

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

Introduction A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism

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The introduction to the special issue explores the central place of Greek theatre within the culture of Italian Fascism. Building on scholarship from the so-called cultural turn in the study of fascism, which variously identified fascism with a form of modernism, it demonstrates that a dialogue between modernism and classicism was fully at work in the performances of ancient drama occurring all over the Italian peninsula and in the colonies in North Africa. The term ‘Hellenic modernism’ is introduced here to underline the fusion of Greek theatre with distinctively modernist traits during the *ventennio* and provide an analytical tool for investigating the role of classical performances and spectacles within Fascism’s programme of cultural and national renewal.

Greek Theatre as a Modernist Utopia

The development of open-air theatre festivals across Europe in the early twentieth century was intertwined with an interest in reviving Greek antiquity, but it was also steeped in the sense of renewal characteristic of modernism. In Italy, extant Greek and Roman amphitheatres provided ideal settings for offering an ‘authentic’ representation of ancient drama by replicating the spatial conditions and aesthetic conventions of classical theatre. Since the nineteenth century, the academic disciplines of classical philology and archaeology had integrated Greco-Roman antiquity with national histories. Bound up with these philological and archaeological endeavours, theatrical performances in ancient sites turned the plays of the classical canon into a living tradition which could be woven into modern culture.¹ The reuse of ancient theatres entailed a turn towards the Greek texts, until now mediated

¹ On the staging of Greek tragedy in the open air and theatrical festivals, see Michelakis (2010).

through neoclassical reconfigurations and the classically inflected operas and ballets that had held sway since the eighteenth century. Initial attempts at performing Greek tragedy in Italy, starting with *Oedipus Tyrannus* in 1911 at the Roman Theatre of Fiesole on the occasion of the fourth conference of classical studies of the philological association *Atene e Roma* (Athens and Rome),² were followed by a staging of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* at the Ancient Theatre of Syracuse in 1914. This 1914 performance marked a pivotal moment for the production of Greek drama in Italy and had a marked effect on ancient drama festivals all over Europe.

The performance of classical drama at Syracuse (*Rappresentazioni classiche*) resumed after World War I and became a major artistic and cultural event, both in terms of its international appeal as well as its significance under Italian Fascism. Mussolini's state built on the Syracuse festival when it founded the *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico* (National Institute of Ancient Drama, INDA), which organised performances of ancient drama and other classical spectacles across Italy's ancient sites. For those involved in these productions, the revival of Greek drama heralded not a return to the past but rather the creation of new theatrical forms. In his *Il Teatro all'aperto* (Theatre in the Open Air) published in 1929, the official Secretary (1927–37)³ and subsequently Director of INDA (1937–49)⁴ Vincenzo Bonajuto juxtaposed the productions at Syracuse with the academicism and lack of originality of earlier open-air stagings of classical drama in Orange and Nîmes in France.⁵ Bonajuto took the opportunity to praise Italy's contribution in reviving the classics, comparing open-air theatre to the rebirth of art and sculpture in the Renaissance and classical literature within the humanist tradition. Syracuse, concluded Bonajuto, was the place that witnessed not only the birth of the Doric comedy of Epicharmus but also the rebirth of classical theatre 'through a form of art that can be called new and original'.⁶

The incorporation of these so-called 'classical performances' into the project of renewing theatre under Italian Fascism has broader implications for understanding the modernist thrust behind fascism's turn to classical antiquity. This attention to art and cultural production under fascist regimes — precipitated by the cultural turn in fascist studies in the 1990s — has challenged the widely held perception that fascism's reaction to the Enlightenment ideology of progress was essentially anti-modern and driven by atavistic impulses.⁷ In recent decades, scholars have instead underscored the radical elements within fascist cultures. Terms like Jeffrey Herf's 'reactionary modernism' and Roger Griffin's 'rooted modernism' and 'alternative modernity' have established analytical frameworks that foreground the permeability of the boundaries between fascism and modernism.⁸ As these studies have demonstrated, fascism embraced the transformative energies of the industrial age to realize a new society, whilst at the same time harking back to pre-modern social forms to conceptualize the nation as an organic unity. For Griffin, these opposing trends do not present a paradox; rather, they reveal fascism's urge to bring forth an alternative modernity, encompassing those aspects of modernism it deemed healthy:

[I]t is precisely *because* fascism was an intrinsically modernist phenomenon that it could host some forms of aesthetic modernism as consistent with the revolutionary cause it was

² Corsi (1939: 107).

³ See 'Memorandum' 27 November 1927 in Archivio Fondazione INDA (AFI) b. 57, fasc. 3 for the official appointment of Bonajuto as secretary of the institute.

⁴ See 'Memorandum' 22 June 1938 in AFI b. 115, fasc. 1, where he features as 'director of the institute'.

⁵ Bonajuto (1929: 73).

⁶ Bonajuto (1929: 71).

⁷ See Griffin's critique (2018) of liberal and Marxist approaches to fascism.

