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The Classical Performances at the Temples of Agrigento and Paestum (1928–1938)

*From Performances of Ancient Drama to the Re-enactment of Myths
and Rituals in Archeological Sites*

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Abstract

This article surveys and analyzes classical performances staged between 1928 and 1938 in the archeological areas of Agrigento and Paestum, and underlines similarities and differences between them to evaluate the impact of Fascist ideology on their organization. Indeed, these performances were much more concerned with staging ancient poetry recitations, pantomimes, choreographies, and parades rather than entire plays, as these were effective conduits for Fascism's visual aesthetics, which was aimed at enhancing the archeological settings that hosted them. The events organized in Agrigento were meant to extend the presence of classical performances in ancient theaters and monuments other than Syracuse under the supervision of the National Institute of Ancient Drama (INDA) and other national and international artists, while the performances staged in Paestum were intended to promote international tourism in Italy, which included the programmatic restoration and renovation of ancient monuments.

Keywords

Italy – classical antiquity – Fascism – Agrigento – Paestum – propaganda – Ettore Romagnoli (1871–1938) – Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico (INDA)

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During the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, revivals of ancient dramas in restored Graeco-Roman monuments was a phenomenon that took place in many European countries. Starting in 1888 at the Roman theater in Orange, with a performance of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* produced by the Comédie Française and with well-known actor Jean Mounet-Sully playing the main character, revivals of Greek dramas flourished in other locations and aimed at shaping a new aesthetic of *mise-en-scène* in contrast to naturalistic theater. Richard Wagner's Opera Festival in Bayreuth, the prodrome of the Greek theater renaissance on the contemporary stages, debuted in 1876, while other examples included the plays written by Gabriele d'Annunzio and his attempt to create an open-air theater in Albano, the productions of ancient drama by German director Max Reinhardt, and the *rappresentazioni classiche* [classical performances] at the Greek theater of Syracuse. These were all experiences that sought to depart 'from the bourgeois character and spatial structure of the naturalistic proscenium theater' in order to 'appeal to large audiences' via the revival of ancient Greek dramas:¹

Festivals transformed the nostalgia for a lost order that cannot be recaptured and the discontent with a fragmented and heterogeneous present to a search for community and plenitude in the future. Like carnivals and other manifestations of festal culture, festivals can be seen as a radical force of protest, subversion, and revolt, but also as an ultimately conservative force, a carefully controlled safety valve helping to maintain the political and social status quo.²

The success of these theatrical performances was recognized by contemporary intellectuals,³ and this led to the interest demonstrated subsequently by the fascist regimes of Italy and Germany in the classical world. They saw it as a paradigm for building a new communal identity through the reappropriation and resemantization of symbols and institutions of the Graeco-Roman

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- 1 Pantelis Michelakis, 'Theater Festivals, Total Works of Art, and the Revival of Greek Tragedy on the Modern Stage,' *Cultural Critique* 74 (2010): 150–153, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.0.0070>. See also Laura Piazza, 'Il paradigma dell'arte sinestetica: La rinascita della messa in scena tragica al teatro greco di Siracusa,' *Sinestesiaonline* 25 (2019): 13–19, accessed October 5, 2023, <http://sinestesiaonline.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/gennaio02019-14.pdf>.
 - 2 Michelakis, 'Theater Festivals,' 150.
 - 3 Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'La rinascenza della tragedia,' *La Tribuna*, August 3, 1897, about the performance of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Antigone* occurred in the same year at Orange and attended by an audience from various social backgrounds.

history.⁴ In the case of Fascist Italy, Roman heritage was the most typical reference in many socio-cultural realms. As pointed out by Emilio Gentile ‘the myth of Rome was a symbol of the Italian people’s repentance, and of their rebirth as the spiritual heirs of the ancient Romans, rejuvenated by a common belief and, just like their forefathers, willing to defy fate and create a “new civilization”’.⁵ However, as described by recent studies, theater under the Fascist government was deeply influenced by the Greek paradigm and by the revivals that flourished in Italy in the early twentieth century,⁶ both because its aesthetic broke with the convention of bourgeoisie theater, and as a mean of education for the people of the new Fascist age.⁷ Mussolini himself spoke about the pedagogical role of theater in different occasions,⁸ supporting many manifestations related to the restaging of ancient plays.⁹

This article presents a comparison of the classical performances staged in the archeological sites of Agrigento and Paestum, two open air venues not

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- 4 Emilio Gentile, ‘Fascism as Political Religion,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2–3 (1990): 229–251; Helen Roche, “‘Distant Models’? Italian Fascism, National Socialism, and the Lure of the Classics,’ in *Brill’s Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, eds. Helen Roche, Kyriakos Demetriou (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 3–28. About the relationship between Greek heritage and Nazi Germany see also Pantelis Michelakis in this special issue, ‘The Antelope and the Lioness: Ancient Greece in the Prologue of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*,’ *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 228–253.
- 5 Gentile, ‘Fascism as Political Religion,’ 245.
- 6 Giovanna Di Martino, Eleftheria Ioannidou, and Sara Troiani, ‘Introduction,’ in *A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism*, eds. Giovanna Di Martino, Eleftheria Ioannidou, Sara Troiani, *Classical Receptions Journal* 16, no. 1 (2024).
- 7 See Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini’s Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Arts and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 209–210: ‘A general “cultivation” of the Italian populace was inextricably bound to the larger goal of fascistizing the nation, and this was the case for all social strata, although it meant something different for each. Thus, when blackshirts spoke of the theater’s educational scope, they could variously refer to ideological and propagandistic tenets on one hand and a more general cultural refinement on the other without much concern for specifying which one they meant’.
- 8 Roberto Forges Davanzati, ‘Mussolini parla agli scrittori,’ *Nuova Antologia*, no. 1468 (1933): 187–193; Benito Mussolini, ‘Per le associazioni artistiche,’ in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 20, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1956), 276: ‘All art institutions, from the theatre to the museum, from the gallery to the academy, must be considered schools . . . prepared to educate taste and sensibility’ (transl. by Gaborik, *Mussolini’s Theatre*, 193).
- 9 See below. As argued by Doug Thompson, ‘The Organisation, Fascistisation and Management of Theatre in Italy, 1925–1943,’ in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), 106, performing classical-historical dramas at the restored Greek and Roman monuments represented a way ‘to strengthen the myth of the legitimate and ideological continuity of the régime with the cultural and political glories of classical Greece and Rome’.

originally intended for staging theater production that were exploited under Fascism to promote the Italian cultural heritage through the spectacular enactment of ancient myths and rituals. In contrast to the plays staged in Syracuse and in other ancient theaters of Italy and abroad,¹⁰ the performances in Agrigento and Paestum responded to a different aesthetic, exploiting the landscape of the temples, along with choreographies performed by masses of participant, ultimately inspired by the political rallies of the regime. Beginning with a brief history of the origins of the open-air classical performances in Italy, the article will analyze theatrical manifestations in the two archeological sites, while also examining the attitude of the Fascist regime in sponsoring these classical performances in the light of the cultural propaganda before and after the year 1929.

