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THE VOICE OF THE INSTITUTION
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL, NICOLA DE PIRRO
ONE HIERARCH'S WRITINGS IN «SCENARIO» AND THE
RHETORIC OF FASCIST THEATRICAL MANAGEMENT
(1932-1939)

Nicola De Pirro, Theatre Inspector and then Director General of Theatre, became a hierarch of substantial power and influence, but we know relatively little about him. (Single investigations provide only bits and pieces of information, and there is no entry on him, for instance, in either the Treccani encyclopedia or biographical dictionary). This article aims to provide a more complete profile of the man who presided over spectacle in its various forms, as we shall see, for the central 30 years of the 20th century – under Mussolini but also for the DC. The exploration of the rhetoric of fascist theatrical management through De Pirro's articles in «Scenario» seeks to 1., enrich our understanding of De Pirro's approach to his position, 2., draw out the multi-layered logic of the regime's management of theatrical production and personnel, and 3., provide some basis of comparison for post-fascist theatrical management, as De Pirro would return to the helm in 1948 under the Giulio Andreotti.

Born on August 24, 1898 in Calabria, Nicola De Pirro was an *ardito* in the Great War, a *squadrista*, and early adherent of fascism, having joined the movement in July of 1920 and participated in the 1922 March on Rome. Though an attorney by profession, he demonstrated interest in fascist cultural matters early on, acting as chief editor of (and very occasional contributor to) «Critica fascista», the journal directed by Giuseppe Bottai. De Pirro would eventually earn the *sciarpa littorio* for early adhesion and years of high-level service to the regime. His activities in governmental offices spanned several spheres, often having to do with the regulation of labor, his law expertise: the syndicates, youth organizations, and finally and most consistently, theatrical offices. In 1925 he became *sindaco* of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*; from 1928, Secretary General of the *Federazione nazionale degli industriali dello spettacolo*¹; in 1929 he became commander of the *Giovani fascisti* and

¹ Referencing various Acs files, Emanuela Scarpellini cites Ministerial decree of May 11, 1928 that gives De Pirro this position, while his personal file in the Archivio Centrale dello

member of the directorate of the *Federazione dei fasci di Roma* (until 1931), from 1930 a member of the *Consiglio provinciale della Corporazione dello spettacolo*. He was judged favorably, although ultimately not selected, when up for the appointment of Federal Secretary of the Urbe in 1933.

When the film and theatre journal «Scenario» was born in February of 1932, De Pirro was its co-director, along with Silvio d'Amico; already an editor at «Critica fascista» and working with d'Amico in the Corporation, De Pirro was a reasonable choice for such a role. From this point, his credentials as an expert in the regulation of *spettacolo* only grew: he would join the Italian delegate at the annual Universal Theatre Society meeting, and in 1935 was named head of the Theatre Inspectorate, under the Auspices of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, a position that transformed into the Director General of Theatre under the Ministry of Popular Culture. As will be discussed further below, following this appointment, d'Amico left sole directorship of «Scenario» to De Pirro.

Among theatre folk, De Pirro's assignment was met with skepticism: as one police informant noted, the general consensus was that «De Pirro is not at all competent, especially when it comes to music, and he lacks the necessary preparation to fill such an important post».² Although the gossip reported by spies in general (that is, not just in De Pirro's case) tended toward the excessively mean-spirited, reports such as these provide a counterpoint to secondary studies of the music and opera world of the *Ventennio*, which note the apparent open-mindedness of the Director General toward experimental music. One of the chief accusations leveled against De Pirro, in fact, was that he supported – even to an embarrassing point – the composer Gian Francesco Malipiero more because they were friends than because he was capable of appreciating his art: «recently at the Opera Theatre, when one of Malipiero's works was not well received, De Pirro, at the theatre, made a big show of applauding, provoking the resentment of the other spectators. Which in turn provoked some rather inappropriate comments from De Pirro»³.

Stato (Acs), Rome, Ministero dell'Interno, Polizia politica (POL POL.) *fascicoli personali*, De Pirro, Nicola, apparently misdated the appointment to 1926 (Emanuela, Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale e politica del teatro nell'Italia fascista*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1989, p. 55).

