, 43). On D’Annunzio and the French ‘gauche’, cf. Treves (1991: 105–6).

¹⁸ Cf. Taxidou (2021: 6–11).

¹⁹ Cf. Fisher-Lichte (2017: 77). Cf. Wagner’s own words quoted in Fisher-Lichte (2017: 78): ‘Nothing [...] could equal the sublime emotion with which the *Agamemnon* trilogy inspired me, and to the last word of the *Eumenides* I lived in an atmosphere so far removed from the present day that I have never since been really able to reconcile myself with modern literature’.

²⁰ *Agamemnon* inaugurated the Oxford Greek play in 1880 (it would be the founding tragedy of the Cambridge theatre festival in 1926 and of the Athenian festival in 1932), and was staged in Sydney in 1885, in Paris at the Theatre de l’Opera in 1886, in Cambridge in 1900 with the Lion Gate as scenery, and again at Harvard in 1906. For more information on these *Agamemnon*s, see Macintosh and Kenward (2019).

²¹ The tragedy premiered in Paris at Sarah Bernhardt’s *Théâtre de la Renaissance* on 21 January 1898.

²² On Nietzsche’s influence on Mussolini, see, amongst others, Witt (2001: 8) and Gaborik (2021: 32ff.).

²³ Gargallo (2014: 119–20). Gargallo often remarked on how the Syracusean productions of Greek tragedy were an actual *Wort-Ton-Drama*, as opposed to Wagner’s *Ton-Drama*, in which music had taken over words (cf. Gargallo 2014, 77, 87 and 91).

Theatre of Orange, was furthered by D'Annunzio, and was realized in the Syracusan theatrical undertaking, which was soon baptized the 'Bayreuth of Italy'.²⁴

But there was also another strand of German avant-garde theatre that recurred in later scholarship retracing INDA's beginnings and which played a pivotal role not just in the first Syracusan performances, but was later fully integrated into INDA's aesthetics and the development of theatre more generally under Fascism. Together with the theatrical experiments occurring at the beginning of the century which saw the German philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Mollendorf act as dramaturg, translator and promoter of a number of productions of Greek tragedy between 1900 and 1909,²⁵ Max Reinhardt appeared as a pivotal and dominating figure in Italy's theatrical development, increasingly so in the 1920s and 30s.²⁶

These early productions staged between 1900 and 1909 were directed by Hans Oberländer, the future collaborator of Max Reinhardt, and represent the beginning of a series of directorial choices that would have an impact on Reinhardt's and, more widely, European theatrical engagements with Greek drama in the first half of the century, including INDA's. In addition to the use of chorus-masses, a feature of Reinhardt's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1910) and *Oresteia* (1911–19), as well as the Syracusan productions up until 1927, Oberländer also employed a chorus that sang, another that performed dialogues, and a dancing body that commented on the action.²⁷ This tripartite choral set-up would be tested for the first time in the 1921 *Libation Bearers* in Syracuse, perfected for *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Bacchae* in 1922, and fully developed in *Seven Against Thebes* in 1924 and in INDA's subsequent productions up to 1939.

But it was especially Reinhardt's experimental approach to Greek tragedy, the classics, and theatre that made a significant impact on Italian engagement with the (Greek) classics on stage during the 1920s and 1930s, when, banned from performing in the Reich because he was Jewish, he turned to the Italian stage instead (until he was banned from that too in 1935).²⁸ During his visits to Italy and productions for the Italian stage, Italian theatre critics and makers reported snippets of his artistic career, introduced his directorial style, and accounted for, as well as detailed, his idea of theatre in the press. Of particular importance here are accounts of Reinhardt's emphasis on theatre being fundamentally the 'communion between audience and actors'²⁹ and on the 'Dionysian' union which could uplift the audience 'beyond earthly reality' and 'entrance' them — words that, while nodding at Nietzsche, resonated with much of the Italian scholarship of the time on open-air performance.³⁰

²⁴ The comparison between Wagner and the Syracusan Festival is made explicit by the Belgian Minister for Science and Art Jules Destrée in an interview marking the production of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* in 1921, when he expressed his wish that 'Syracuse would become for classical art what Bayreuth is for lyric art' (AFI PR 27 April 1921). Cf. also a letter from Gargallo to Fausto Maria Martini, in which the former refers to the latter's recent 'baptis[m] of Syracuse as Italy's Bayreuth' (AFI b 42, fasc. 5).

²⁵ Cf. Romagnoli (1917: 127); Gargallo (2014: 33) and Pace (1933: 81). These productions were organized by the *Akademische Verein für Kunst und Litteratur* (Academic Association for Art and Literature), an association founded by Hans Oberländer in 1899; notably *Oedipus Tyrannus* (28 February 1900, Berliner Theater) and *Antigone* (28 March 1900, Lessing-Theater), for which Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote a prelude: both saw Max Reinhardt in the role of Tiresias and employed Wilamowitz's translations of the plays; also important was Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (24 November 1900, Theater des Westens), with Max Shilling as composer.

²⁶ Romagnoli (1917: 127) talks about the success of Reinhardt's *Oedipus Tyrannus*; see also Pace (1939: 103).

²⁷ Flashar (1991: 114).

²⁸ Reinhardt's last production in Italy was in 1935, the year Italy invaded Abyssinia: as a response to France's and England's imposed sanctions, Mussolini banned English and French prose and operatic plays from the Italian stage, but it was after Mussolini's alliance with Hitler in 1938, and more systematically from 1940 onwards, that the Italian stage really took the hit and cast out Jewish works as well as any other play that reflected badly on Germany and the Germans (Gaborik 2021: 107).

²⁹ 28 April 1932, 'Parla Max Reinhardt', *La Tribuna — L'Idea Nazionale*.