From Fiesole to the National Institute of Ancient Drama in Syracuse: The Role of Ettore Romagnoli in the Italian Revival of Greek Drama

The revival of Greek plays in the ancient theaters of Italy can be traced back to 20 April 1911, when Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* was performed at the Roman theater of Fiesole, near Florence, by the actor Gustavo Salvini. The event was organized by the Italian poet and intellectual Angiolo Orvieto,¹¹ and it was included in the framework of the Fourth Congress of Italian classicists, promoted by the *Società per la Diffusione e l'Incoraggiamento degli Studi Classici 'Atene e Roma'* [Society for the Diffusion and Encouragement of Classical Studies 'Athens and Rome'], which was founded in 1897 and aimed at promoting ancient Greek and Roman culture to non-academics.¹² Salvini's production dealt perfectly with the problem of popularizing ancient Greek drama to a broader audience and his *Oedipus Rex* at Fiesole was recognized as the first reenactment of an ancient play understood for its value as a performance in its own right rather than as a literary text.¹³ The performance was one of the first to restage a Greek drama in

10 See in this special issue Giovanna Di Martino, 'The Living Archive: Archiving and Documenting Classical Performance during Fascism,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 183–205.

11 About the organization of Salvini's performance in Fiesole by Orvieto and his wife Laura see Valentina Garulli, 'Laura Orvieto and the Classical Heritage in Italy before the Second War World,' in *Our Mythical Childhood . . . : The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 74–75.

12 See Art. 2 in the Statute of *Società per la Diffusione e l'Incoraggiamento degli Studi Classici, Atene e Roma* 1, no. 1 (1898): 48–50.

13 Mario Pintacuda, *Tragedia antica e musica d'oggi: La musica nelle rappresentazioni dei tragici greci in Italia* (Palermo: Misuraca, 1977), 5.

Italy,¹⁴ and was also the first to be staged in an ancient theater. As argued by his wife Laura, Orvieto organized the event with the intention ‘to revive an ancient drama in the atmosphere in which it was born, outdoors, to give it new interest among today’s men’.¹⁵

Subsequently, the staging of ancient Greek dramas in Italy was carried out by the philologist and Professor of Greek Literature Ettore Romagnoli.¹⁶ During the aforementioned Congress he delivered a speech about the popularization of Greek culture, presenting a ‘program’ to renovate the entirety of education in Italian Classical Studies. Romagnoli’s project was intended to approach ancient Greek poetry, music, and figurative art with an ‘artistic’ knowledge, which he called *ellenismo artistico* [artistic Hellenism], rather than with a solely philological, and positivistic, one. The result of this education would be the birth of a new generation of classicists, whose main purpose would be to publish modern translations of Greek literature, along with essays about ancient material culture, devoted to a non-specialist audience.¹⁷ In addition, recalling the success of Salvini’s performance of *Oedipus Rex* and the *Oresteia* produced by the Argentina Theater in Rome,¹⁸ as well as Reinhardt’s production of *Oedipus* staged in Berlin in 1910,¹⁹ Romagnoli proposed the introduction of Greek

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- 14 Salvini also produced Euripides’ *Hippolytus* in 1909, that toured in indoor theaters, while the Argentina Theater in Rome staged an adaptation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* by Tito Marone and Antonio Cippico in 1906. About the last play see Armando Petrini, *Attori e scena nel teatro italiano di fine Ottocento: Studio critico su Giovanni Emanuel e Giacinta Pezzana* (Turin: Academia University Press, 2012), 185–192, <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/16846>.
- 15 Laura Orvieto, ed. Caterina Del Vivo, *Storia di Angiolo e Laura* (Florence: Olschki, 2001), 103. See Garulli, ‘Laura Orvieto and the Classical Heritage in Italy,’ 74 for the whole quotation.
- 16 About Ettore Romagnoli see Giorgio Piras, ‘Romagnoli, Ettore,’ in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 88 (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2017), 189–194. Regarding Romagnoli’s studies on Greek theater and his role as translator and artistic director of classical performances, see Sara Troiani, *Dal testo alla scena e ritorno: Ettore Romagnoli e il teatro greco* (Trento: Università degli Studi, Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia, 2022), <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/104174>.
- 17 Ettore Romagnoli, *Vigilie italiane* (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Italiano, 1917), 66–140. Though it was not admittedly anti-philological, Romagnoli’s speech opposed the excess of the micro-philology that had dominated classical studies in Italy from the 1870’s in favor of an aesthetic criticism. Later, during the First World War, Romagnoli directly attacked the positivistic German philology and its herald Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, publishing the pamphlet *Minerva e lo scimmione* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1917) in order to accuse textual criticism of lacking contact with non-specialists and of concentrating on too particular arguments, instead of interpreting classical authors for their own art.
- 18 Troiani, *Dal testo alla scena e ritorno*, 101–103 about the influence of that performance and of the artistic director of Argentina Theater, Eduardo Boutet, in Romagnoli’s theatrical practice.
- 19 Troiani, *Dal testo alla scena e ritorno*, 96. About Reinhardt’s production see Hellmut

and Latin dramas more widely in the Italian theatrical repertoire and, at the same time, training professional actors to portray ‘tragic’ characters that were far from the conventional roles found in bourgeois theater.²⁰

After this programmatic speech, Romagnoli immediately started to produce a series of successful indoor performances of Greek dramas. First, he directed a company of his undergraduate students from the University of Padua, organizing a tour in various north Italian cities (Padua, Vicenza, Venice, Trieste and Milan) from 1911 to 1913.²¹ Between May and June 1913 he was invited to stage his adaptation of Euripides’ *Bacchae* in Fiesole and at the Stadio Palatino in Rome, in collaboration with the professional actors of *Drammatica Compagnia di Roma* [Dramatic Company of Rome]. One year later, the philologist became the official translator and artistic director of classical performances at the Greek theater in Syracuse, organized by a local Committee of Sicilian aristocrats whose president was Count Mario Tommaso Gargallo.²²

From its very first performance, which was Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in 1914,²³ the theater festival in Syracuse enjoyed national and international success thanks to the attractiveness of the ancient monument, surrounded by a natural landscape, and to the peculiar kind of performances staged. Romagnoli, who remained as artistic director of the Syracusan theater festival until 1927, established the model for performing an ancient drama in its original venue with sensitivity to modern tastes. Indeed, he avoided following an archeological approach in staging Greek plays; rather, he preferred to rework the original texts in order to produce a performance that corresponded to his own artistic

Flashart, *Inszenierung der Antike: Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585–1990* (Munich, Beck: 1991), 129–128; Fiona Macintosh, ‘Tragedy in Performance: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Productions,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Patricia E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 298–301.