² «De Pirro non sarebbe affatto competente soprattutto per quanto riguarda la musica e mancherebbe di quella preparazione necessaria per ricoprire un posto di tanta importanza». Informant's report, dated April 9, 1935. ACS, POL POL., *fascicoli personali*, De Pirro, avv. (A folder to be distinguished from the «De Pirro, Nicola» listed above.)

³ «Quando recentemente alla Reale della Opera fu dato un lavoro di Malipiero che ottenne le generali disapprovazioni, il De Pirro, presente in teatro si affaticava ad applaudire provocando anche il risentimento di altri spettatori. Ciò che provocò da parte del De Pirro frasi ben poco parlamentari», *Ibidem*.

Still, in time, De Pirro rose to the challenges of his post. Persons as expert as d'Amico believed in his good theatrical taste, competency, and practicality («chiaro senso pratico»)⁴. These would be necessary, for the Director General's powers were all-encompassing, both behind the scenes and in the public eye. He oversaw the formation of troupes (dictated in part by workers' protections including salary regulation), their agreements with theatre managers, and the selection of repertoire (which overlapped with censorship concerns and was conditioned by protectionist and politically-motivated measures that set numbers on Italian and foreign plays to be performed). At home and abroad he was often the regime representative at important theatrical events, which could mean taking part in delegations to various conferences (like the SUT); speaking about the theatre abroad, as he did in 1938 at the Italian Cultural Institute in Budapest; presiding over important premiers or the opening of the theatrical season; attending the 1934 Volta Convention on the theatre, etc. De Pirro was necessarily involved in the regime's programming of various *teatro per il popolo* initiatives, like the *Carri di tespi* and *Sabato teatrale*, both judged highly successful by regime superiors⁵, and had a say in ongoing and frequent discussions about the refurbishing and building of theatrical spaces.

Along with Bottai, for instance, De Pirro worked on the creation of an Italian National Theatre, an ambitious project spearheaded by such figures as d'Amico and Luigi Pirandello. These plans went ahead in fits and starts: typically, economics were cited as the chief difficulty in realizing them. (Both Pirandello's and d'Amico's proposals for such an institution imagined not just a single playhouse in the capital, but at least two or three in other key cities, so costs would have indeed been onerous.) Despite De Pirro's indications to Pirandello in 1936 that the required millions had been found and the project would be realized for 1939, it never came to fruition (if fascist temperance, Pirandello's death, the war, or some combination of all these was more to blame is anyone's guess)⁶.

⁴ Silvio d'Amico, *Che cosa fanno ispettorato e corporazione*, now in Alessandro d'Amico and Lina Vito (eds) *Cronache*, 4 voll., Palermo, Novecento, 2001-05, vol. 4.1, p. 232.

⁵ See for instance, Bottai's comments in a 1937 radio address, originally reprinted in «Il Dramma» and reported by Pietro Cavallo, *Immaginario e rappresentazione. Il teatro fascista di propaganda*, Roma, Bonacci, 1990, p. 215n. For a discussion of the importance of the *Carri di tespi* in the Dopolavoro's broader leisure-organization scheme, see Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organisation of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

⁶ The entire development (and non-development) of the National Theatre project is seen from Pirandello's perspective in Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, ed. Benito Ortolani, Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori, 1995.

The substantial lack of resources for important performance endeavors was a major problem that De Pirro had seen from the very first days of his appointment, and he apparently even spoke too freely about it, as we know once again from internal records noting that he tended to tell whoever asked that the situation was dire: «We have to say that everything is going fine», he lamented, «but to the contrary, unfortunately, things are going terribly, and there is no hope at all for help or other financial resources. We don't have a dime, and nevertheless, crazily, they want and they order us to do all sorts of things that, materially speaking, cannot be done»⁷. De Pirro's vision was less grandiose, probably as a result of that practicality d'Amico praised, but seemingly committed; the latter, in fact, in *What the Inspector and Corporation Do*, a 1936 article about the proceedings of a recent encounter of these two entities with the *Duce* – underscored that De Pirro had on this occasion, as often in the past, recommended swift action when it came to renovations: «the difficult conquest must be made gradually, taking careful stock of opportunities large and small, but without delay».⁸ The stasis that often resulted from the gap between projection and realization was a major source of disappointment for the sector, but even if d'Amico would never have prioritized in the same way – and, indeed, before they became collaborators with «Scenario», their disagreements at times went public – De Pirro remained in his eyes an «enthusiastic, intelligent, and diligent colleague» («solerte, intelligente, e diligente collega»)⁹.