⁸ Herf (1984); Griffin (2007, 2016). See also Antliff (2002) on the relationship between fascism and modernist movements in the visual arts. Johnson (2015) discusses the turn to classical antiquity in modernist and fascist theatres, but he differentiates the universalist aesthetics of modernism from fascism's hereditary claims on classical antiquity. On Nazism's racial claim on classical Greece, see also Fischer-Lichte (2017: 143–81).

pursuing, *and* condemn others as decadent, as well as imparting a modernist dynamic to forms of cultural production normally associated with backward looking ‘reaction’ and nostalgia for past idylls.⁹

The above propositions are particularly valuable when applied to the uses of the classical tradition in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Shifting the emphasis from modernism to classicism, recent studies have offered a critical appraisal of the classicizing styles promoted by both regimes. Among the scholars who have shed new light on fascism’s classicism is Jan Nelis, who explains the worship of ancient Rome in Fascist Italy as a move to incorporate antiquity within a distinctively futural project.¹⁰ In this vein, Helen Roche argues that Italian Fascism and Nazism fused antiquity and modernity through a ‘classicizing modernism’ rather than a simply reactionary one.¹¹

Building on these debates, this special issue addresses a twofold question: in what sense did the use of Greek theatre in Fascist Italy work towards classicizing modernist aesthetics, and how did classical performances in this climate relate to the key preoccupations of modernism as an artistic and political phenomenon? The central place of Greek theatre within the culture of Italian Fascism demonstrates that a dialogue between modernism and classicism was fully at work. In this case, Italian Fascism did not reach back to the *Roman* past but to the Greek theatre models that had propelled modernist experimentation all over Europe in the preceding decades. The term ‘Hellenic modernism’ introduced in this special issue not only underlines this fusion of classical theatre with distinctively modernist traits during the *ventennio* but also provides an analytical tool for investigating the central role of Greek theatre within Fascism’s programme of cultural and national renewal. Classical performances under Mussolini strove to reinvest modernity with spiritual and communal qualities derived from Greek antiquity; in doing so, they engaged with earlier and contemporary attempts at reinventing Greek theatre for the modern era but gave them a decidedly futural dynamic. Like several modernist movements since the early twentieth century, Italian Fascism (and National Socialism) treated classical Greece as a regenerative force that could remedy the perceived crisis in the modern world. Under Mussolini, Greek theatre not only provided the means of renewing theatre itself but was also used to usher in the new era of Fascism. The Regime’s aspirations to recreate theatre as a mass, communal and ritualistic event found their perfect embodiment in productions of Greek drama and other classical performances in the open air. At the same time, these performances helped to imagine a reborn past projected into the present and the future which underpinned Fascism’s political utopianism. Olga Taxidou uses the term ‘modernist Hellenism’¹² in discussing this turn to classical Greece that shaped the utopian visions of theatrical modernism in the twentieth century. It can be argued that Italian Fascism assimilated the aesthetic ideals of modernism into the political project of national regeneration. In this sense, modernist Hellenism here morphed into a Hellenic modernism that integrated Greek antiquity into Fascism’s alternative modernity.

Since their inception in the late nineteenth century, stagings of Greek drama in ancient theatres had been perceived as a revival of a religious form of performance, a feeling that was intensified by the ‘sacredness’ of ancient sites and the festive character of the events themselves. The efforts to stage Greek drama in the open air represented an expansive search for transcendence in a secular age. Nietzsche’s proclamations in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) are particularly pertinent here: Nietzsche regarded the rationalism permeating the post-classical world as hostile to tragic ecstasy, grounded in the dissolution of individual boundaries and submission to the collective. But the modernist anguish expressed in Nietzsche’s treatise also included the affirmation that tragedy could be reborn through

⁹ Griffin (2007: 33) (original emphases). Also Griffin (2016).

¹⁰ Nelis (2014).

¹¹ Roche (2018: 22).

¹² Taxidou (2021).

Wagnerian opera. By bringing Greek theatre back to life, performances in ancient sites gave audiences uplifting communal experiences that could counteract modernity's lack of religious anchoring. In that regard, these performances can be seen as part of the modernist currents that Griffin describes as 'temporalized utopias constructed to immunize society against decadence and the terror of nihilism'.¹³ These endeavours were thus profoundly modernist, in that they strove to re-enchant the world and re-sacralise time and space, which modernity had stripped of their sacred aura. Both the use of ancient sites as well as the festive context of the performances were key to redefining temporal and spatial frames, allowing an escape from capitalist labour time as well as from linear notions of progress. The core features of these performances — as a rebirth of a ritualistic form of theatre and spiritual experience for modern audiences — resonated strongly with what fascist regimes were seeking to create in the form of mythic narratives and political rituals. Therefore, the study of these performances can help us understand how theatrical production under fascism participated in creating a secular religion.¹⁴

The interest that fascist regimes took in the production of Greek drama did not stem from a nostalgic hankering but rather from the same modernist ideas that had inspired efforts to reinvent Greek theatre since the second half of the nineteenth century — from the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* to D'Annunzio's modern tragedy — and the first attempts to hold theatrical festivals in the open air. The stagings of Greek drama in Syracuse organised by INDA continued into the *ventennio*, securing substantial support from the Fascist state. These stagings intersected with the experimentations of the theatrical avant-garde in providing the basis for developing new types of popular and mass theatre.