20 Romagnoli, *Vigilie italiane*, 126–137.

21 Sara Troiani, ‘Ettore Romagnoli e il teatro universitario: I primi sviluppi di una nuova ideologia drammatica tra ellenismo “artistico” e stimoli internazionali,’ *Dionysus ex Machina* 11 (2020): 239–244, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://dionysusexmachina.it/dionysus2018/?p=8278>.

22 About Count Gargallo see Marina Valensise, ‘Il Conte Gargallo, mecenate e manager,’ in *Oresteia atto secondo: La ripresa delle rappresentazioni classiche al Teatro greco di Siracusa dopo la Grande Guerra e l’epidemia di Spagnola*, ed. Marina Valensise (Milan: Electa, 2021), 14–47.

23 An in-depth analysis of the performance is offered by Giovanna Di Martino, ‘Sicilianità “greca” e italianità alla vigilia della Grande Guerra: Il caso di *Agamemnone*,’ in *The Old Lie: I classici e la grande guerra*, eds. Roberta Berardi, Nicoletta Bruno, Anna Busetto, and Luisa Fizzarotti, *FuturoClassico* 5 (2019): 174–208, <https://doi.org/10.15162/2465-0951/1094>.

vision,²⁴ which aimed at staging holistic reenactments of ancient dramas, i.e. as performances conceived by one artist (as the ancient *chorodidaskalos*) who was contemporaneously a poet, a musician, a choreographer, and a scenographer.²⁵ Though he was an expert musician and wrote the musical pieces for most of the performances he directed,²⁶ Romagnoli collaborated with famous artists in producing the Syracusan plays. These included the scenographer Duilio Cambellotti,²⁷ the composer Giuseppe Mulè,²⁸ and the *corps de ballet*, hired from 1922 and recruited among the followers of Jean Dalcroze's eurythmic dance.²⁹ They worked by his side to realize 'a new form of theatrical art' in which poetry, music, dance, and scenography were given equal importance.³⁰

In 1924 the Syracusan theater festival had the chance to obtain national recognition. After Benito Mussolini was invited to attend the performances of the *Seven against Thebes* and *Antigone*, Count Gargallo involved Romagnoli in formalizing the status of the local Committee by the Fascist government thanks to the friendship of the latter with the Italian Minister of Education, Pietro Fedele.³¹ Therefore, in 1925 the Executive Committee of the classical perfor-

24 About Romagnoli's work as translator of ancient Greek plays for the stage see Troiani, *Dal testo alla scena e ritorno*, 229–386.

25 Ettore Romagnoli, 'Le rievocazioni dell'antico dramma greco,' in *Convegno di lettere: Il teatro drammatico, Roma 8–14 ottobre 1934: Atti del convegno* (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1935), 275–276.

26 While he wrote the music for all the plays staged before and after his engagement as artistic director of the Syracusan classical performances, he was involved as composer for the festival in 1914 (*Agamemnon*), in 1922 (*Oedipus Rex*) and in 1927 (*Clouds*). About Romagnoli's studies on ancient Greek music and his activity as composer, see Carlo Del Grande, 'Ettore Romagnoli studioso di musica greca e compositore,' *Dioniso* 11, no. 2 (1948): 79–82; Sara Troiani, 'La poesia come "dono della musica": interrelazioni tra musica greca, traduzione e rappresentazione del dramma antico in Ettore Romagnoli,' in *Linguaggi, esperienze e tracce sonore sulla scena: Atti della Graduate Conference, L'Aquila 15–16 novembre 2018*, eds. Angela Albanese and Maria Arpaia (Ravenna: Longo), 79–86.

27 On Cambellotti see Monica Centanni, ed., *Artista di Dioniso: Duilio Cambellotti e il Teatro greco di Siracusa 1914–1948* (Milan: Electa, 2004).

28 The collaboration between Romagnoli and Mulè has recently been analyzed by Giovanna Casali, 'Rievocare la musica greca antica: Ettore Romagnoli e la collaborazione con Giuseppe Mulè per le rappresentazioni classiche al Teatro greco di Siracusa,' *Greek and Roman Musical Studies* 10, no. 1 (2022): 217–252.

29 A detailed research about the choreographers who participated in the Syracusan classical performances from 1922 until 1948 can be found in Giulia Bordignon, 'Dalla filologia alla teatralità, e ritorno: Il ruolo del coro danzante negli spettacoli classici al Teatro greco di Siracusa tra il 1914 e il 1948,' *Danza e ricerca: Laboratorio di studi, scritture, visioni* 12 (2020): 29–60, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2036-1599/11808>.

30 Mario Tommaso Gargallo, *Per il teatro greco* (Roma: Formiggini, 1936), 86.

31 This emerges from a letter sent by Romagnoli to the Count Gargallo, now stored in the

mances at the Greek theater of Syracuse became an *ente morale*, named *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico* [INDA; National Institute of Ancient Drama]. Two years later, a new law (*R.D.* no. 320, 17 February 1927) entrusted INDA with the supervision and coordination of all artistic events staged in Italian ancient outdoor theaters and in other archeological venues.

Between 1927 and 1928, this assignment was carried out directly by Romagnoli, who reprised some of the successful Syracusan productions at the Roman theater in Ostia (*Seven against Thebes*, *Antigone*, and *Clouds*) along with performances directed by him and produced by other institutions: *Alcestis* with the *Compagnia degli Illusi* [Company of the deluded] at the Roman theater in Pompeii; *Miles Gloriosus* by Plautus and *Julius Caesar* by the Italian writer, politician, and Fascist senator Enrico Corradini at the Greek theater in Taormina organized by *Ente Primavera Siciliana* [Sicilian Spring Institute]; and his own original play *Il Carro di Dioniso* [Dionysus' Chariot] at the Greek theater in Palazzolo Acreide, near Syracuse, in collaboration with the leading actors hired in the 1927 INDA's productions, Gualtiero Tumiatì and Maria Laetitia Celli. In 1928 Romagnoli was also involved as artistic director in a theater festival at the Greek Temples of Agrigento in Sicily and, for the very first time, he was asked to display his skills as stage director in a non-theatrical venue, starting a new approach to the revival of ancient dramas.