³⁰ 1 January 1932, Max Reinhardt: 'Il compito dell'Arte Drammatica', *Realtà. Rivista mensile dei Rotary Clubs d'Italia*.

Yet this union, Reinhardt argued, was most elicited in specific performance settings: in a letter published in the *Gazzetta di Venezia* in 1933 (the year in which he directed Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the theatre festival *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino* in Campo San Trovaso), Reinhardt explicitly praised the general trend of returning theatre to its original form of 'ludi scenici' ('scenic games') – that is, open-air performances. These, he argued, could 'elevate' and 'empower [...] the audience's soul disposition', a concept that again had much currency at the time, particularly when talking about productions of Greek tragedy.³¹ His idea of a 'theatre for great crowds, for the big audience',³² what he termed 'the Theatre of the Five Thousand' in a newspaper article originally published in 1911, was (unsurprisingly) variously reported in the Italian press in the 1920s and 1930s, when Mussolini was encouraging theatre makers and playwrights to create a theatre of and for the masses for Italy, 'a theatre that can hold fifteen or twenty thousand people', as he stated in 1933.³³ Around the same time, Reinhardt's *Oedipus Tyrannus* was remembered as one of the first embodiments of this theatre, paving the way for his later engagements with the classics.³⁴

Indeed, these 'classics' were central to Reinhardt's model of theatre: in a 1932 interview published in the Italian press, he explained how it was the director's task to bring the classics' 'eternal substance' closer to the modern taste and sensibility in an adaptive process that 'preserved' them but 'in new theatrical forms',³⁵ reiterating a concept that he had already expressed in an interview in 1902 and which had functioned as a sort of manifesto for his later productions. Reinhardt's productions, in Italy and elsewhere, proved particularly useful in offering Italian theatre a concrete model to draw from, one that encompassed and realized Wagner's reinvention of the Greek model and Nietzsche's choric tragedy,³⁶ ideas which, in Italy, had circulated via D'Annunzio. Indeed, some of the aesthetic choices employed and perfected in his early engagements with Greek tragedy provided an ideal point of reference for some of the formative staging decisions in the early Syracusan productions. As will be seen, these decisions later developed into markedly distinctive stylistic choices for INDA.

The reference to Reinhardt's chorus-masses in both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oresteia* was evident to a theatre critic when multiple choral masses mounted the stage in both *Agamemnon* in 1914 and *Libation Bearers* in 1921.³⁷ The choral masses that joined in the singing that Ettore Romagnoli, the *metteur en scène* of the classical performances until 1928, had composed for the choral odes in *Agamemnon*, were composed by more than 100 extras. In *Libation Bearers* (and subsequent productions until 1936), an additional 100-member chorus sang off-stage near the orchestra. It was jokingly noted that Romagnoli should learn from Reinhardt and his recent productions of Greek tragedy on how to move such masses onstage.³⁸ Just like in his *Oedipus Tyrannus*, both the Syracusan *Agamemnon*

³¹ 16 September 1933, Max Reinhardt: 'Un giudizio di Max Reinhardt sull'Arena di Verona', *Gazzetta di Venezia*.

³² 6 September 1933, Silvio D'Amico: 'Ai Festspiele di Salisburgo. Colloquio con Max Reinhardt', *La Tribuna — L'Idea Nazionale*.

³³ Mussolini (1951–1963: 50).

³⁴ Cf. April to May 1923, Max Pirker: 'Max Reinhardt', *Il Convegno*; 24 April 1932, Silvio D'Amico: 'Reinhardt a Roma', *La Tribuna — L'Idea Nazionale*. Reinhardt's model of theatre, or better, diversification of theatre into more than one model, was implicit in Massimo Bontempelli's intervention in plans for a mass theatre at the Volta convention and explicit in Dutch architect Hendrik Wijdeveld's recourse to the Großes Schauspielhaus as an already successful model for mass theatre.

³⁵ 28 April 1932, 'Parla Max Reinhardt', *La Tribuna — L'Idea Nazionale*.

³⁶ On Reinhardt's continuation and perfection of what Wagner had begun with the *Ring* cycle and points of contact with Nietzsche, see Fisher-Lichte (2017: 69–90).

³⁷ Extras posed as the people of Argos, Aegisthus' soldiers, Agamemnon's soldiers coming back from Troy and Clytemnestra's maidens.

³⁸ Cf. AFI PR 17 April 1914, Renato Simoni: 'Grandi Feste Greche', *Corriere della sera*.

and *Libation Bearers* employed a separate ‘reciting chorus’, a 25-person male chorus of Argive elders in the *Agamemnon*, and a 25-person female ensemble as Clytemnestra’s maidens, producing ‘plastic tableaux’ in pivotal scenes from the *Libation Bearers*, embodying what would later develop into a proper third ‘chorus’, a dancing one.

As had been observed for Reinhardt’s *Oresteia*,³⁹ the Italian press recalled how, in the Syracusan *Agamemnon*, the audience themselves appeared as the ideal and concrete continuation of the chorus-masses onstage.⁴⁰ The ‘barbaric’, ‘primitive’, and pre-classical Greece that functioned as scenery in these early productions and was embodied in the actors’ costumes⁴¹ also recalled Reinhardt’s ‘pre-Hellenic [...], partly Cretan and Mycenaean, partly Oriental, partly [...] merely savage’ Greece in his *Oedipus Tyrannus*,⁴² and the ‘barbaric’ atmosphere in his *Oresteia*.⁴³ In the Syracusan *Agamemnon*, costumes reproduced the late Geometric motifs that Paolo Orsi, a famous Italian archaeologist, was discovering on vases around Syracuse and Megara Hyblea; in *Libation Bearers*, they represented the same geometric-zoomorphic figures of the sub-geometric period that Orsi had recently brought to light.