At this point, it is vital to take into account the significant commonalities between avant-garde experimentations and visions for a Fascist theatre. What Fascism had in common with the early-twentieth-century avant-garde was an investment in developing theatrical models that broke away from realist tradition as well as from commercialized bourgeois art. Mussolini's Theatre of the Masses (and *for* the Masses)¹⁵ was a type of popular theatre meant to rekindle public interest by offering a quasi-religious collective experience. Most importantly, the Theatre of the Masses was not conceived as a propaganda tool but rather as an instrument of mass agitation. The cultural and political efficacy of the physical theatre envisioned by Mussolini rested upon its massive dimensions, which could allegedly seat 20,000 spectators. But the large dimensions were relevant not only to its character as a theatre 'for the people'; they were also aimed at recreating theatre as ritual. This becomes apparent when looking at the new theatrical venue that engineer Gaetano Ciocca designed for Mussolini's Theatre of the Masses: a grand Futuristic space merging the Greek amphitheatre and the Roman arena. A closer comparison with other new theatre spaces suggests that Ciocca was not the only one to turn to classical antiquity. Several avant-garde movements and practitioners — however dissimilar in aesthetic and political terms — looked back to Greek theatre when developing theatrical spaces that could mould audiences into new configurations.

Fascism went on to use theatre's potential to shape collective identity after the politicized theatres of the avant-garde had introduced new performative modalities for engaging the masses. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the revolt against bourgeois culture had manifested itself in different efforts to create a people's theatre. An influential model was that of Max Reinhardt's Theatre of the Five Thousand, which notably staged *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1910) and the *Oresteia* (1911).¹⁶ The large crowds at Reinhardt's stagings

¹³ Griffin (2007: 97).

¹⁴ Gentile (1996). On the relationship between theatre and ritualism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, see Berghaus (1996). On the efforts to reinvent theatre as a ritual within political cultures and modernist theatres in the first half of the twentieth century, see Fischer-Lichte (2005).

¹⁵ Schnapp (1996: 31ff.).

¹⁶ On Reinhardt's performances, see Fischer-Lichte (2005: 46–68) and (2017: 91–141) and Macintosh (2009: 102–29).

necessitated the use of unconventional theatrical venues, such as the arena at the Munich *Volksfestspiele* and the Circus Schumann in Berlin, which was later rebuilt by Hans Poelzig as the *Großes Schauspielhaus*, an expressionist building incorporating elements of a circus arena into a closed space. Similarly, plans for alternative spaces developed by the political avant-garde offered spatial arrangements that could integrate the individual spectator into a community. Such examples were the Total Theatre, developed by Walter Gropius for Piscator's Epic Theatre, which blended the circus arena, the Greek proscenium theatre, and the contemporary deep stage, whilst also incorporating the technological advancements of film. Yet whilst both Ciocca's Theatre of the Masses and Gropius's Total Theatre were never built, the physical materiality of Italy's ancient theatres gave a concrete form to the aspirations to reinvent theatre for the popular masses.

The strong predilection for Greek drama in Italy presents an intriguing peculiarity when considered alongside other classical or open-air spectacles promoted by the Nazis or para-fascist regimes in other European countries. Whilst Roman plays took precedence during Franco's dictatorship in Spain, the festival of Syracuse retained its focus on Greek drama.¹⁷ Italy's case also contrasted with Nazi Germany, where ancient theatre provided the model for the completely new type of choric drama called *Thingspiel*, designed for open-air performance. Unlike cinematic uses of antiquity under Mussolini, classical texts were not subjected to propagandistic manipulation, even though ideological readings of the plays did occur. Classical performances did not directly contribute to reinforcing the myth of *romanità*; nonetheless, they represented a regenerative side to modernism, and, as such, aligned with the revolutionary drive of fascist movements to transform culture and society. At the same time, they refashioned modernism, injecting it with a classicizing streak.

Classical performances during the *ventennio fascista* offer a vantage point from which to unravel the entangled histories of fascism, modernism and classicism. By focusing on the staging of Greek drama in open-air theatres and sites, this special issue seeks to present Greek drama as a key facet of fascist modernism. In addition to fostering a better understanding of Fascist cultural production, the value of classical performances as a field of scholarly enquiry is that they shed new light on the fusion of classicism and modernism under Italian Fascism, whilst also allowing us to trace the aesthetic practices and ideas that continued to inform approaches to Greek drama in the post-war period. With these in mind, we shall now turn to examine the creative visions and political ideals that coalesced in the reinvention of Greek theatre under Mussolini.

A (Greek) Theatre for the Masses

On 8–14 October 1934, some of the most prominent figures in twentieth-century European theatre gathered in Rome for a conference strongly supported by Mussolini and organised by the successful playwright and theatre experimentalist Luigi Pirandello together with Silvio D'Amico, soon-to-be president of the Italian Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (founded by the Fascist state a few years later) and a pivotal player in the internationalization of Italian theatre before, during, and after Fascism. *Il Teatro Drammatico* (Dramatic Theatre) was the topic chosen that year by the Alessandro Volta Foundation as representative of the vast area of study that went under the umbrella of *Lettere* (Letters).¹⁸ The conference, hosted by Italy's Royal Academy, featured artists like Edward Gordon Craig, Walter Gropius, Aleksandr Jakovlevič Tairov, Jacques Copeau, and Bernard Shaw.