The responsibilities of his office meant that De Pirro would at least cross paths, if not work closely, with important thespians. Partly, this was social: close with d'Amico as he was, he could often be found in his company, for evenings out or stays in the country, along with Bottai, Pirandello and Marta Abba, Massimo Bontempelli and Paola Masino, and Corrado Pavolini (a talented young colleague of d'Amico's but, of course, also brother to the in-

⁷ «Abbiamo l'imposizione di dover dire che tutto va bene, ma invece purtroppo le cose vanno malissimo e senza speranza alcuna di aiuti od altre risorse finanziarie. Siamo completamente alla miseria, e ciononostante pazzamente si vuole e ci si ordina di fare tante cose, che materialmente non si possono fare». Informant's report dated May 19, 1935. Acs, POL POL *fascicoli personali* De Pirro, Avv.

⁸ «La difficile conquista va attuata per gradi, seguendo accortamente le maggiori o minori opportunità, ma senza indugio». Silvio d'Amico, *Che cosa fanno ispettorato e corporazione*, cit., p. 232.

⁹ Silvio d'Amico, *Il milione di Cenerentola* (25 February 1931), now in *Cronache*, cit., p. 458. He references *Il milione del Signor Bonaventura*, an article recently written by De Pirro for «Lo spettacolo italiano» on funding issues; De Pirro responded in kind with *Il milione di Cenerentola (lettera aperta a Silvio d'Amico)*, again in «Lo spettacolo italiano» Anno II, n. 2 (February 1931), p. 45. Their polemic was heated, if nonetheless respectful. For d'Amico's many grievances, see *Il teatro non deve morire*, Roma, Eden, 1945.

famous hierarch Alessandro) and his wife. And so, if De Pirro once complained that *capocomici* ran directly to Mussolini when they wanted some advantage,¹⁰ he, too, was frequently sought out for assistance in several types of situations. Over time, he gained a reputation for being capable and, more importantly, powerful.

Pirandello, for example, solicited him when he fell into conflict with CINES over the production of *Acciaio*, a screenplay he wrote with Marta Abba in mind but that was so extremely altered by director Walter Ruttmann that it no longer required the actress' participation. Wondering whether it would be possible to litigate for damages, Pirandello suspected (and was correct) that De Pirro could not officially pursue a case, as it would constitute a conflict of interest with his official position in the Syndicate, but could provide wise counsel or intervene in other ways. They did not know each other well at the time, so, Pirandello mused, «I don't know how trustworthy he is. But he appears to be devoted to me, and I see that – at least in conversation – he is frank, and says what he thinks. Perhaps he would be a good intermediary, as able to *threaten* effectively, if needed, as he seems to be». Picking back up the topic later in the same letter, he continued, «We need someone tactful and resolute, who would know how to conduct the deal firmly and reasonably. I think De Pirro could be suitable».¹¹ Initially impressed with De Pirro's strategy, Pirandello would lose faith in him when CINES would not – and could not be forced to – comply with their demands. From that moment on, believing that De Pirro was not particularly married to their cause, the *maestro's* opinion of him would grow increasingly suspect. In his reporting to Abba in 1935 that De Pirro had been named Inspector, «as someone devoted to me» («come persona a me devota») and put in charge of his project for a State Theatre, his doubt was subtly but clearly expressed: «you know De Pirro. He made the most open declarations of fidelity and devotion...»¹². As we've seen, such doubts were well-justified.