For *Agamemnon*, Art-Nouveau artist Duilio Cambellotti, who had previously worked for D’Annunzio, designed a six-metre-high cyclopean wall with a faithful imitation of the Lion Gate surrounding the archaic Atreidai’s’ palace; this was flanked by a 16-metre-high tower (Figures 1, 2).⁴⁴ For *Libation Bearers*, Cambellotti replicated the archaic palace on the right in deep red, flanked by the same tower and looking out onto a sort of agora-like space in the front; on the left was Agamemnon’s tomb, constructed as an altar on which stood a tall funerary stele, topped with the reproduction of a winged sphinx.⁴⁵ The asymmetric scenery was formally divided by a Mycenaean-style fountain (claimed to be taken from vase iconography) and, on both sides, there were rocks and tall cypresses to complete the background (Figure 3).⁴⁶

Aeschylus was the new bard of this ‘barbaric’ and ‘primitive’ Hellenism, argued philologist and translator Ettore Bignone in a newspaper article introducing the Syracusan production of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* — a Hellenism that had been found in the ‘treasures at Mycenae’ and, more generally, in the geographical location of ‘the ancient Aegean civilization’.⁴⁷

Refining the Aesthetics of Hellenic Modernism

The year 1924 saw INDA not only intersecting with Fascism but *interweaving* with it, formally and substantially: after repeated appeals to the government, including letters to the king Vittorio Emanuele III and the Ministry of Education, the cultural initiative that had performed classical Greek tragedies with great success between 1914 and 1924 was

³⁹ Cf. Fisher-Lichte (2017: 114).

⁴⁰ Cf. AFI PR 17 April 1914, Luigi Ambrosini: ‘Agamennone applaudito da quindicimila spettatori’, *La stampa, Torino*.

⁴¹ Cf., for example, AFI PR 8 April 1914, *Il Secolo*; AFI PR 4 May 1921, *Nation Belge*; and Cambellotti (1982: 54).

⁴² Gilbert Murray quoted in Fisher-Lichte (2017: 122).

⁴³ Review quoted in Fisher-Lichte (2017: 115): the critic also mentioned the presence of ‘four snorting, stamping’ horses as contributing to such an atmosphere, another element that was introduced in the 1914 Syracusan production to accompany Agamemnon’s entrance.

⁴⁴ Cf. AFI PR 2 April 1914, *Aretusa*. On how and by whom it was built, cf. Bonajuto cited in Norcia (2004: 33).

⁴⁵ Cf. Vicre’s insistence on the importance of the ‘agora’ in the scenery, ancient and modern (Vicare 1921: 4–5).

⁴⁶ On the relationship between the 1921 scenery and vase iconography, cf. Pace (1921: 10).

⁴⁷ Thus Bignone in AFI PR 8 April 1914, ‘Agamennone’, *Il Secolo*: ‘Observing these mysterious and potent figures [in Aeschylus’ dramas], one would say that Aeschylus has stepped over the edges of classical Greece and Homeric poetry; he is more than a bard; he is a contemporary to these violent and grand passions that recent archaeological discoveries of the treasures at Mycenae and of the ancient Aegean civilization have fully unveiled to us’.

finally given proper recognition on 7 August 1925.⁴⁸ After seeing Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and *Antigone* performed at the ancient theatre of Syracuse on 13 May while on a tour in Sicily, Mussolini, whose party had just won the elections (the last to be held before the Fascist dictatorship), sensed 'the great civic importance' and 'national character' of the Syracusan performances and of an institute that could promote such performances all around Italy.⁴⁹

The Institute's 'moral' and 'civic' characters had been highlighted numerous times before — most recently by the Sicilian politician Enrico Giaraçà in advertising the 1924 performances. Its spiritually elevating powers (to employ the wording used for Nietzsche's programmatic return to tragedy) and morally uplifting functions had always been argued to be central to the endeavours around the Syracusan performances.⁵⁰ It was precisely this union of the civic and the moral, the spiritual and the educational, that Mussolini saw as productively fitting into, and contributing to, his new theatre.

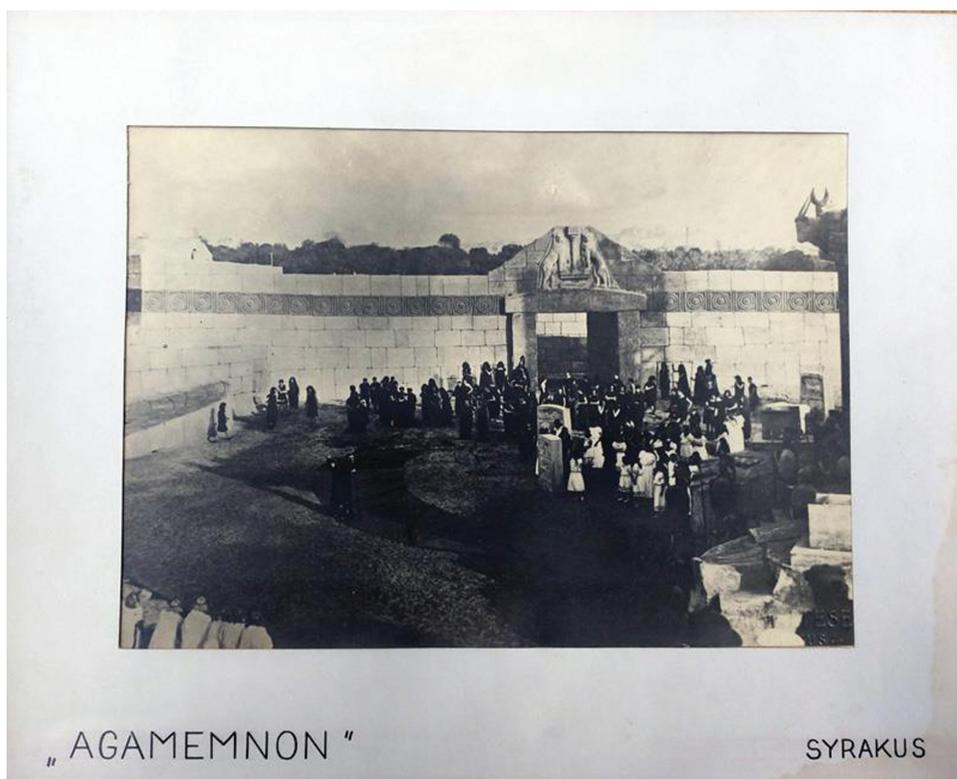


Figure 1. The Atreidai palace in the set of the 1914 *Agamemnon* at Syracuse. Leyhausen-Spiess collection. APGRD.