¹⁷ Performances in the ancient theatres of modern Greece also maintained a focus on Greek drama, but this was in accordance with the dominant narrative of historical continuity between ancient and modern Greece. Notably, the first use of the Ancient Theatre at Epidaurus in the modern era occurred in 1938, during the para-fascist dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas. See Ioannidou (2011).

¹⁸ See Reale Accademia d'Italia (1935); Fried (2014); Gaborick (2021: 230–9).

The Italian cohort had summoned its most important theatre makers and critics for the occasion. In addition to Pirandello and D'Amico, invitees included: Guido Salvini, one of the foremost theatre directors in Italy and a close collaborator of Reinhardt's when mounting his productions in Italy;¹⁹ Ettore Romagnoli, philologist and artistic director of INDA between 1914 and 1927; Massimo Bontempelli, theatre critic and close collaborator of Pirandello; and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of the Futurist movement. The conference opened with the famous challenge that Mussolini had thrown down to theatre makers and artists at the fiftieth anniversary of the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers on 28 February 1933:

We have to prepare a theatre of the masses, a theatre that can hold fifteen or twenty thousand people. [...] The current paucity of seats creates the necessity for high-priced tickets, which deters people from going. Instead, theatre, to which I accord more educational effectiveness than cinema, should be destined for the people; plays should reach out to them as they want. A play should stir up the greatest collective passions [of humankind] and be inspired by a sense of conscious and profound humanity [...]. Only by finding a dramatic expression for such collective passions will you see the crowds at the theatres grow.²⁰

Il Duce was addressing a crisis that some theatre critics, including D'Amico,²¹ had been complaining about for some time; with his speech, he was addressing this crisis by proposing that theatre should go back to including the masses, both physically ('a theatre that can hold fifteen or twenty thousand people') and conceptually ('a play should stir up the greatest collective passions [of humankind] and be inspired by a sense of conscious and profound humanity'). But the 'theatre of twenty thousand' was a historically recognized theatre that had already been 'unearthed' and put to use at the end of the nineteenth century, and was now being incorporated into Fascism's programmatic refashioning of Italy's past as well as into the configuration of its future renewal. Greek theatre offered a uniquely 'collective' model;²² Romagnoli argued at the conference that it was this kind of theatre that had thrived under his direction in Syracuse from 1914 to 1927.²³ Its architecture had merged into Gropius' plans for his Total Theatre, presented in 1927 in Berlin for the first time and now again in Rome, as well as into Ciocca's mentioned Greek-inspired form of theatre; as Ciocca boasted during his own intervention at the Volta Conference, 'the theatre of the masses is Greek theatre that rises up again'.²⁴ In a similar manner, and only a few months after Mussolini, newly appointed Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment Joseph Goebbels spoke of 'a theatre of fifty thousand and a hundred thousand'.²⁵

¹⁹ Salvini was the assistant director of Max Reinhardt's production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the theatre festival *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino* in Campo San Trovaso in 1933; he was also the assistant director of Reinhardt's production of Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* on 17 January 1934 at the Excelsior Theatre in Milan. Salvini was later entrusted with teaching theatre direction at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts between 1938 and 1944, after Tatiana Pavlova. For further information on Salvini's importance in and for Italian theatre in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as about his active involvement with establishing theatre direction in Italy, see De Luca and Vanni (2005).

²⁰ Mussolini (1951–63). All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated.

²¹ See D'Amico (1931).

²² As stated by the architect Ciocca in his speech at the Volta conference (Ciocca 1935: 190): 'Already in ancient Greece, theatre had subsumed collective functions'.

²³ Romagnoli (1935).

²⁴ Ciocca (1935: 190).

²⁵ Quoted in Fisher-Lichte (2017: 143). On mass theatres in proletarian movements and Nazi culture, see also Eichberg (1977) and Fischer-Lichte (2005).

²⁶ On the restoration of ancient sites and the creation of new ones for staging theatrical productions in Italy and the colonies, see Di Martino (forthcoming 2024).

By the time of the Volta conference in 1934, as many as 11 locations hosted Greek and Roman (or Greco-Roman-inspired) drama.²⁶ Whilst the Roman theatres of Fiesole, Gubbio, and Ostia, as well as the Roman Forum and the Greek theatre of Syracuse, had already been brought back into use at the beginning of the century, other venues were purpose-built, such as the Greco-Roman-inspired theatre of Licinium in Erba — inaugurated in 1923 with a production of Vittorio Alfieri's *Oreste*. Others were being restored or reconfigured to host theatre productions and/or Greco-Roman-inspired religious ceremonies (like the Panathenaic Games in Paestum in 1936). The ancient theatres in Taormina and Italian-controlled Pula were inaugurated in 1928 and 1932, respectively; the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza launched its 'classical performances' season with a production of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* in 1934 with classical philologist Manara Valgimigli as the main organizer and Salvini as director; and the ancient sites of Pompeii, Agrigento, and Paestum reopened in 1927, 1928 and 1932, respectively. Three years after Volta, in Italian-controlled Libya, the Roman theatre of Sabratha was brought back to life with a production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* followed by *Iphigenia in Tauris* in the following year, both directed by Salvini.²⁷