The Classical Performances at the Temples of Agrigento: Between Political Recognition and Theatrical Renovation

At the Temples of Agrigento between 9 and 20 May 1928 Romagnoli staged new productions of *Alcestis*, *Il carro di Dioniso*, *Il mistero di Persefone*, another of his original plays, and Pindar's choral ode to the Greek tyrant Theron of Akragas (*Third Olympian Ode*), with a company of professional actors and dancers. The event, named *Primavera classica ai Templi di Agrigento* [Classical spring at the Temples of Agrigento], was organized by a local committee that obtained the patronage of 'S.E. Benito Mussolini', as shown by the posters collected in the Archive of Ettore Romagnoli (figure 1).³²

Archive of Ettore Romagnoli at the Biblioteca Civica 'G. Tartarotti' in Rovereto. See Troiani, *Dal testo alla scena e ritorno*, 128, fn. 238. Romagnoli's Archive, donated to the Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati in 2016, holds books from the private library of the philologist, along with unpublished documents, photos, posters, etc. related to his various academic and artistic activities.

32 The posters do not mention *Il carro di Dioniso*, but photographs from the Archive of Ettore Romagnoli testify to the performance of the pièce in 1928 at the Temples of Agrigento.



FIGURE 1 Poster of the events of *Primavera classica ai Templi di Agrigento*, 1928
SOURCE: ARCHIVE OF ETTORE ROMAGNOLI, BIBLIOTECA CIVICA 'G. TARTAROTTI', ROVERETO, COURTESY OF ACCADEMIA ROVERETANA DEGLI AGIATI

The support given by the head of the Italian government to performances other than those organized by INDA could be explained by a possible misinterpretation of the Law no. 320 of 17 February 1927. According to some members of the INDA Executive Committee, including Count Gargallo, the law allowed them to officially approve or reject any classical performance in ancient archeological areas outside Syracuse, while in Romagnoli's opinion the minister of education assigned to the artistic director-in-chief of INDA, i.e. Romagnoli himself, the organization of theatrical enactments in those venues. These differing interpretations of the law led to the end of the collaboration between Romagnoli and INDA in November 1928. If the former was interested in exporting his concept of revival of ancient dramas to the rest of Italy, the members of INDA probably feared the competition with other archeological venues, especially for reasons related to the economy and tourism.³³

Nevertheless, the regime's approval of Romagnoli's enterprise in Agrigento was intended to extend the staging of open-air performances of classical and historical dramas within many ancient monuments in Italy, in order to reach a heterogeneous audience, gathered together 'in the name of a shared past and a common identity'.³⁴ The ritualistic roots of that kind of performance, reflected both in the *mise-en-scène* itself and in the non-traditional arrangement of the space, could indeed strengthen the sense of participation among the spectators, further prefiguring Mussolini's declarations about *teatro di massa* [mass theater],³⁵ and the crucial role attributed to theater in the education, and

33 Troiani, *Dal testo alla scena e ritorno*, 130–134.

34 Michelakis, 'Theater Festivals,' 156.

35 Mussolini referred to *teatro di massa* in a public speech, delivered on February 28, 1933 during the celebration of the fifty years since the foundation of *Società Italiana degli Autori ed Editori* [SIAE; Italian society of authors and publishers] and then published in Forges Davanzati, 'Mussolini parla agli scrittori,' 187–193. With *teatro di massa* the Duce included both buildings apt to host 15,000 or 20,000 spectators and performances aimed at affecting people with 'great collective passions' and 'a sense of lively and deep humanity' (Ibid., 191). Mussolini's speech had a great influence on the reflections of intellectuals and dramatists: one year later the *Reale Accademia D'Italia* [Italian Royal Academy] organized the Volta Convention on dramatic art (*Convegno Volta sul teatro drammatico*), with the aim of discussing the development of a new aesthetic for the contemporary Italian prose theater. At the same time the regime, in collaboration with the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* [OND; the fascist afterwork club], supported the activity of *filodrammatiche* [theater amateur organizations] and of *Carri di Tespi* [Thespian Trucks], that, designed by scenographer Antonio Valente and playwright and film director Giovacchino Forzano, aimed at promoting theatrical productions in small Italian centers at reduced prices. For further considerations on *teatro di massa*, see: Jeffrey Schnapp, '18 BL: Fascist Mass Spectacle,' *Representations* 43 (1993): 89–125; Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale e politica del teatro nell'Italia fascista*, 2nd ed. (Milan: LED, 2004), 106–120, 239–280; Gaborik,

fascistization, of the Italian population.³⁶ In addition, Mussolini's patronage of the festival in Agrigento probably reflected the preferred choice of the regime, from its advent in 1922, to sponsor preexisting cultural institutes, as well as to provide new ones with financial fundings, in order to exercise bureaucratic control and restrict any antifascist propaganda.³⁷

The performances in Agrigento under Romagnoli's direction were staged at the Temple of Concordia and involved famous Italian actors and the participation of professional dancers trained by Minnie Smolkova, as photographs of the events and brief film footage of *Il mistero di Persefone* show.³⁸ Regarding this play, Romagnoli's idea was to reproduce the hypothetical form of the ancient mysteries as described by Pseudes-Psellus,³⁹ Sopater,⁴⁰ and Galen,⁴¹ whose texts were collected and analyzed by the English scholar Jane Ellen Harrison in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. This work was familiar to Romagnoli as he cited it in his academic studies.⁴² According to the ancient sources, the mysteries were non-spoken pantomimes of Greek myths concerning death, rebirth, and afterlife (e.g., the ones of Dionysus, Orpheus, etc.) staged before a faithful audience and then explained by a priest. Among the myths performed during those sacred representations, especially in the rites celebrated

Mussolini's Theatre, 192–196. About the *Convegno Volta* see the volume of Ilona Fried, *Il Convegno Volta sul teatro drammatico: Roma 1934: Un evento culturale nell'età dei totalitarismi* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2015).

- 36 Patricia Gaborik, 'Lo spettacolo del fascismo,' in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. 3, eds. Sergio Luzzato and Gianfranco Pedullà (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), 592.
- 37 Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, 30. See also Schnapp, '18 BL,' 91: 'the fascist regime, despite its authoritarianism, tended toward an "eclecticism of the spirit" in its cultural policies, encouraging a proliferation of competing formulations of fascist modernity, among which Mussolini felt free to choose as a function of circumstance'. Gaborik, 'Lo spettacolo del fascismo,' 609 underlines the indifference of the regime in building new venues devoted to the development of a 'national' theater: 'Their [the Italian Fascist hierarchs] National Theater, in short, did not resemble a superb, solitary Roman building, but rather a large network of stable theaters, open-air theaters, temporary stages to be placed in all the gardens, squares and archeological sites available' (where there is no indication, all translations from the Italian are mine).
- 38 'Il mistero di Persefone,' 1931, Archivio Luce, cod. M008210, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000051722/1/il-mistero-persefone.html?startPage=0>.
- 39 Paul Gautier, 'Pseudes-Psellus, Graecorum opiniones de daemonibus,' *Revue des études byzantines* 46 (1988): 101 (3,51–68).
- 40 Christian Walz, ed., *Rhetores Graeci*, vol. 8 (Stuttgartiae-Tubingae: J.C. Cottae, 1835), 113 ff.
- 41 George Helmreich, ed., *De Usu Partium*, vol. 1 (Lipisae: Teubner, 1907), 418 (7.14.576).
- 42 Jane E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 568–570; Ettore Romagnoli, *Filologia e poesia: Saggi critici* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1958), 210–213.