⁴⁸ Appeals to the government began in 1921 and intensified in 1924 (cf. especially Orlando 1921; Gargallo 2014: 55–63; and letters to various political and cultural figures at the time, including the king Vittorio Emanuele III and the Ministry of Education, in AFI b 42, fasc. 5). The Royal Decree by which INDA was established dates back to 7 August 1925.

⁴⁹ Cf. AFI PR 22 January 1924, *Giornale d'Italia* and 23 March 1924, *Bollettino della Sera*.

⁵⁰ Cf. Giaraçà (1924: 2): '[...] the classical performances [...] now [...] reach a new form of aesthetic pleasure and artistic education [...], a new form that is, at the same time, destined to exercise a beneficent moral influence on the modern, restless human soul, with a most incredible evocation of the serene Hellenic civilisation'. Prior to being recognized by the government, the committee had gathered under the name 'Ente Morale' (Moral Institution).

From 1924 onwards, efforts were made to fine-tune those aesthetic traits that had appeared on the Syracusan stage up until that point and which heavily drew on the avant-garde theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such endeavours were later accompanied by the creation of a new alternative narrative that, while praising the early efforts, recognized their many imperfections, and attributed ex-post to Fascism the supposed aesthetic perfection that had been achieved as well as the opening of theatre to the masses.

The refinement of a modernist yet Hellenising aesthetic that suited the classical performances had in fact already begun under the Romagnoli-Gargallo partnership and was evident in Cambellotti's scenery for Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, performed first for the Syracusan stage in 1924 and in Ostia in 1927. Although modelled on the masonry tunnels of Mycenaean Tiryns, the scenery for the 1924 production largely distanced itself from any archaeologizing: Cambellotti argued in 1948 that the early productions (particularly 1914 and 1921) were based on the false assumption that designing scenery for an ancient Greek tragedy involved a detailed archaeological reproduction.⁵¹ Having 'archaeological-artistic traits as guides in the reconstruction of the scenery is an obstacle [...], and cause for mistakes and obscurity': rather, 'the figurative arts, with their lines, volumes and colours, should render the ethical and religious content' of such tragedies.⁵² The 1924 scenery for



Figure 2. The Lion Gate in the set of the 1914 *Agamemnon* at Syracuse. Leyhausen-Spiess collection. APGRD.

⁵¹ Cambellotti (1982: 94–5).

⁵² Cambellotti (1982: 96).

the Syracusan production of *Seven Against Thebes*, and the 1927 scenery for the Ostia production (of which Cambellotti was particularly proud),⁵³ followed this new principle: though still providing a generally ‘Greek atmosphere’, his style had rid itself of any archaeological reference.⁵⁴

The final results were massive abstractions that reminded the spectator of the Greek spirit and the ‘spirit of the drama’, and leaned towards a generalizing ‘architectural and symmetrical unit’.⁵⁵ Such a unit was obtained through an ‘abstraction’ process designed to carve out a ‘solid architectonic line able to sum up the drama being performed’.⁵⁶ Responding to critics who complained that his scenery had nothing to do with Greece, Cambellotti argued that although ‘the archaeological commentary [had] disappeared from the stage’, the ‘process’ was ‘still Greek’, consisting mainly of the ‘arrangement of triangular prisms, variable on each of their sides’, a method that was employed in ancient Greece.⁵⁷ Cambellotti’s process was not about the inclusion of copious additions; rather, it was about conceptual and physical abstraction in order to ‘make way for emotional and aesthetic preoccupations in tune with the play being performed’.⁵⁸



Figure 3. Orestes centre-stage, the Chorus and the people of Argos on the sides at the end of the performance of the 1921 *Libation Bearers* at Syracuse. AFI, Archivio Maltese.

⁵³ Cf. Cambellotti (1982: 73): the 1927 scenery was ‘more perfect because the archaeological aesthetics has diminished so much that it has almost disappeared altogether; the emotive and expressive elements, instead, are dominating so as to construe the whole architectural framework of the scene’.

⁵⁴ Cambellotti (1982: 96).

⁵⁵ Cambellotti (1982: 29, 69).

⁵⁶ Cambellotti (1982: 30).

⁵⁷ Cambellotti (1982: 75). See the critical comments about Cambellotti’s supposedly ‘non-Greek scenery’ in the *Bollettino* (1924: 2).

⁵⁸ Cambellotti (1982: 72).

The atmosphere of Thebes under attack was conveyed by the seven high towers and the wall connecting them, studded with shields; the sense of angst emerged from the circular forestage that represented the Theban agora, enclosed labyrinth-like within two lateral prisms (Figure 4). For the 1927 scenery in Ostia, the cyclopean walls were replaced with Futurist-style triangles, while the two lateral and opposing prisms bore the image of a big-eyed snake to symbolize the two fighting brothers, Eteocles and Polynices (Figure 5).