Others appreciated him more, especially because – despite his squadrist past – he seemed reasonable, and not especially militant in his fascism when

¹⁰ Gianfranco Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano nel tempo del fascismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1994, p. 145.

¹¹ «Non so quanto ci sia da fidarsene. Mi si mostra devoto, e vedo che – almeno a parlare – è franco e senza pelli sulla lingua. Forse come intermediario sarà buono, capace come dimostra d'essere di *minacciare*, all'occorrenza, efficacemente»; «Ci vuole una persona risoluta e di tatto, che sappia condurre l'affare, con fermezza e con calma. Io credo che il De Pirro potrà essere adatto», Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., letter 320915, pp. 1032-33.

¹² «Tu conosci il De Pirro. Mi fece la più aperta dichiarazione di fedeltà e di devozione...» Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., letter, 350408, p. 1197.

it came to artistic matters. A handful of iconoclasts, Anton Giulio Bragaglia and impresario Remigio Paone (a suspected anti-fascist and indeed, later, partisan), for instance, sung his praises¹³. A frustrated Alberto Savinio was another who placed his faith in De Pirro when hoping to save the financing that was – at least it was rumored – about to be pulled from a production of *Capitano Ulisse* because the company was slow to take final shape. Savinio wrote to Lamberto Picasso, company head, «There seems to be a misunderstanding or ill will from somebody here. I wrote immediately to De Pirro. Go see him, explain the situation to him, and get rid of this obstacle»¹⁴. De Pirro's position was different this time than it was with Pirandello: he oversaw all such questions, and so his decision-making power was definitive. The confidence with which Savinio assumed that De Pirro would resolve the problem suggests, if nothing else, a sense on the intellectual's part that De Pirro would be inclined to act in his favor, even against formal regulations. This is not necessarily to imply a sort of favoritism for Savinio and his set (mutual friend and colleague to many of the personages listed above), but rather to underscore the sense that the Director General often acted in the interests of art. Such an appraisal has already been advanced by one specialist, who describes De Pirro as a «staunch supporter of the artistic ends of the theatre, [he was] intent on exploiting his broad powers so as to have a profound impact on the art»¹⁵.

Especially significant about the Savinio event, however, is its date: 1948, when De Pirro was eventually reappointed to the position of Director General by new Christian Democratic undersecretary Giulio Andreotti – a gesture not uncommon but nonetheless as offensive to the entire left-wing swath of the performing arts community as it was contrary to the spirit of the 1944 law on epurations that had, indeed, initially deposed him. And, truth be told, contrary

¹³ Maria Procino Santarelli, *Eduardo dietro le quinte: un capocomico-impresario attraverso cinquant'anni di storia, censura e sovvenzioni (1920-1970)*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2003, p. 103. Paone, it should be noted, was investigated along with De Pirro; he, too, was absolved. See also John C.J. Waterhouse, *Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882-1973): The Life, Times, and Music of a Wayward Genius*, Amsterdam, Harwood, 1999. An expanded and substantially revised edition of *Gian Francesco Malipiero* published in Italian, Turin, Nuova ERI, 1990.

¹⁴ «Qui c'è forse un equivoco o il malvolere di qualcuno. Ho immediatamente scritto a De Pirro. *Lo vada a trovare*, gli spieghi la situazione e veda di togliere di mezzo l'ostacolo». Alessandro Tinteri, *Savinio e lo spettacolo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, p. 160.

¹⁵ «Convinto assertore delle finalità artistiche delle scene, [era] deciso a sfruttare gli ampi poteri di cui era dotato per incidere a fondo sulla realtà artistica», Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale e politica del teatro nell'Italia fascista*, cit., p. 164. She further notes that he was supported in his efforts by Ciano when he was Minister, who had theatrical interests of his own.