at the Athenian deme of Eleusis, a place of honor was assigned to the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone, the latter abducted and married by the god of the Underworld, Hades. Persephone's myth was also chosen by Romagnoli because of its connection to Sicilian folklore, as it is said that the abduction of Demeter's daughter occurred near the Pergusa Lake near Enna. The press reviews of *Il mistero di Persefone* focused on the modern re-enactment of the mystery by Romagnoli, who divided the major moments of the narration into seven *tableaux vivant*,⁴³ each one 'explained' through Minnie Smolkova's mimic dances, as shown in film footage from the *Istituto Luce*.⁴⁴

Unlike the original myth, Romagnoli's play is set in Agrigento, probably for the sake of celebrating the city that hosted the festival. The first *tableau vivant* narrates the abduction of Persephone (portrayed by Eva Magni) by the besotted Hades (portrayed by Oscar Andriani), while she picks flowers in a meadow with her friends, the Nymphs. The second and third scenes of the play are focused on Demeter, portrayed by the famous actress Teresa Franchini, who had already collaborated with Romagnoli in the 1921 INDA production of Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers*. In the film footage from the *Istituto Luce* Demeter appears between the massive columns of the Temple of Concordia, while she is holding a pair of torches in her hands. The actress' gestures were conceived to symbolize Demeter's hopeless quest for her daughter and had a great visual impact during the performance (figure 2), as a similar image was used as the picture for the posters. During her trip in search of Persephone, Demeter meets Hecate (portrayed by Dalma Barbarisi), who helps the goddess by asking the Winds, played by a chorus,⁴⁵ and the Sun where to find her daughter. The Sun, which sees everything, answers that Hades brought Persephone to the Underworld in order to make her his spouse. Overcome with grief, Demeter lies near a fountain dressed as a beggar. The daughters of Celeus, the King of Eleusis, who approach her in a slow dance, invite Demeter to their father's palace, where she becomes the nursemaid of the King's son. The events of the fourth and fifth *tableaux vivant* are not included in the film footage. They narrate Demeter's attempt to make Celeus's son immortal by exposing him to flame but, before she can complete the ceremony, she is sent away by the child's mother, Metaneira. After this episode of ungratefulness, she dismisses

43 Giovanni Filippini, 'Il Mistero di Persefone e Alceste al Tempio della Concordia,' *L'Arte Fascista* 3 (1928), no. 6–7: 210–214.

44 The acronym LUCE stands for *L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa* [The Educational Film Union].

45 From the printed version of the play the Winds' lines are inserted in a musical score. See Ettore Romagnoli, *Il mistero di Persefone* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1929), 38–39.



FIGURE 2 Teresa Franchini as Demeter in *Il mistero di Persefone* at the Temples of Agrigento, 1928

SOURCE: ARCHIVE OF ETTORE ROMAGNOLI, BIBLIOTECA CIVICA 'G. TAR-
TAROTTI', ROVERETO, COURTESY OF ACCADEMIA ROVERETANA DEGLI
AGIATI

her grief and returns to be the powerful goddess she was before, spreading famine across the Earth until Persephone returns to her. The sixth scene displays Persephone asleep, while Pluto contemplates her beauty, hoping to win her love. But, as Persephone wakes up, she asks him to return her to her mother. In the same moment the god Hermes (portrayed by Mario Canossa) appears to deliver Zeus's order to release Persephone in order to avoid human extinction. Hades accepts it but, before releasing Persephone, he speaks with deep love for her, and the goddess falls in love with him in return. In the last *tableau vivant* Persephone rejoins her mother, but she then returns to her beloved one, following her feelings for him. Demeter accepts her daughter's choice and, appeased, restores fertility to the Earth.

Film footage from the *Istituto Luce* and pictures of the performance at the Temples of Agrigento, along with those staged over the next two years at the outdoor theater Licinium in Erba and at Villa Reale in Monza (figure 3), where Jia Ruskaja (the stage name of Evgenija Fëdorovna Borisenko) was chosen as choreographer,⁴⁶ clearly show the attention given to dance in emphasizing the

46 Mario Corsi, *Il teatro all'aperto in Italia* (Milan, Rome: Rizzoli, 1939), 247.



FIGURE 3 Rehearsal of *Il mistero di Persefone* at Villa Reale in Monza, 1930
SOURCE: ARCHIVE OF ETTORE ROMAGNOLI, BIBLIOTECA CIVICA 'G. TAR-
TAROTTI', ROVERETO, COURTESY OF ACCADEMIA ROVERETANA DEGLI
AGIATI

peculiar atmosphere of each scene and the mood of the characters. Romagnoli had already sought to exploit choreographed movements in this sense when he staged *Antigone* (1924) and *Medea* (1927) at the Greek theater of Syracuse. In the two tragedies the chorus was split into two main groups: the actresses who played the choral role, and the dancers from Hellerau School, who were trained by Valerie Kratina, that interpreted the episodes with their mimetic movements as 'living sculpture', to borrow the expression coined some years later by Anton Giulio Bragaglia to define the new forms of dance.⁴⁷ In *Medea*, the role of the dancing chorus went further, mirroring through its rhythmic dances the pain suffered by the main character, sharing her grief, and physically interacting with her. She was placed at the top of a high stairs in Cambellotti's scenography, while the speaking chorus of the Corinthian Women stood in the orchestra, far from her.⁴⁸

Therefore, while in the same years Romagnoli developed his own conception of revival of Greek drama, based on the harmonic co-existence of poetry, music, and dance, in *Il mistero di Persefone* he gave a decisive role to the two latter ele-

47 Bordignon, 'Dalla filologia alla teatrabilità, e ritorno,' 37.

48 Ibid., 39.

ments in order to facilitate the staging of a play in a venue not originally built for theatrical performances, enhancing the visual impact of the place with the almost continuous presence of choreographies. In addition, according to the critic Mario Filipponi the music composed by Romagnoli himself increased the ritualistic dimension of the performance as a modern revival of ancient mysteries and appealed to the heterogeneous audience that attended the play.⁴⁹

