Patricia Gaborik’s book *Mussolini’s Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Politics and Theatre* is one of the first attempts to give a glimpse for a non-Italian speaker into a rich and controversial history of Italian theatre during the years when Italian Duce Benito Mussolini took political power over the country and guided it towards a new fascist future. This journey lasted from 1922 when Mussolini became the Prime Minister and ended in 1945, with the assassination of the Duce. The period of more than twenty years, known in Italian as the *ventennio*, reveals a turbulent and fascinating theatre life that, as Gaborik proves, merited a more profound analysis than it had received until now. The researcher’s book appeared in May 2021, and in December that year became the Bridge Book Award American winner for non-fiction. Mussolini’s story as a theatre man is divided into five chapters. The chapters reveal different theatre facets that the Duce was interested in, namely criticism, drama writing, censorship, and the work of the impresario. To describe Mussolini as an impresario, the author dedicates not one, but two chapters of the book, thus probably unconsciously accentuating the main role the Duce had to play for the Italian theatre in the *ventennio*.

The book starts with the chapter entitled *Mussolini the Critic*. However, the term *critic* is used here in a more abstract than concrete way. The reader is acquainted with teachers and influencers who helped Mussolini to form his taste for theatre. These include German playwrights Friedrich Schiller and Wolfgang Goethe, who are just briefly mentioned together with Nietzsche at the beginning of the chapter; then the Duce’s contemporaries, Italians Gabriele D’Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello and the Irish-English George Bernard Shaw are abundantly presented in several sub-chapters. The Duce’s relationship with the “triumvirate” is passionate and inspiring. Gaborik describes it in detail and with great attention, thus allowing the reader to discover the complexity of the rapport. One common
The denominator was essential for it, namely the idealism which led these men to the accomplishment of changes in the existing social order.

The second chapter, dedicated to Mussolini as an impresario, depicts his idea of the Art Theatre. This consisted of developing a new concept for theatre architecture and space. With the example of Pirandello’s activities as capocomico of Teatro d’Arte the author tries to reveal Mussolini’s theatre vision – not a means of propaganda, but a tool for education and transmission of artistically grounded political messages for national awakening. Although the Duce supported theatre experiments, especially those of Anton Giulio Bragaglia, he was more interested in theatre’s ability to sustain itself financially. However, theatre experimentation was not the right means to attract big audiences, thus the Duce decided to stop his support for experimental theatre. That did not mean that such a kind of theatre stopped – Bragaglia continued to be nurtured by the government for discovering new Italian and foreign authors and directors.

In the fifth chapter, the author continues describing Mussolini as an impresario, and deals with his approach to the theatre for the masses. Here, the Duce seconds German fascist leaders, accentuating the necessity to open cultural manifestations to the lower classes of society while reducing ticket prices and augmenting seating capacities. To describe this phenomenon Gaborik uses the notion of “strategic aestheticism”. The essence of this notion is revealed in one of Mussolini’s quotations: “Fascist theatre, let it be said once and for all, is not theatre that stages the chronicles of the regime, but is that theatre which, the artistic material remaining wholly free, is inspired by the conception of life that is Fascism’s, by fascist morality” (238–239).

To achieve the fascist goals the regime took very concrete steps: it developed the activities of the so-called Thespian Trucks, mobile troupes that showed big theatre performances in the most distant corners of the country, while also introducing low-cost Saturday performances for the workers in the cities. Another strategy for raising a “New Man” (in fascist ideology) was related to the education of future theatre artists – directors, playwrights, and actors. This was possible with the creation of amateur theatres, Fascist University Groups and finally with the foundation of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1936.

That said, the author does not close the Mussolini deal. She analyses in detail his role as a dramatist (chapter three) and censor (chapter four). The dramatic talent is revealed in the collaboration with a famous librettist Giovacchino Forzano. Although the Duce never signed the plays, theatrogoers knew that Forzano was just his ghostwriter and that a historical trilogy, dedicated to Napoleon, Count Camillo Benso di Cavour and Julius Caesar was Mussolini’s idea. As in Germany and other European countries, the Romantic pulsion of the plays had to inspire nationalistic sentiments of the audience and thus serve the creation of the “New Man”. Gaborik analyses the historical, social and political background of the trilogy in detail. Interesting to know is that Campo di Maggio, the play about Napoleon, was presented in the thirties in Germany and Austria numerous times, proving that the countries had a similar point of view on the challenges confronting those societies. The chapter about censorship in Italy is dedicated to Leopoldo Zurlo, who took the role of the state’s theatre censor in 1931 and continued to play it until 1943. The author depicts the complexity of the role, the need to manoeuvre while presenting foreign authors, and the aspirations of the censor to serve Italian theatre at its best, for instance, while trying to eliminate from the Italian repertoire the so-called bourgeois drama with its multiple love triangles. Needless to say, Zurlo’s decisions were in concordance with the decisions of the Duce.

In general, the book offers a very interesting insight into Italian intellectual society during the Duce’s governance. Although the title of the book suggests that Mussolini would be the main character of the story, Mussolini’s portrait reveals itself through his relationships with other personalities of the epoch. He is one of the many who tried to give the Italian nation a new vision of the country. Mussolini and his entourage in the perspective of theatre seem to
be very coherent, humanist, open and curious, and that can pilot the reader to misleading conclusions about the regime. To understand the particularities of fascism in Italy it would have been useful to put it in the perspective of other fascisms, particularly the German one. It seems that Italian fascism, in comparison with the German version, did not severely damage particular social groups, as for instance, Jews or homosexuals in Germany. The brutalities of the regime are presented very fragmentarily and thus remain unknown to the reader.

Last but not least, one should congratulate the author for her writing style: using the frame of a theatrical play, Gaborik introduces at the beginning of the book the *dramatis personae*, that is, politicians and Mussolini’s family members, thus allowing the reader to feel as if reading a theatre play. The tricky words that the author introduces from time to time in the text reinforce the impression that the reader is dealing here with a good storyteller and that the story, told by someone else, could be quite different and would reveal the same facts from another perspective.

Ina Pukelytė

PhD Ina Pukelytė is Associate Professor at the Theatre Studies Department of the University of Vytautas Magnus (Kaunas). She is member of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR/FIRT) and the European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance (EASTAP). She is formerly Head of Kaunas State Drama Theatre. Her research interests are Lithuanian theatre history, cultural policies and management. Her monography *Žydų teatras tarpukario Lietuvoje* (“Jewish Theatre in Interwar Lithuania”) was published in 2017. Of her articles, “Front theatre and variety theatre in Lithuania during World War II” was published in 2020, and “Reflections of theatrical activities in Lithuanian local periodical press under German occupation 1941–1944” was published in 2021.