to what seems to have been the predominant spirit of Nicola De Pirro. The Director General made a request in 1937 to rejoin the militia; and for a period in 1941, he actually did absent himself from DG duties (and from writing in «Scenario») to fight in the war. In the midst of dreadful losses, De Pirro was called to arms on July 13, 1943 and assigned his head editor Mario Corsi to direct «Scenario» (events announced on the front page of the August issue). However, just before his arrest on July 25, 1943, Mussolini then ordered the immediate appointment of De Pirro as *Consigliere di stato* – one can only assume that this was to protect him from heading off to battle. De Pirro did not, however, go north to the Republic of Salò. Instead, he became one of the many super-fascists targeted by the regime's enemies and the subject of a handful of anonymous letters sent to officials urging investigation into his corrupt practices. The most impressive of these is one addressed to Badoglio just a week prior to the armistice, in which the author claims that anyone in the theatre industry could confirm that De Pirro was «the worst of the rotten» («il peggio marcio») around: «he drained millions, which he hid in foreign banks and partly in the Worker's Bank (Florence branch). Clean the place out!!!!!!! »¹⁶. One would imagine that these were simple attempts to displace him for the sake of political enmity, if it weren't for the fact that decades later, in 1966, De Pirro was indeed incriminated for *peculato in concorso* after a three-year investigation into subventions given by his office. He was absolved of the accusations in 1972¹⁷.

By the *Alto commissariato per le sanzioni contro il fascismo*, De Pirro was twice judged unfit for continued service – in an initial 1944 ruling and then in a 1945 response to the defendant's appeal. Most incriminating was his exuberant commitment to Mussolini's movement even before the March on Rome. But two noteworthy details emerged in the deliberations about him. First came the understanding that, regardless of any discipline-specific competencies it may or may not have required (and that De Pirro may or may not have had), the role of Director General «is in and of itself a political appointment», and so, while the subject in question protested that he was appointed for his skills rather than his sympathies, the commission retained that within a ministry that «intended to direct performance toward cultural and propagandistic functions, [...] the nomination of its leader could only be driven by political considerations»¹⁸. Secondly, when De Pirro protested the initial ruling

¹⁶ «Ha succhiato milioni che ha nascoste in banche straniere e in parte a quella del Lavoro (sede di Firenze). Fate pulizia!!!!!!!» Anonymous letter to «Eccellenza Badoglio, Capo del Governo», marked received September 1, 1943. ACS, POL POL *fascicoli personali* De Pirro, Nicola.

¹⁷ Daniela Manetti, entry on «Remigio Paone», Treccani *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 81, 2014. Consulted online November 24, 2016.

¹⁸ «è carica di per se stessa politica»; «intendeva indirizzare lo spettacolo a funzioni

on several grounds, even a proven claim to have carried out partisan activity after September 8 did not excuse his prior service to Mussolini's regime. As the document read, «his claim to have conducted partisan activity can be considered reliable, but such activity does not appear to be of substance and proportion enough to act as attenuating factor in front of the considerable sum of charges deriving from articles 12 and 14» of the July 27, 1944 law that held punishable the active participation in fascist political life.

But then, flying in the face of these appraisals, Andreotti gave De Pirro his old job back, and would vindicate his choice many years later – during a commemoration of the late Eduardo De Filippo – with the claim that theatre people rejoiced in it, for De Pirro was a reserved and honest person («una persona schiva e onesta»), and greatly esteemed («circondato da grande stima»)¹⁹. Bottai, who had worked so closely with De Pirro throughout the *ventennio*, saw it as a personal victory, «like an acknowledgment that we were not all, in short, a pack of incompetents» («come di un riconoscimento che non eravamo tutti, insomma, un branco di incapaci»)²⁰. The ex-censor Leopoldo Zurlo in his 1952 memoir wrote of De Pirro only in passing, and in fairly neutral terms, painting a picture nonetheless of a man «of taste», a diplomatic and indulgent administrator. All innocuous ways of describing someone currently in office and an at least sub-textual approbation of Andreotti's choice.