Some years later, Romagnoli's experience in Agrigento was followed by other similar performances. Between April and May 1935, the *Ente Primavera Siciliana* promoted feasts, folk events, and performances of classical character organized by INDA both at the Theater of Taormina on 27 and 28 April and at the Temple of Concordia in Agrigento on 4 and 5 May, under the direction of the archeologist Biagio Pace, Fascist parliamentarian and new president of the Institute from 1929, as well as the actor Franco Liberati. The various events were specifically conceived to increase tourism within the isle and included recitals of the *Idylls*, ancient poetic compositions by the Sicilian poet Theocritus in the translation of the philologist Ettore Bignone. The actors enrolled to perform the recitals were the same hired for the classical plays in Syracuse, like Giovanna Scotto, who would play Phaedra in Euripides's *Hippolytus* one year later. However, the main part of the performances was reserved for the dances by the choreographer Jia Ruskaja, a figure deeply involved in the Fascist educational program in her role as dance teacher,⁵⁰ and her students from La Scala with music by Grieg, Beethoven and by the Italian composers Mulè, Pizzetti, and Mosella.⁵¹

49 Filipponi, *Il Mistero di Persefone e Alesti*, 212–213.

50 Jia Ruskaja's engagement with the Italian Fascist government has been recently investigated by Patrizia Veroli, 'Classical Dance and Mediterranean Imaginaries: Jia Ruskaja in Fascist Italy,' in *A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism*, eds. Giovanna Di Martino, Eleftheria Ioannidou, and Sara Troiani, *Classical Receptions Journal* 16, no. 1 (2024). In 1928 Ruskaja opened a private school of 'classical dance and rhythmic gymnastics' in Milan and in 1932 became the artistic director of the dance school of Teatro Alla Scala (soon after the employers of the Institution were required to join the National Fascist Party) also because of her closeness to Aldo Borelli, one of the exponents of the Fascist press. In 1940 she founded the Royal School for Dance in Rome as a branch of the Royal Drama School. In her study, Veroli demonstrates how Ruskaja's modern dance involved a training in rhythmic gymnastics and 'classical' dance, that, differently from ballet, would be imbued with imagery of 'Mediterranean-ness', in line with the appropriation of this identity, strongly connected with the Roman imperialism in the Mediterranean Sea, by the Fascist rhetoric. Veroli also recognizes Ruskaja's debt towards Ettore Romagnoli, who, as already mentioned, collaborated with her for the classical performances at Erba and Monza, respectively in 1929 and 1930.

51 Archive of INDA Foundation, Syracuse (AFI), Press Review 1935, unknown author, 'Primavera d'arte classica in Sicilia,' *Il Piccolo*, April 12, 1935.

Ruskaja's choreographies were inspired by ancient paintings and monuments.⁵² They reproduced scenes from the dramas staged two years before in Syracuse, namely Sophocles's *Women of Trachis* and Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris* (which were actually choreographed by the Czechoslovakian Rosalia Chladek, pupil of Valerie Kratina,⁵³ but according to the critics were newly created by Ruskaja)⁵⁴ and from Homer's episode of Nausicaa and Odysseus (*Nausicaa and the Wave*), along with other topics related to nature and the seasons. According to the reviews, those kinds of performances were distinct from the ones in the Theater of Taormina, both from the point of view of the actors' interpretation and the dances, as they were best equipped to display the natural scenography and landscape offered by the ancient Temples of Agrigento:

Here the theater is made up of the Temple of Concordia, which, immense, stands in the foreground while in the background are the Temple of Hercules, the one of the Dioscuri, and the smaller ones, as far as the eye can see. . . . Between one column and another small human beings, lost in the vastness of the places—the shepherds and the singers—will make their voices heard no longer as a challenge to fate, but as an entreaty. In this sense, even though the program of Taormina and Agrigento is the same, the two interpretations, necessarily very different, will make it appear with two different faces. Even Jia Ruskaja, not new to the exceptional stages offered by Sicily, had the precise intuition, so that the dances of Taormina will have figurations that those of Agrigento will miss and vice versa.⁵⁵

52 About the development of modern dance from the study of Greek vase-paintings see Fiona Macintosh, 'From Sculpture to Vase-Painting: Archaeological Models for the Actor,' in *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre*, eds. George Harrison and Vayos Liapis, *Mnemosine Supplements* 53 (2013): 517–533. See also Fiona Macintosh in this special issue, 'Moving Images, Moving Bodies: Greek Dance, Eugenics and Fascism,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 206–227 for further considerations and bibliography about eurythmic dance and its connection with eugenics under Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and the Greek-inspired dances in the United Kingdom at the beginning of the twentieth century.

53 About the choreographies of *Trachiniae* see Eleftheria Ioannidou, 'The Sweet Vitality of the Dancing Bodies: Classical Embodiment, Modernist Poetics, and Fascist Visions in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* at Syracuse in 1933,' in *Hercules Performed*, ed. Emma Stafford (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2024).

54 AFI, 'Primavera d'arte classica in Sicilia.'

55 AFI, Press Review 1935, Vito Mar Nicolosi, 'Idilli e danze classiche: I monumenti antichi e l'incomparabile scenario naturale che formeranno la suggestiva cornice degli spettacoli,' *Il Messaggero*, April 19, 1935.

The performances in Agrigento in 1935 were clearly effective for a very unusual stage, but already in 1928 Romagnoli, even though he reprised the classical plays according to a personal artistic view, sought to renew his own theatrical practice with *Il mistero di Persefone*. Conceived as something different from the Greek dramas that the philologist produced before it, the play dealt with the problem of being staged in a venue which did not allow the audience to give the same attention to the piece as in a theater. Thanks to the central role played by music and dance, *Il mistero di Persefone* introduced a new aesthetic mainly prone to the spectacular, as the later performances in Paestum would develop.

The INDA Performances at Paestum: The Birth of a New Kind of Classical Performances

At the end of the 1920s, the Fascist government began to promote reclamation of the marshes and excavation of ancient monuments within the region of Campania. The aim was to invest in international tourism, or as Mussolini himself said in 1931 to the authorities in Naples, ‘to offer the world enchanting views and unearthed cities, which have no equal on the face of the Earth.’⁵⁶ As Fausto Longo points out, the grandeur of these excavation and restoration works was well framed in the political direction developed by Mussolini and by other fascist officials, who aimed at enhancing ‘the great ancient architectures which, mostly isolated in large spaces, had to simultaneously provoke admiration and fear in those who observed them.’⁵⁷ According to the directions of the government, the archeological area of Paestum, which includes the ancient Greek-Lucanian town of Poseidonia, was subjected to an intense program of excavation and restoration between 1929 and 1934 in order to transform the site into an attractive tourist destination.