But the Greek theatre 'model' — that is, its architecture, its outdoor features, the festival surrounding it and its appeal to, as well as inclusion of, the 'people' — was not limited to the performance of the Greco-Roman classics: the 1930s saw a significant rise in the popularity of outdoor venues for festivals of various genres, especially music, with notable productions leaving their mark on the development of Italian theatre, including Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Copeau's *The Mystery of Saint Uliva* in 1933 at the *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino* festival.²⁸ In 1939, no fewer than 347 festivals took place in 42 outdoor venues, boasting a turnout of 1,749,272.²⁹

Research in this area has mostly focused on the cult of *romanità*, and on Fascism's use of antiquity in archaeological, architectural, and literary endeavours, overlooking the importance of not only Greek theatre but of theatre more generally in this period. Even when solely focusing on theatre, as Patricia Gaborick has recently argued in her 2021 *Mussolini's Theatre*, attention has been given to Fascism's reorganization of theatre's internal structure rather than its productions.³⁰ When attention has been directed to analysing the plays and performances, scholarship has mainly concerned itself with spotting traces of Fascist ideology and propaganda within them rather than considering them from an artistic perspective.³¹ But, as Gaborick documents, 'propaganda is too simplistic a word to account for what Mussolini and his hierarchs were doing' in the theatrical realm;³² the well-established view that Fascism's cultural production (in theatre especially) merged into a general 'aestheticization of political life'³³ is similarly too simplistic. The Regime's use of such aesthetics was 'strategic', 'conscientious' and 'beyond the tactical', as Gaborick convincingly shows throughout her book;³⁴ theatre was the preferred artistic form whereby the new Italian could be educated in a 'sense of conscious and profound humanity', as in Mussolini's words

²⁷ All of the data herein included refer to the table drawn up by Di Martino and published in the [Supplementary Appendix](#). On this particular production in Sabratha, see Di Martino (forthcoming 2024).

²⁸ See, amongst others, Angelini (1988: 169–74).

²⁹ Corsi (1939: 309).

³⁰ See, for example, Scarpellini (1989) and Pedullà (1994), amongst others.

³¹ See Schnapp (1996), Johnson (2015) and Gaborick (2021: 265, fn 54) for a few exceptions to the rule.

³² Gaborick (2021: 13); see also Witt (2001: 30).

³³ This expression is taken from Walter Benjamin's famous 1935 essay titled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (now in Benjamin 2008: 28).

³⁴ Gaborick (2021: 19), where she also introduces the expression 'strategic aestheticism', which she employs throughout the book, supporting it with examples.

above, and elevated spiritually so as to achieve ‘national regeneration’, to quote Emilio Gentile.³⁵

Not only is a focus on the role of Greek theatre under Fascism a timely step forward into filling a gap in classical reception, theatre and fascism studies;³⁶ it also resituates Greek theatre at the centre of twentieth-century modernist theatrical engagements. Taxidou’s (2021) *Greek Tragedy and Modernist Performance* has already made significant advances in this direction by arguing for Greek tragedy’s centrality in modernist experimentation, employing and discussing key terms such as ‘performance’ and ‘theatricality’,³⁷ but a history of modernism’s engagements with theatre in Italy and in relationship with Fascism is yet to be written.

The Greek Theatre Model and Its Place and Task in Fascist Theatre

On 17 May 1924, in a letter to poet, playwright, and theatre critic Fausto Maria Martini, Count Mario Tommaso Gargallo (a Sicilian aristocrat and the primary financial sponsor and promoter of the first classical performances at the ancient theatre of Syracuse) reported back on a personal meeting he had with Mussolini on the latter’s visit to Syracuse a few days previously, where he had also sat in the audience to watch *Seven Against Thebes* and *Antigone*. Il Duce was so struck by what he saw that he (reportedly) told Gargallo that:

A National Institute of Drama must rise because these performances are too beautiful. Yet, such an Institute should not limit itself to performing Greek and Roman tragedies only but, though making these the basis of its activity, should also include modern works that revolve around or will revolve around Greek and Roman myths.³⁸

Roughly a year later, on 7 August 1925, the Committee for the Classical Performances, with Gargallo as president and Romagnoli as artistic director, which had mounted the first classical performances in the ancient theatre of Syracuse, was given its long-awaited official recognition and support from the government when it became the National Institute of Ancient Drama (INDA). The committee now comprised 14 members, amongst whom five were named directly by the government.³⁹ With the ministerial decree of 17 February 1927, the Institute became an important tool that went far beyond organizing local productions of Greek drama in Syracuse, just as Mussolini had hoped: with the support of Romagnoli, who acted as an intermediary between the Minister of Education Pietro Fedeli and INDA’s Committee, the Institute was now responsible for the production of Greek and Roman drama and Greco-Roman-inspired drama all over Italy.⁴⁰

³⁵ Gentile (1997): as argued here, the myth of national regeneration was not born with Fascism but had come out of the *Risorgimento*, was consolidated through the Great War, and then fully integrated into the new illiberal and authoritarian politics of Fascism, which ‘proclaimed itself the only authentic movement of the new Italians regenerated by the war’ (1997: 41).