Such a hyper-real space was the cradle for an equally modern(ist) production: the martial tone of the *Seven Against Thebes* had been obtained through the fashioning of new musical instruments, according to composer Giuseppe Mulé: one-ringed trumpets and single-coppered strings that reproduced the noises of war.⁵⁹ Dancing to these instruments was a nine-member corps de ballet trained in the Dalcroze-founded Rhythmic school in Hellerau, who had choreographed the entire play under the direction of Valeria Kratina (Figure 6).⁶⁰ The dancing chorus that saw its beginnings in 1921 and was formally introduced to accompany the choral odes only in 1922 had now morphed into one of the main characters of the play, helping to convey its ‘emotional and aesthetic preoccupations’, to reprise Cambellotti’s words.⁶¹ Described as ‘Phidias-like sculptures’, the corps produced ‘plastic tableaux’ with their rhythmic movement patterns; the *schemata* of ancient Greek dance but with a modern twist, that is, what Aby Warburg had been developing in the early twentieth century to refer to the afterlife of antiquity: *Pathosformel*.⁶² These ‘pathos formulae’ consisted of primitive gestures, crystallizing scenes from the play and standing out like drawings on ancient Greek vases.⁶³

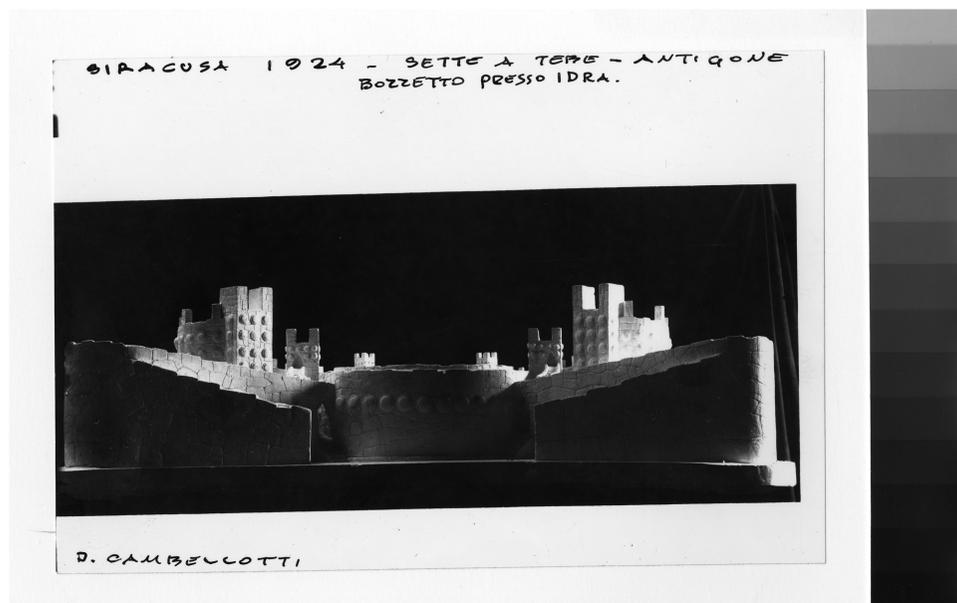


Figure 4. Photo by Luigi Ragghianti of Duilio Cambellotti’s scenery design, with revolving prisms, for *Antigone* and *Seven Against Thebes* (1924, Syracuse). Courtesy of Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca, Fototeca Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Arte contemporanea b. 54, n. 00012468.

⁵⁹ AFI PR 29 April 1924, *Corriere della Calabria*.

⁶⁰ The number of dancers reported in the press was either nine or ten (cf., amongst others, AFI PR 27 April 1924, *Giornale dell’Isola* for ten and 1 May *Gazzetta di Messina* for nine).

⁶¹ Cambellotti (1982) 72.

⁶² Cf. Bordignon (2012: 78) and AFI PR 30 April 1924, *Giornale di Sicilia*.

⁶³ AFI PR 1 May 1924, *Tribuna — Roma*.

If ‘(re)evocation’ was the hallmark of the 1914–22 Syracusan productions, the terms ‘interpretation’,⁶⁴ or ‘wondrous adaptation’⁶⁵ were variously employed to describe the 1924 performances. These were not an archaeological, ‘cold and servile reconstruction’; rather,



Figure 5. Photo by Luigi Ragghianti of Duilio Cambellotti’s scenery design, with revolving prisms, for *Antigone* and *Seven Against Thebes* (1927, Ostia). Courtesy of Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca, Fototeca Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, *Arte contemporanea* b. 54, n. 00012450.



Figure 6. The Chorus’ dancing exodus at the end of the performance of the 1924 *Seven Against Thebes* at Syracuse. AFI, Archivio Maltese.

⁶⁴ AFI PR 17 April 1924, *Il Mondo*.

⁶⁵ AFI PR 1 May 1924, *Gazzetta di Messina*.

they were ‘an interpretation of the two tragedies’, as was reported in the press.⁶⁶ ‘What we are doing’, Romagnoli stated, ‘is staging with modern sentiment’.⁶⁷

Supplanting modernity

In 1930, INDA mounted Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, the last of the productions that will be analysed in this article and the last Aeschylean play to be staged in Syracuse until the end of the war. The Institute had been entrusted with overseeing classical productions all over Italy and, for this reason, it also effectively functioned as a centre of censorship for most (if not all) productions that adapted ancient Graeco-Roman material in Italy at the time.⁶⁸ The expansion of Greek and Roman drama to other ancient sites in Italy, however, had left a few members of INDA’s committee unhappy, particularly with Romagnoli, who had acted as an intermediary between the committee and the Minister of Education and had strongly pushed for this expansion. The spotlight had been moved away from Syracuse and was now to be shared with a number of other sites all over Italy.⁶⁹ In addition, Romagnoli had supposedly taken the credit for INDA’s successes one too many times.⁷⁰ His removal from the artistic directorship on 22 November 1928 by request of the committee itself proved useful to Fascism a few months later: the artistic director’s tasks were integrated into those of the president and the committee, so that, when Mussolini decided to make INDA directly dependent upon the government in March of the following year, it was easy enough to mandate that its president be selected by the Prime Minister himself.⁷¹

When Pace was given full rein over INDA, he was able to concentrate control over all artistic choices involved in the Syracusan performances into his own hands, a power that he shared with a few loyal collaborators (Franco Liberati and Vincenzo Bonajuto, especially). Pace and his team’s course of action for the INDA productions to come was twofold: on the one hand, they intentionally built on the expertise established over the years since INDA’s first attempts; on the other, they reached out to other successful artists in Italy and beyond with the aim of steering artistic choices towards Fascism’s strategic repurposing of the ‘classical’ with markedly modernist traits for all classical productions in Italy that is, its goal of a ‘Hellenic modernism’.