The works were carried out under the direction of the *Commissione per lo sviluppo del turismo e la sistemazione delle zone monumentali e panoramiche della provincia di Salerno* [Commission for the development of tourism and the arrangement of the monumental and panoramic areas of the province of Salerno], which in 1930 changed its name to *Commissione archeologica e monumentale* [Archeological and monumental commission] and later, in 1934, to *Ente per le antichità e i monumenti della provincia di Salerno* [Institute for the

56 ‘Paestum,’ *Opere Pubbliche, Rassegna Mensile Illustrata* 3, no. 11–12 (1933): 542.

57 Fausto Longo, ‘Archeologia e fascismo a Paestum,’ in *Miti e popoli del Mediterraneo antico: Scritti in onore di Gabriella d’Henry*, eds. Chiara Lambert and Felice Pastore (Salerno: Arci Postiglione, 2014), 122.

antiquities and monuments of the province of Salerno].⁵⁸ The works overseen by the *Commissione* included, among others:⁵⁹ the reclamation of the marshes along the western and southern walls of the ancient city; the construction of the Restaurant Nettuno close to the Gate of Justice, to allow tourists have a view of the monuments; construction of a panoramic road for visiting the fortification which surrounded the area; and the excavation of the so-called Italic Temple.⁶⁰ Along with structural interventions in improving the road network from Battipaglia and Salerno to Paestum, Fascist propaganda widely promoted the restoration of the ancient site to stimulate tourism in that area, while also involving the Province of Salerno and INDA in the organization of classical performances in 1932, 1936, and 1938.⁶¹

For the performances that took place at the Basilica, to host the audience between this monument and the Temple of Neptune a large semi-circular *cavea* was built using the stones from the wall that were not used in the restoration.⁶² The performances included recitals of ancient Greek poetry (mainly Theocritus' *Idylls* and a mimiamb by Herodas), along with choreographed and musical performances. In 1932, the choruses and dances were from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, performed by Minnie Smolkowa to music by Ildebrando Pizzetti and with Ettore Romagnoli's translation. In 1936, there was a huge parade based on the ancient procession of the Panathenaea. And in 1938, there was a play entitled *Mistero Dionisiaco* inspired by Euripides's *Bacchae*. As in the case of the classical performances at the Temple of Agrigento, INDA aimed at stag-

58 Longo, 'Archeologia e fascismo a Paestum,' 121.

59 See *ibid.*, 121–126 for a detailed list of all the archeological interventions within the area of Paestum. In the same years, an archeological project at the river Sele, run by Umberto Zanotti Bianco, and Paola Zancani Montuoro and financed by the private funding of *Società Magna Grecia*, discovered the Sanctuary of Hera. The dissolution of the Society by decree of the Prefect of Rome on August 21, 1934 and the difficulties in asking for the financial support of the Authorities, because of the anti-fascist positions of Zanotti Bianco himself, frustrated progress on the project at the Sele, which eventually stopped in 1941 and was resumed only after the end of the Second World War. See Nathalie de Haan, 'The Società "Magna Grecia" in Fascist Italy,' *Anabases* 9 (2009): 122–125, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anabases.367>.

60 The so-called Italic Temple was dated to the fourth century BC, during the Lucanian Age, offering the chance of speculating about the defeat of the Greek colonizers by the native population, 'preparing' the later Roman domination of Magna Graecia. As a matter of fact, the Temple was renamed by the archeologist Amedeo Maiuri as *Tempio della Vittoria*, to stress the predominance of the *elemento italico* rather than the Greek one within the site of Paestum. See Longo, 'Archeologia e fascismo a Paestum,' 123.

61 Domenico Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum negli anni 1932-1936-1938* (Salerno: Dottrinari, 1981), 13; Longo, 'Archeologia e fascismo a Paestum,' 125–126.

62 Longo, 'Archeologia e fascismo a Paestum,' 127.

ing events that exploited a visual aesthetic harmonically aligned to the natural scenography offered by the archeological site.

The Panathenaea consisted of the reenactment of the last part of the eponymous Athenian feasts: the procession of the main authorities and the people of the ancient city-state to the Temple of Athena and the donation of the veil by the goddess' priestess. The costumes worn by the participants, as well as their gestures, were based on the images of the ancient feast engraved on the Parthenon frieze.⁶³ The work of preparation was carried out by the philologist Raffaele Cantarella and the artists Duilio Cambellotti and Ildebrando Pizzetti, and by Vincenzo Bonajuto, who oversaw the entire performance. The show involved eighty musicians and 120 singers (who were hidden from the audience), fourteen professional dancers from the Hellerau-Laxemburg School, and forty-two young extras from the local *Istituto Magistrale*. Ninety-nine more extras were chosen between the *OND* members of Cava dei Tirreni, Vietri sul Mare, and Fratte di Salerno, while thirty-five *butteri* [herdsmen on horseback] of the Paestum countryside were involved as riders.⁶⁴ The parade ended in front of the Basilica, where the priestess, performed by Rosalia Chladek, danced, miming the offering of the *peplum*. In the very final moment, a chorus of young women sang ll. 668–719 of Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*, which celebrates the city of Athens, with a dance accompaniment.⁶⁵

The audience and theater critics appreciated Pizzetti's music and Chladek's choreographies as the best elements of the parade, while the movements of masses, though carefully trained, lacked accuracy.⁶⁶ The employment of a large number of amateur extras in the classical performances, which followed a tradition inaugurated in Italy by Romagnoli,⁶⁷ reflected the propensity for the spectacular embedded in other Fascist theatrical events. These included the performances of *La laguna di Milano* at the Arena in Milan (1923), *Il mistero di Rùmmon* at the Stadio Palatino in Rome (1923), and D'Annunzio's *La figlia di Iorio* at Vittoriale (1927).⁶⁸ The spectacular was reflected in its politics too, as Emilio

63 Venturino Panebianco in Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum*, 30–31.

64 *Ibid.*, 29.

65 A detailed sketch of the procession by Vincenzo Bonajuto is published in Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum*, 34–42.

66 [Puck], 'Dopo le Panatenee,' *Scenario* 7 (1936): 327.

67 Since the performance of Euripides' *Bacchae* in Fiesole, Romagnoli employed a large number of extras as choreographical elements. Later, in the Syracusan plays, the presence of masses, recruited *in loco*, assumed a stable role. See Giulia Bordignon, "Musicista poeta danzatore e visionario": Forma e funzione del coro negli spettacoli classici al Teatro greco di Siracusa 1914–1948,' *Quaderni di Dioniso* 3 (2012): 25.

68 Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, 108–109.