³⁶ Gaborick only briefly mentions the activities of the National Institute of Ancient Drama (on which, see further below), which was responsible for mounting the majority of the classically inspired performances under Fascism (2021: 245–52), but describes in detail Renato Simoni and Guido Salvini’s production of *Oedipus Tyrannus* at Sabratha in 1937 (248–52).

³⁷ Taxidou (2021: 19).

³⁸ AFI b 42, fasc. 5.

³⁹ Cf. the Royal Decree dated 7 August 1925 in ‘Fondo Romagnoli’ at *Biblioteca Civica ‘Tartarotti’*, Rovereto.

⁴⁰ See AFI b. 57, fasc. 5 for the modifications to the statute approved by INDA’s committee, and an undated letter, probably sent in February 1927, from Romagnoli to Gargallo, where he reports to ‘have personally agreed on the form of the modifications to be made to the statute with the Minister of Education Fedeli’, which had probably already reached the Count by the time of his letter (see in AFI b. 59, fasc. 1).

It was not long before another decree, issued on 2 March 1929, eventually sanctioned INDA's direct dependence on the state: Article Two provided for INDA's offices to move to Rome and Article Five provided that the Prime Minister select the President and that the general Director of Antiquity and Fine Arts, together with the Director of Dramatic Arts from the Ministry of Education, be part of INDA's Governing Council.⁴¹ Gargallo was removed from office in the summer of that same year and Biagio Pace was installed in his place. At the time, Pace was a professor of Archaeology and the History of Classical Art in Pisa and, most importantly, had just been re-elected as a member of the Chamber for Sicily in the National Fascist Party. Romagnoli, who had been removed from INDA's artistic directorship a few years back over disagreements with the council,⁴² was made a member of the Royal Academy of Italy in the same year, and continued his public literary activity. Retracing INDA's progression towards state dependence is important to understanding the extent to which Greek theatre was implicated in the Regime's plans to make theatre *the* preferred pedagogical and artistic tool to educate the new Italians.

Such preference was very clear in the narrative of spiritual value that was being constructed around the Greek theatre model. In the aforementioned *Il Teatro all'aperto*, Bonajuto describes the classical performances in Syracuse as having high ethical and pedagogical value, as well as, and perhaps because of, the theatre's aesthetic and artistic value. The ethical value consisted first of all of the 'religious character' of the plays themselves, which, though different from modern religiosity, expressed a 'religious principle which was not formal and thus contingent, but universal and thus eternal'. Such 'religious principle' was to be found in the 'presence of a divine will to which everything else is subordinated'; the plays represented the 'contrast between the limited will of humans [...] with this Being'. But it was the heroic stature that tragic characters rose to in front of this divine 'Being' that demonstrated 'the ethical value of the Syracusan performances' for contemporary audiences: it was this 'transfiguration of passions' evident in the heroes of Greek tragedy that moved spectators to 'feel life not in their everyday and meagre reality, but in [life's] high moral meaning and eternal, immutable drama'.⁴³

In his 1939 *Il Teatro all'aperto in Italia*, which retraces and documents all forms of outdoor theatre during the *ventennio*, Mario Corsi, the head of the Press Office of the Theatre Directorate from 1935 and auditor at INDA's committee meetings from 1937,⁴⁴ strongly concurred with Bonajuto. The heroes' urge to 'improve on and fulfil themselves' characterized the 'spiritual education' imparted by Greek tragedy to the Greeks at the time, and contemporary audiences now.⁴⁵ But the plays' content was only one aspect: it was within the framework of outdoor theatre that this poetic spirit could reach out to the 'masses' and fulfil its function:

By bringing the great masses out of a theatre's closed doors [...] so that they can breathe in this atmosphere of art and prodigy, one achieves [...] also a political idea, because enticing a heroic sense of life in the crowds' souls heightens the spiritual values, values which, as in ancient Greece, need to be looked after with much care; these represent and will always represent the indomitable forces of a Nation that is willing to move forward.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Art. 5 also stated that the Ministry of Education should supervise the annual programme of the Institute's activities. The actual document is in AFI b. 67, fasc.1; a summary was published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on 12 April 1929 (cf. *Dioniso* 1929, 214).

⁴² See AFI b. 59, fasc. 1 especially and Di Martino (2019: 193–5).

⁴³ Bonajuto (1929: 104).

⁴⁴ His presence is requested on 22 May 1936 in one of INDA's committee meetings and is recorded beginning on 26 February 1937 (cf. 'Memorandum' 22 May 1936 in AFI b. 96, fasc. 1 and 'Memorandum' 26 February 1937 in AFI b. 115, fasc. 1).

⁴⁵ Corsi (1939: 101).

⁴⁶ Corsi (1939: 102). See also Bonajuto (1929: 105).