Perhaps we learn most about De Pirro and his conduct as DG, however, from the private words of Silvio d'Amico, whose vigilant dedication to the theatre was unquestionable. When De Pirro returned to his post in the spring of 1948, his friend took the opportunity to congratulate him and to offer some affectionate but firm advice. «You are intelligent, you are loyal, you know the environment you're going back to being boss of, and you have the most sincere desire to work for art and art alone», d'Amico prefaced his other more difficult remarks. But, he continued,

culturali e propagandistiche, [...] la nomina del reggitore non poteva essere ispirata che da considerazioni politiche.» And following: «si può ritenere attendibile la sua affermazione di collaborazione partigiana, ma questa non si manifesta di entità e proporzioni tali da poter costituire discriminante in confronto al ragguardevole complesso di addebiti che deriva dagli art. 12 e 14...» Report on the meeting of the Central commission for epurations, March 21, 1945. Acs, Ministero dell'Interno, Alto commissariato per le sanzioni contro il fascismo (1944-47), III.22. sf2.

¹⁹ Elio Testoni, ed. Testimony of Giulio Andreotti, *Eduardo De Filippo. Atti del convegno di studi sulla drammaturgia civile e sull'impegno sociale di Eduardo De Filippo Senatore a vita*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2004, p. 152.

²⁰ Giuseppe Bottai, letter to Giuseppe Fanelli, dated April 29, 1948, in *Diario 1935-44*, Giordano Bruno Guerri (ed.), Milano, BUR Rizzoli, 2001, p. 603.

you hold as your fundamental norm that of pleasing as many people as possible. I believe that it's better to do the opposite. In art, the vast majority of it, in all epochs and in all countries, is constituted of the mediocre, the bad, and the worst; when it comes to art, you need to go to the intelligent minority. You can't hope to make Ruggi and Bragaglia, Benelli and Guerrieri, Viola and d'Amico all happy at the same time; you need to decide. If you want to pull the Italian theatre out of the chasm into which it's sinking, you need to be courageous and dive, I'm not saying, not at all, into the arms of a faction, but, at least generally speaking, towards those you admire²¹.

Particularly meaningful about these words in light of Bottai's interpretation of events – and in light of the general image of fascism as *onagrocazia* – was the implacable d'Amico's faith in De Pirro's dedication to the theatre, and presumably the "right kind" of it. Although he had had much to say about the regime's failures, d'Amico's criticism here is not so much of its having had wrong principles, but having lacked the character to carry out the right ones. The director of the National Academy was no stranger to necessary and convenient compromise, so his perspective is all the more telling.

Strangely enough, though, given De Pirro's evident tendency to try to please, d'Amico also warns him against disrespectful treatment of the theatre people he worked with. To judge by his observations, the Director General was not a very likeable guy! De Pirro had treated an important writer «like garbage» («come uno straccio»), and several actresses were known to complain about his speaking offensively («in modo offensivo») to them. Women, it seems, were a weak point for the hierarch. Informers reported about his «unbridled need for flings with women» («lo sfrenato bisogno di avventure femminile»)²², while Pirandello scoffed in a letter to Marta Abba:

²¹ «Tu sei intelligente, sei leale, conosci bene l'ambiente di cui torni a capo, e hai il più sincero desiderio di lavorare per l'arte e per quella sola»; «tieni per norma fondamentale quella di accontentare più gente possibile. Io credo che convenga fare il contrario. In arte, la stragrande maggioranza, in tutte le epoche e in tutti i paesi, è costituita dai mediocri, dai cattivi, e dai pessimi; in arte bisogna andare incontro alle minoranze intelligenti. Tu non puoi sperare di contentare ad un tempo Ruggi e Bragaglia, Benelli e Guerrieri, Viola e d'Amico; bisogna che tu decidi. Se vuoi cavare il teatro italiano dal baratro in cui sta affondando, devi essere coraggioso e buttarti, non ti dico affatto in braccio a una fazione, ma, almeno genericamente, dalla parte di quelli che stimi». Letter from Silvio d'Amico to Nicola De Pirro, conserved in the Fondo d'Amico at the Genova Actor's Museum and reprinted in Raffaella Di Tizio (ed.) *Documenti dal fondo d'Amico*, in a vaster collection entitled *Nascita dell'Accademia*, in the materials section of the website http://www.teatroestoria.it/materiali/La_nascita_dell'Accademia.pdf, pp. 187-88.