Gentile points out: ‘Politics assumes a performative character when it unfolds by means of mass spectacles, such as political meetings, processions, parades, festivals, ceremonies and rituals’.⁶⁹

The *Mistero Dionisiaco* responded to a similar aesthetics but presented a significant innovation. The performance, again written and conceived by Bonaiuto, concerned the narration of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, without staging the entire tragedy, only the main moments, through the involvement of dancers from the Hellerau-Laxemburg School, led by Chladek. The choral parts of the music, composed by Mulè, were performed by the orchestra of San Carlo Theater of Naples. The press review, cited by Domenico Sorrentino,⁷⁰ reports enthusiastic praise for the mainly choreographed structure of the performance, also attested to by photos and film footage of the events from the *Istituto Luce* archive.⁷¹ Exploiting the ‘natural’ scenography offered by the archeological frame of the Basilica and the approach of sunset towards the end of the play, the organizers of the event created a suggestive atmosphere that grabbed the attention of the audience, gathered in a place not originally intended to host theatrical performances:

In Paestum the show, which has as its reference the rhythmic harmony of the immense and perfect Doric columns, must necessarily—and the need arises in anyone with an instinctive aesthetic sense—be mainly visual, since the suggestion of the architectural grandeur of the environment is too prominent. The spectator’s attention, while it can be easily nourished by the play of colors, by the eurythmy of the dances, but always having as its basis the incomparable show of lights and shadows that the afternoon sun creates on the grandiose famous monument, could not concentrate with equal ease on following the whole unfolding of an entire tragedy.⁷²

The *Mistero Dionisiaco* offered a further development of the new kind of classical performance that INDA staged in restored monuments and archeological

69 Emilio Gentile, ‘The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy,’ in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), 72.

70 Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum*, 48–55.

71 “‘Mistero Dionisiaco’ composizione di V. Bonaiuto rappresentato all’aperto nella zona dei Templi,’ May 26–29, 1938, Archivio Luce, cod. T00001648, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL8900000847/18/mistero-dionisiaco-composizione-v-bonaiuto-rappresentato-all-aperto-nella-zona-templi-1.html>.

72 The quotation comes from the press review included in *Dioniso* 6, no. 6 (1938), 332–333, now in Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum*, 49–50.

sites. If, in the previous years, the dances from *Agamemnon* and the choreographed parade, which was reserved for the short performances of the *Idylls* and for Herodas' mimiamb, lacked dramatic content, by contrast, Bonajuto's play displayed not the whole of Euripides' tragedy but rather only its prominent moments. It incorporated choreographies as a mimetic accompaniment to spoken words and culminated, in the final scene, with a procession of masses of extras in the role of the Theban people, which, gathering together, participated in the mourning over Pentheus's death as living and vigorous sculptures.⁷³

As demonstrated by the analysis of Romagnoli's *Mistero di Persefone*, the performance of *Mistero Dionisiaco* constituted a new and original approach to the reenactment of classical myths within ancient temples. Both plays concern the narration of ancient *mysteria*, which were probably performed before an audience of believers in Greek shrines and sanctuaries. But modern spectators would have been enchanted too, thanks to an original script that was paired with music, dance, and archeological landscapes. Although Raffaele Cantarella proposed biannual theatrical events in the archeological site of Paestum, based not on dramatic texts but on scenes from the Homeric poems to encourage further theatrical innovations, the Second World War and the absence of a proper structure to house the audience put an end to the performances in that archeological area, and to the fruitful cultural collaboration between the Province of Salerno and INDA under the Fascist regime.⁷⁴

Conclusions

From the point of view of the Fascist government, the events in Agrigento and Paestum responded to their cultural propaganda in two ways. On the one hand, the performances staged in 1928 at the Temples of Agrigento were included in a political project whereby they wanted to launch classical representations in ancient theaters and monuments of Italy through the authority of INDA and its main collaborators. In this sense, the support given to the various performances directed by Romagnoli during 1927–1928 falls properly within the scope of this project. The philologist, who participated in the Congress of Bologna (1924) and later became one of the first appointed members of the *Reale Accademia d'Italia* in 1929, had already developed a model for classical dramatic performances within restored monuments, thanks to his experience as artistic direc-

73 Gian Maria Cominetti in Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum*, 52: 'The moment when the crowd mourns was of a truly monumental sculptural power.'

74 Sorrentino, *Rappresentazioni classiche a Paestum*, 9.

tor of the performances at Syracuse. Even if his involvement in theatrical productions outside INDA was not welcomed by the Administration Board of the Syracusan Institute, the government approved and encouraged it, according to a politics of cultural funding that consistently characterized the attitude of the Regime towards Italian theater in the 1920s.⁷⁵ In addition, Romagnoli's personal conception of the modern staging of a Greek drama could be extended to other archeological sites, leading, however, to risky competition for tourism and economic growth with Syracuse.

On the other hand, the events organized in the 1930s were aimed at developing international tourism in Italy, exploiting at the same time an extensive program of restoration and renovation of ancient monuments promoted by the regime. Indeed, the appreciation of the Italian open-air performances by foreign audiences resulted both from the high-quality shows produced and from factors related to the settings in which they took place. In this sense, the Greek and Roman monuments, together with the Italian climate conditions, offered unsurpassed outdoor venues:

While talking about Italian theater with foreigners, they are interested above all else in our outdoor events. And it can be explained: apart from the excellence often achieved by these initiatives of ours, it is (as gourmets say) a specialty. Outdoor theater requires climate and landscape. The climate of the country must provide ample protection against meteorological accidents; and the landscape must compete victoriously with the imagination of the best scenographers. Now, Italy not only satisfies these conditions, but adds to them the possession of classical open-air theaters, and monumental backgrounds very suitable for hosting a performance.⁷⁶

In addition, examples offered by the classical performances produced in Agrigento and Paestum allow us to reflect on a new kind of performances that differed from the staging of ancient dramas in open-air theaters. Whereas the latter gave equal and well-balanced significance to spoken word, music, dance and scenography, like in Romagnoli's productions at the Greek theater of Syracuse, the events at the Temples of Agrigento and Paestum were invested, more

75 In Sara Troiani, 'Ettore Romagnoli *Rievocatore* of Ancient Greek Drama,' in *A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism*, eds. Giovanna Di Martino, Eleftheria Ioannidou, and Sara Troiani, *Classical Receptions Journal* 16, no. 1 (2024) I recently discovered that Romagnoli, probably after his formal dismissal from INDA, attempted to establish a 'Fascist Institute of Classical Drama' that, however, never became a reality.

76 [Puck], 'Dopo le Panatenee,' 325.

broadly, in recitals of ancient poetry, but also in reenactments of ancient myths and rituals, as well as in pantomimes and choreographies to prevent the audience from being distracted in places that were not intended to host theatrical performances. The archeological frame completed these predominantly visual performances, providing both the 'natural' scenography and the challenge of developing new theatrical vocabularies suited for open-air venues.⁷⁷

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77 On July 22, 2023 INDA staged its new production of Aristophanes' *Peace* at the *Valle dei Templi* in Agrigento, thus re-opening the collaboration between the Institute and the Archeological Area.