From the very first appointments and artistic choices in 1930, one can see this double drive at work. While Pace renewed Mulé’s contract for the composition of the music for *Iphigenia at Aulis*, in keeping with the ‘tradition’ of the Institute, as he stated, he also reached out to the widely-known composer Ildebrando Pizzetti for the *Agamemnon*.⁷² To both, Pace gave the clear instruction of composing music that would not ‘overtake the acting’.⁷³ Indeed, Pace was aiming at fine-tuning the relationship between the different components in the classical performances (music, poetry and dance) and their roles in the contemporary performance through a careful balance between the tradition that had already

⁶⁶ AFI PR17 April 1924, *Il Mondo*.

⁶⁷ AFI PR 29 April 1924, *Corriere della Calabria*.

⁶⁸ Cf. the Royal Decree 2 March 1929 in AFI b. 67, fasc. 1.

⁶⁹ In an undated letter to the Minister of Education, probably written at the beginning of 1929, Gargallo complains about the government’s decision to include amongst the number of venues hosting classical performances theatres like Taormina, where ‘there are only a few ruins and very little trace of the ancient theatre’. In his opinion, it was an ‘excessive sense of patriotism’ that drove this frenzied theatrical activity, which then resulted in some artistic disasters (AFI b. 67, fasc. 1).

⁷⁰ Cf. Di Martino (2019: 193–4).

⁷¹ Cf. ‘Memorandum’ 13 April 1928 in AFI b. 65, fasc. 1, for the abolition of the role of artistic director and Troiani in this issue for more on the circumstances around Romagnoli’s removal from office on 22 November 1928.

⁷² Cf. Pace’s letters, one to Mulé dated 2 September 1929 and the other to Pizzetti dated 3 September 1929, in AFI b. 71, fasc. 2 and 1, respectively.

⁷³ Cf. AFI b. 71, fasc. 2 and 1.

been established between 1914 and 1927 and the introduction of new artistic choices, as well as new artists themselves.

Though the 1930 *Agamemnon* still included choral odes put to music, as had been envisaged by Romagnoli under a more clearly Wagnerian influence for the early productions, Pizzetti's music (as well as, more generally, his reflections on the role of music in ancient Greek drama)⁷⁴ pointed in the direction of becoming a full-bodied character in the tragedy. In addition to accompanying the choral odes as well as, for the first time, the dances choreographed by the Dalcroze-trained modernist dancer Jia Ruskaja and her violet-clad, eleven-member corps de ballet, the music was also aimed at commenting on the actions of the characters on stage, independently of the singing and dancing.

For the first time, the dancing chorus had been granted moments in the tragedy where they figured as the main actor on the stage. Ruskaja had fought to secure at least three main moments in the tragedy when she and her ensemble had the whole orchestra for themselves.⁷⁵ One was the unrolling of the red carpets on the grand staircase (at Ag. 908): the press remarked on the ironic beauty of the dance that greeted the king, with the chorus twirling out of the palace down the princely staircase holding laurel wreaths (Figure 7).⁷⁶ But the second poignant moment was the intermezzo after Cassandra's entrance into the palace (at Ag. 1330). To Pizzetti's dark music, produced by the forty-person orchestra of



Figure 7. The Chorus' dance with laurel rings in the carpet scene. AFI, Archivio Maltese.

⁷⁴ Cf. Casali in this issue.

⁷⁵ Ruskaja and Pizzetti quarrelled over the number of instrumental pieces for dances only in the play: in a letter to Bonajuto dated 13 February 1930 (cf. AFI b. 71, fasc. 1), Pizzetti explained that even though 'the only melody written to be danced to is the one accompanying the unrolling of the red carpets', Ruskaja and the other dancers could and should also enrich the following moments with rhythmic dances: 'the chorus as they follow Cassandra's entrance into the palace, which I wrote without words, but which should be vocalised'; 'Agamemnon's entrance with the chariot'; and 'the final lament'.

⁷⁶ Cf. AFI PR 29 April 1930, *Giornale dell'Isola di Catania* and 30 April 1930 *Telefrago Livorno* (the latter reports: 'the palace's doors open and the dancers come out with laurel rings in their arms').

woodwind and percussion, Ruskaja and her dancers began a frightened, rhythmic yet frantic dance up to the base of the staircase. There they waited, their bodies on the floor and the palms of their hands stretched out towards the palace.⁷⁷ A ‘murky’ and ‘magnificent’ instrumental piece then erupted as the doors opened on Agamemnon’s and Cassandra’s corpses lying on the floor whilst Clytemnestra appeared, monstrous, holding a blood-stained axe.⁷⁸ But the closing piece was the most striking: to the nostalgic notes of Pizzetti’s music, Ruskaja and her corps de ballet crawled on the floor, reached the palace’s doors with striking evolutions, then halted at the threshold and vanished with their arms up in the air, thus closing the tragedy:⁷⁹ Ruskaja was the last to exit, ‘all immersed in the flashing red light, as the statue of Murder’.⁸⁰