²² Informant report dated September 6, 1943, ACS, POL POL *fascicoli personali*, De Pirro, Avv.

De Pirro (Of all people, go figure!) was being indignant about what happens on this beach and in this Hotel “Excelsior”: hard to stomach, he says: [...] all of these gentlemen occupied with all of the ladies in residence; at night, in all the corridors, a constant coming and going through all the doors [...] I told him that, frankly, I hadn’t seen any of that, in the days that I spent at the “Excelsior”, but perhaps that is because I didn’t have his eye for discovering it and didn’t go wandering the corridors at night. But enough of this insipid talk, which turns the stomach, just hearing it from somebody like De Pirro²³.

Such were the ways, it seems, of the Catholic, married with children, old-new Director General of Theatre. (Who certainly did not lack the chance for encounters with women of the stage).

Post-1948, De Pirro worked under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Spectacle, reporting to the *Presidenza del consiglio*. His role continued to be an important one, as he took part in the film and theatre censorship commission, wielding along with Andreotti enormous power over stage and screen. Perhaps the most notorious case in which he was involved was the one that prompted Vitaliano Brancati’s pamphlet *Ritorno alla censura*, a scathing attack on DC censorship practices, which, he claimed, resembled fascism’s but were in the end even worse. Brancati had been moved to write the attack when a seven-member commission that included De Pirro prohibited his play *La governante*. Initially reluctant to approve the script, when De Pirro learned of the campaign the playwright was mounting to draw attention to the matter, he personally made cuts and amendments to the text (as Zurlo before him) that would – he pledged to Andreotti – make it suitable for public performance and thereby avoid both scandal and Brancati’s ire. He was not successful. But he would support the cause of Anna Proclemer in 1956 when she would once again seek the *nulla osta* for a posthumous production of the play (Brancati had passed away two years earlier). Proclemer, like several others who had come into contact with De Pirro, found him to be the approachable one²⁴. Certainly De Pirro redeemed himself among most sets, perhaps if only

²³ «De Pirro (proprio lui, figuraTi!) se n’è venuto indignato di ciò che avviene su codesta spiaggia e in codesto albergo “Excelsior” [Castiglioncello (Livorno)]: cosa da stomacare, dice: [...] tutti i signori occupanti delle signore villeggianti; la notte, in tutti i corridoi, un entrare e uscire da tutte le porte [...] Io gli ho detto che veramente non avevo veduto nulla di tutto questo, nei giorni che avevo passato all’”Excelsior”, ma forse sarà stato perché io non avevo i suoi occhi per scoprirlo e non andavo di notte in giro per i corridoi. Ma lasciamo questi insulsi discorsi, che danno un urto di stomaco, solo a sentirli fare da un De Pirro». Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., letter 340812, p. 1142.

²⁴ The irony in this case was that the two functionaries to support Brancati’s case were Cesare Vico Lodovici and De Pirro, the two ex-fascists who returned to the analogous ministry. For a full account of this event and the complications of post-fascist DC censorial

because he kept on with his efforts to please as many as possible, including the great left-wing theatre makers of the new generation, like Grassi and Strehler; even Ivo Chiesa, long-time head of the Stabile di Genova, for some years along with Luigi Squarzina, remembered De Pirro as one who actually cared about the theatre²⁵.

In addition to the prose theatre and opera worlds, the Directorship had jurisdiction over the cinema. De Pirro was thus also heavily involved in running the *Centro Sperimentale del Cinema*, of which he officially became president in 1948 (even if effective control would remain in the hands of his colleagues) when it was decided that Umberto Barbaro, as a communist, should be replaced. In 1950, De Pirro became special commissioner, and was in part responsible for the crucial 1955 statute that expanded the center's operations beyond production to protection of native cultural patrimony. As late as 1963, he presided over a project to fuse the *Accademia d'Arte drammatica* and the CSC: a project, however, never realized.²⁶ That same year, having reached the age of 65, he retired. As noted, accusations of *peculato* shadowed the years after his retirement, but he was eventually acquitted. De Pirro died in 1979.