Bonajuto hoped that this form of theatre would contribute to the renewal of Italy's own theatre; almost a decade later, in his 1938 *Teatro per il popolo*, head of the Theatre Directorate Nicola De Pirro argued that such renewal had indeed been achieved, and that Italian theatre had come back to being a 'festival-like and intimate communion of the people' and thus returned to its 'mythical and eternal values'.⁴⁷

This emphasis on the ethical and pedagogical value of Greek theatre was in line with Mussolini's and the Regime's belief that theatre was a 'spiritually uplifting' art form⁴⁸ which would contribute to what Emilio Gentile has called Fascism's 'spiritual revolution' — one that would be 'inspired by a total conception of life'⁴⁹ which the totalitarian Regime claimed to have brought about. The spiritual elevation implicit in theatre, and (Greek) tragedy in particular, as well as its return to serving as a collective rite, were concepts once again markedly derived from the works of Nietzsche and D'Annunzio (both of whom fascinated Mussolini). The works of Romain Rolland and Wagner likewise grounded early twentieth-century avant-garde calls for a cultural and spiritual revolution and for modernist experiments in the performing arts, dance in particular.⁵⁰ These concepts, experiments and experiences were now being repurposed and incorporated into Fascism's all-encompassing revolution.

In order to understand fully the extent of this, the contributions in this special issue make ample use of and reference to scholarship that falls under the so-called 'cultural turn' in fascist studies, which has recently shifted to analysing the particular relationship that the different national variants of fascism had with modernism.⁵¹ They also draw on, as well as contribute to, the field of modernist studies, moving away from strictly textual narratives to allow for the inclusion and analysis of theatrical experimentation as an essential part of the discipline.⁵² This issue builds on recent scholarship concerning fascism's recourse to the classical past as central to the modernist project, widening its scope to include the reception of Greek antiquity, and particularly of the Greek theatre model, in the shaping of theatre under Italian Fascism.⁵³

Greek theatre was not merely tangential to Fascism's well-known appropriation of antiquity but played an integral part in both the Regime's reconstruction of Italy's mythological past and in moulding its forward-looking and modernist renewal. In other words, this recourse to Greek theatre contributed significantly to what Griffin has termed Fascism's 'rooted modernism', and what, in the theatrical experiments analysed in this issue, (aesthetically) translated into a 'Hellenic modernism'.⁵⁴ As will be seen, the classical performances produced all over Italy in the *ventennio* strongly featured in the Regime's programmatic and strategic repurposing of Greek theatre with markedly modernist traits.

In conclusion, the Greek theatre model — that is, its outdoor setting, communion with the people, full valorization and combination of massive scenery constructions, dance, music and poetry — was perfectly suited to elevating the new Italian spiritually while also educating their taste and sensibility. The combination of the (Hellenic) 'classical' with the 'modern' — or rather the re-configuration of the past into Italy's future — had found in Greek theatre its conceptual and concrete model.

⁴⁷ De Pirro (1938: 16).

⁴⁸ Gaborick (2021: 27).

⁴⁹ Gentile (1996: 39).

⁵⁰ See Witt (2001: 8ff.; 32–88); Gaborick (2021: 30–59, and 32 in particular); Taxidou (2021: 34ff.).

⁵¹ See especially Herf (1984); Gentile (1990, 2003); Sternhell (1994); Griffin (2007, 2016).

⁵² See Kastleman et al. (2019); Mao (2021); Taxidou (2021).

⁵³ See Falasca-Zamponi (1997); Wyke and Biddiss (1999); Silk (2005); Arthurs (2012); Nelis (2011) and (2014); Kallis (2014); Johnson (2015); Roche and Demetriou (2018).

⁵⁴ Griffin (2016: 126, 2007).

Contributions

The contributions to this special issue explore the relationship between fascist modernism and ancient Greek theatre revivals through a multidisciplinary approach, offering a wide perspective within the fields of classics, theatre and performance studies, sociology, cultural history and memory studies. The first two contributions (Di Martino and Ioannidou) analyse Italian Fascism's approach to classical performances within the ideology and the cultural propaganda of the Regime. The chapters by Troiani, Casali and Veroli focus on specific aspects of Greek drama production (direction, musical composition and dance, respectively). Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's conclusions address the coexistence of history and memory in Fascism's project of socio-political renewal.

Giovanna Di Martino's contribution discusses the aesthetic trajectory followed by INDA from its very first engagements with Greek tragedy in 1914 to the first performance with Biagio Pace as the new president of the Institute in the 1930s. The aesthetic and cultural shift of INDA over the years is analysed through the lens of the productions of Aeschylus' tragedies in Syracuse; that is, the *Agamemnon* in 1914, the *Libation Bearers* in 1921, the *Seven Against Thebes* in 1924 and the *Agamemnon* again in 1930. It first identifies the cultural and theatrical movements that influenced the beginnings of, and first aesthetic choices employed in, the Syracusan productions of Greek drama with late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century engagements with ancient Greek theatre in France (particularly Roman Rolland's *Le Théâtre du Peuple* and the productions of Greek drama at the Theatre of Orange); Germany (particularly Wagner, Nietzsche, and Reinhardt's *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oresteia*); and Italy (particularly Gabriele D'Annunzio's Latin-Mediterranean theatre). It then analyses the achievement of certain aesthetics over the years in the scenery, costumes, and dramaturgical choices regarding the staging of the chorus(es); these effectively comprised a Hellenic modernism that Pace and his team implemented and eventually passed off as theirs in a re-configuration of the already existing modernity that would afford to Fascism the achievement of such modernist aesthetics in staging classical drama.