The efforts of both Pizzetti and Ruskaja had a significant impact on the audience. Pizzetti’s ‘avant-garde modernism’ hinted at ‘multi-vocal mixtures and musical drawings from Strauss to Honegger’ and at ‘the polychromatic music of Stravinsky’ or ‘Schönberg’,⁸¹ while Ruskaja surprised the audience with her ‘anti-musical’ style, consisting in sudden and abrupt turns and moves,⁸² which were reported to have ‘externalise[d]’ the characters’ ‘inner feeling’ in an ‘aesthetic manifestation’ that drew from both the ‘past and present’.⁸³

But Cambellotti’s scenery for the 1930 *Agamemnon* probably best embodies the aesthetic maturity achieved by INDA over the years; it also eloquently shows the aesthetic trajectory followed by the Institute from the first *Agamemnon* in 1914 through the productions analysed in this article. Indeed, in some ways, the 1930 scenery recalled the 1914 archaeological staging of Aeschylus’ play whilst simultaneously diverging from it. The high tower, lion gate and Atreidai palace of 1914 had been made to fit Cambellotti’s new system of prisms and (now fully fledged) ‘prudent modernism’:⁸⁴ two high, lateral, grey/light blue blocks of rock enclosed the orchestra whilst a granite-like ‘cyclopean wall’ in the back formed its majestic framework. The sixteen-metre tower of 1914 had become twenty metres long, was equipped with two asymmetric and Futurist-like small windows and culminated in a geometrically V-shaped top. The Atreidai palace of 1914 had been divested of its more recognizable archaeological traits and essentialized so as to resemble a sophisticated hut: two trunk-like pillars were positioned next to one another at the front and another two intersected on the top; the two side columns hosted rounded, copper-like studs decorated with ‘primitive’ and stylized drawings while the two golden central doors were adorned with a pair of stylised lions on the top (Figure 8). ‘If one compares the 1914 sketch for the scenery of the *Agamemnon* with the one produced in 1930’, Corsi affirmed in his recollection of the 1930 performances of the *Agamemnon*, ‘one would notice a substantial difference in the very conception of tragedy between the first attempt and this new re-elaboration of the scenic elements’.⁸⁵ These elements were in fact transformed, or better: ‘deformed’ and ‘abstracted’ and projected onto a new, hyper-real space. Cambellotti’s ‘expressionist

⁷⁷ It is not clear whether lines 1343–71 were excised or kept, since the press described these two scenes (the choral passage put to music and Clytemnestra’s opening the doors) as continuous, but there is no sign of it being cut from the script; also, it is unclear whether these lines were sung (as suggested by an interview with Pace: cf. AFI PR 12 February 1930, *Il Mattino*) or spoken in a vocalized melody (as suggested by Pizzetti’s letter referenced above in AFI b. 71, fasc. 1).

⁷⁸ Cf. AFI PR 18 April 1930, *La Tribuna* and Corsi (1939: 80).

⁷⁹ AFI PR 28 April 1930, *Resto del Carlino*.

⁸⁰ AFI PR 29 April 1930, *Giornale dell’Isola Catania*.

⁸¹ AFI PR 16 May 1930, *Il Popolo d’Italia*.

⁸² Bragaglia (1928: 149); cf. also Corsi (1939: 90), in which Dalcroze is openly acknowledged as the source for the development of the dancing chorus in the Syracusan performances.

⁸³ AFI PR 23 April 1930, *Corriere di Sicilia* — Catania.

⁸⁴ So the theatre critic Silvio D’Amico after seeing the scenery for the 1927 productions in Ostia (quoted in Angelini 1988: 206).

⁸⁵ Corsi (1939: 77).

synthetism', as Bonajuto called it, had created an environment much closer to the play's 'artistic reality'.⁸⁶

Following the same principle that had guided him in 1924, which involved the creation of an 'atmosphere' grasping the 'spirit' of the tragedy rather than inflexibly sticking to the ancient sources, Cambellotti gave his audience a truly 'tragic' palace: with its dark colours and massive structure, it resembled a 'huge monster which would return only corpses to sunlight', the press reported.⁸⁷ Indeed, the scenery also intentionally evoked some distant history as a faded memory of a long time ago. The press's most recurrent adjective in describing the scenery was 'primitive': the scenery was a 'real and architectonic representation of what a palace should have looked like in primitive times'.⁸⁸ Cambellotti had marked it with the 'coarse and savage features of the Bronze Age',⁸⁹ yet freely reinvented them in a work of true modernity.⁹⁰ The palace was finally rid of 'any marble, or pompous architecture, or even history, cut out by a barbarian with an axe'.⁹¹ The entire scenery was modern and ancient, recalling an indefinite time in the Bronze Age.⁹²