In Eleftheria Ioannidou's contribution, the assimilation of classical antiquity into the modernizing project of Fascism is investigated in relation to the controversy over the staging of ancient Greek dramas in Syracuse that was instigated by the Futurist movement in Sicily in 1921 and continued into the following decade. In line with Futurism's aesthetic and ideological programme of breaking with dramatic and literary tradition, the Sicilian Futurists proposed a festival of folk drama at the Greek theatre of Syracuse with the aim of appealing to the local population and investing in young playwrights. Their ideas were reiterated in the 1923 manifesto that Marinetti addressed to the Italian government. Although Mussolini showed interest in the proposal, the plan of holding a contest of modern drama at the Greek theatre did not materialize. Their antagonism towards the favoured model of the rising Fascist age notwithstanding, Futurist theatres and the classical performances at Syracuse converged in their opposition to the 'psychological' aesthetic of bourgeois theatre and in the attention to production of 'popular' and, at the same time, avant-garde performances to be staged in open-air venues.

Sara Troiani's contribution focuses on the theatrical aesthetics developed by the classicist Romagnoli, in his productions of ancient dramas as artistic director and official translator of the classical texts staged both at the Greek theatre in Syracuse and in other open-air theatres and archaeological venues. The core of Romagnoli's revivals of the ancient performance lay in 'artistic Hellenism', an approach to the study of classical culture which aimed at popularizing Greek and Roman heritage by means of essays and translations targeting a non-specialist audience, as well as the staging of ancient dramas adapted to a modern sensitivity. The ancient *chorodidaskalos* — a professional figure skilled in composing poetry and music, choreography, scenotechnique, and training actors — offered Romagnoli a model to follow: managing the different elements of theatrical production, he foreshadowed the transition towards director-centred theatre in Italy. After his dismissal from INDA's artistic

direction in 1927, he independently produced classical performances, also trying to found a 'Fascist Institute of Classical Drama' with the aim to compete with the 'new' performances at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse in the early 1930s.

In her contribution, Giovanna Casali analyses the musical compositions of the 1921–39 INDA productions, highlighting the pivotal role played by music in the revival of Greek drama during the *ventennio*. Until 1927, the fruitful artistic partnership between Romagnoli and the Sicilian composer Giuseppe Mulè was based on phylogenetic theories on the derivation of Sicilian folk music from the ancient Greek tradition: Mulè thus tried to evoke an archaic sense by reworking ancient Greek musical fragments with Sicilian folk songs, obtaining aesthetic outcomes that were labelled as 'modern' by the critics. In the 1930s, the new INDA direction diverged from that followed by Mulè and Romagnoli. Their desire to address the Italian mass audience through theatre music led the composers — namely Ildebrando Pizzetti, Gianfranco Malipiero, and Riccardo Zandonai — to refuse archaeological reconstructions in favour of modernist (and nationalistic) criteria and, at the same time, to celebrate and emphasize the heroic values embedded within the ancient plays (resonant with Fascism's cultural politics).

Patrizia Veroli deals with the dance aesthetic and teaching methods of Eugenia Borisenko, known by the stage name of Jia Ruskaja — a Russian *émigré* actress and dancer who, from the late 1920s–40s, was especially successful in staging classical dance all over Italy. Strongly connected to the Fascist establishment, she managed to obtain the support of the government to subsidize her all-female dance schools in Milan and was later entrusted with the direction of Rome's *Regia Scuola di Danza* (Royal School for Dance). Though initially a follower of modern dance and strongly opposed to ballet, a theatrical genre which was considered the glory of the country, Ruskaja finished by accepting and introducing it into her educational reform, based on a dance aesthetic where Graeco-Roman imagery mingled with traditional ballet's values and style. Applied to the routine of her students, this practice favoured bodily control and a very limited stress on individual expression, in order to reproduce an idea of 'Mediterranean-ness', linked with 'peacefulness' and serenity, that fully mirrored the Fascist Regime's gender politics for the Italian woman.

In her Afterword, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi underlines the dichotomies embedded in Fascism's mythical appropriation of the past. The Regime was interested in restoring the past as a living object, through the appeal to shared memories based on common myths, beliefs, and values that were, however, far less reliable than history. By the merging of 'profane' history and 'sacred' memory, as it clearly emerges from the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution organised to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the revolution, Fascism's cultural propaganda fostered the revival of ancient Greek theatre as a powerful means of forging a community with shared ancestral roots and, simultaneously, placing it at the centre of the revolutionary changes that were underway.

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at CRJ. Section 1 of the introduction is by Eleftheria Ioannidou, Sections 2 and 3 are by Giovanna Di Martino, and Section 4 is by Sara Troiani.

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