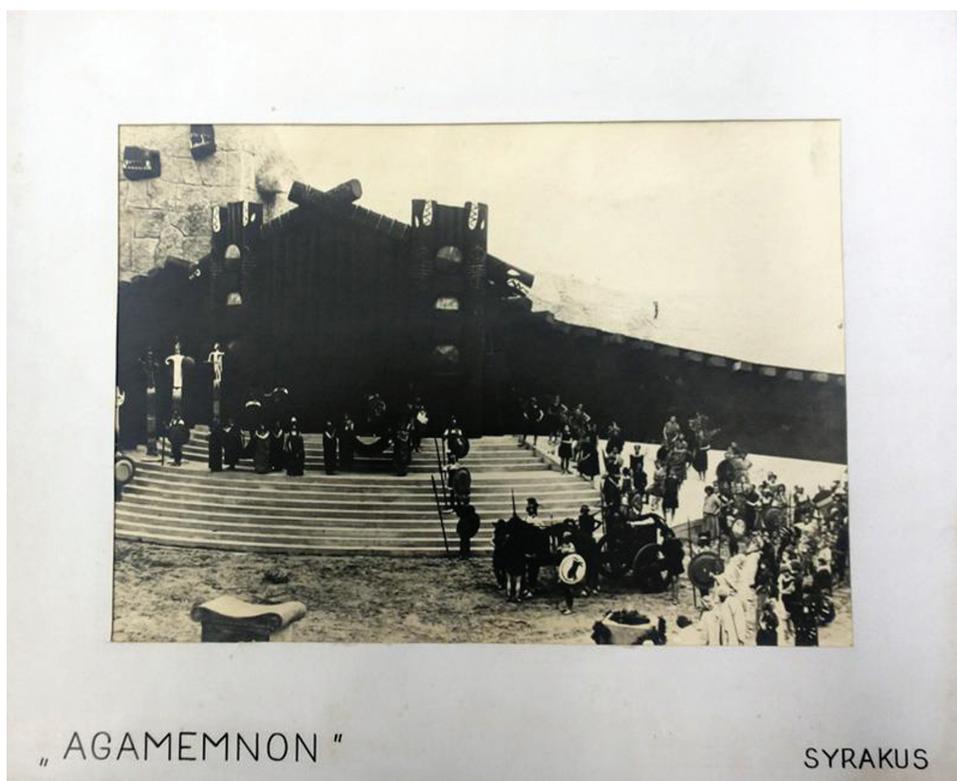


Figure 8. The set of the 1930 *Agamemnon* at Syracuse. Leyhausen-Spiess collection. APGRD.

⁸⁶ Bonajuto (1929: 7).

⁸⁷ Corsi (1939: 77).

⁸⁸ Mario Corsi in AFI PR 6 May 1930, *Secolo XX — Milano*.

⁸⁹ AFI PR 18 May 1930, *Secolo XX — Milano*.

⁹⁰ Corsi (1939: 78).

⁹¹ AFI PR 30 April 1930, *Telegrafo Livorno*.

⁹² For the use of the term 'archaic', cf. AFI PR 25 April 1930, *Corriere di Napoli* and 'Notiziario' in *Dioniso* (5) 307–12.

In an article in *Nuova Antologia* published in 1933, Pace strenuously defended the unhistorical traits of the 1930 backdrop as being the result of a process inherited from the ancients themselves, who ‘did not attempt any realism’, but adopted and endorsed ‘a perfect idealism’.⁹³ While grounding INDA’s now fully fledged Hellenic modernism, he also made sure that such aesthetic perfection would be ascribed to Fascism only, or better, to Fascism’s final inclusion of the Institute’s means and aims into its own. Arguing against archaeological reconstructions (perhaps hinting at previous productions), Pace spoke in favour of an aesthetics that translated into a ‘phantom of the ancient dream’, a ‘blast of classicism’: if, on the one hand, ‘the firm knowledge of [the tragedies being performed] or of the most pedantic problems of philology or archaeology around them constitutes the humble yet vital root’ of the classical performances, ‘this ought to remain sensibly hidden’; the scenery, dance and music of the spectacle should gush out from a ‘remote, dissimulated, yet powerful substrate of genuine knowledge’.⁹⁴ This knowledge should inspire the artists but in no way deter their creativity: everything in the performance should work together to shape a ‘vision’ of the ‘classical world’, one that went in the opposite direction of recreating the ancient (again, perhaps hinting at previous productions).⁹⁵

By 1939, no fewer than three books had been issued on the open-air theatre experience that strongly emphasized the modernity of the aesthetic means employed for the classical performances.⁹⁶ It was argued that INDA had achieved ‘new aesthetic criteria of modernity’,⁹⁷ whose main feature was to be rid of any archaeological reconstructions or academicism.⁹⁸ Indeed, it was argued, it was only through Fascism that this modernity could be attained: anything before 1929 was labelled an ‘attempt’, inevitably flagged as being ‘imperfect’ due to ‘modest means’ and animated by a ‘classical preoccupation’.⁹⁹ Only with the advent of Fascist control over the Institute was it deemed possible to relinquish the ideal of ‘faithful, scientific reconstruction’.¹⁰⁰

Along with perfecting the aesthetic means employed for the classical performances, in this new, alternative narrative, Fascism was also credited with having explored and utilized in full the means and possibilities of open-air theatre by opening it up to the people: the Italian theatre ‘has obeyed the canon of Fascist doctrine that it should move towards the people’, wrote Nicola De Pirro in 1938.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the early-century theatrical experiments aimed at ‘popularising’ theatre (such as those in France mentioned at the beginning of this article) and designed for ‘great crowds, for the big audience’ (à la Reinhardt), had merged into Fascism’s cultural and political revolution. The Greek theatre model, with its outdoor nature and large seating capacity, had been fully appropriated and its ‘properties’ extended to other forms of theatre, such as opera and musical performance. The supplanting of the previous modernity was now complete: a new, *alternative* modernity had been constructed in its stead, one that was astutely making use of the ancient as a capacious recipient of Fascism’s refashioning of Italy’s mythical past and construction of its future.

⁹³ Pace (1933: 86).

⁹⁴ Pace (1933: 89).

⁹⁵ Pace (1933: 91).

⁹⁶ Cf. Bonajuto (1929); De Pirro (1938); Corsi (1939).

⁹⁷ Bonajuto (1929: 70); cf. also Corsi (1939: 88).

⁹⁸ Cf. Bonajuto (1929: 70, 80); De Pirro (1938: 8, 12); Corsi (1939: 65).

⁹⁹ Corsi (1939: 28, 62, 68).

¹⁰⁰ Corsi (1939: 88).

¹⁰¹ De Pirro (1938: 15). Cf. also Scarpellini (1989: 114).

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at [Classical Receptions Journal](#) online.

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