«Scenario» as De Pirro's megaphone

As noted above, when «Scenario» was born in 1932, d'Amico and De Pirro were its co-directors. The monthly magazine was independent, and was too varied in its content and point of view to be categorized as a regime publication *per sé*; and yet, as Mirella Schino has rightly observed,

with such a pair directing it, in '32 "Scenario" seems to be a magazine that is at least indirectly blessed by the regime. It can allow itself to be a militant magazine. Even better: it is, or at least believes itself to be, the incarnation of one train of thought on theatrical reform at least semi-officially approved by the regime²⁷.

administration, see Patricia Gaborik, *Il censore censurato*, in, *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà (eds.) Vol. 3, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, pp. 786-92.

²⁵ Maria Pia Fusco, *Addio, senza alcun rimpianto*, «La Repubblica», August 4, 1993, consulted online, April 8, 2017.

²⁶ Gian Piero Brunetta recounts this period in *Il cinema neorealista italiano: Storia economica, politica, e culturale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2003.

²⁷ «Con una simile coppia di direttori, nel '32 «Scenario» sembra essere una rivista almeno indirettamente benedetta dal regime. Si può permettere di essere una rivista militante. Anzi: è, o crede di essere, anche l'incarnazione di una tendenza di pensiero sulla

Nowhere is this more clearly evidenced than in the April 1935 article announcing the creation of the Inspectorate and De Pirro's placement at its head: «At this point everybody knows the battles “Scenario” has fought for the necessary renovation of our theatre; nor would it be possible to hide our obvious satisfaction about what is a clear recognition of our cause. Which is of course that of the Italian's theatre»²⁸.

D'Amico's later claim that he left directorship to De Pirro in 1936 when the latter became Inspector – «intuiting that any freedom of judgement, on those pages, had become impossible, I abandoned it»²⁹ – must be understood within this fuller context (and recalling his and De Pirro's friendship, even if they seemed more distant in this period than in the past). Indeed, given his authority and dwelling in high circles, d'Amico already carried a heavy weight of his own. As spies assigned to him would note in a 1939 report, he was known as the «high priest of Italian theatre» and, although this detail pertains to a later period than the magazine's founding, as «director of the Royal Drama Academy, thus an entity of the State, his words have always been taken as those of the more or less official mouthpiece of the executive spheres».³⁰ A publication in their hands, then, could hardly escape such status. But if this relationship disturbed Silvio d'Amico enough to make him leave the directorship, De Pirro instead took full advantage of it.

Following is a sampling of articles from «Scenario» that we may attribute to Nicola De Pirro either because he signed his own name or because they are authored by «Scenario» in the period of his solo directorship (the one exception is noted below). The scope is not to exhaustively represent his point of view, but to trace the various ways De Pirro used the publication to finesse his position. We see, first, the development of one man's career: we see how he viewed his role and how «Scenario» could function as an extension of it; but even more, we get a glimpse of his sense of self and its evolution over time.

riforma teatrale almeno ufficiosamente approvata dal regime», Mirella Schino, *Storia di una parola. Fascismo e mutamenti di mentalità teatrale*, «Teatro e Storia», anno XXV, n. 3, 2011, pp. 169-212 (qui 175).

²⁸ «Le battaglie combattute da «Scenario» per il necessario rinnovamento della nostra Scena, ormai son di pubblica ragione; né ci sarebbe possibile tacere una ovvia soddisfazione per questo non dubbio riconoscimento della bontà della nostra causa. Che è poi quella del Teatro italiano»: *L'Ispektorato del Teatro*, «Scenario», anno IV, n. 4, April 1935, p. 183.

²⁹ «intuendo che ogni libertà di giudizio, in quelle pagine, era ormai diventato impossibile, io lo abbandonai». Silvio d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire*, cit., p. 32.

³⁰ «direttore dell'Accademia dramm. Reale, quindi statale, le sue parole sono sempre interpretate portavoce ufficioso delle sfere dirigenti». Informant's report dated March 3, 1939. ACS, POL POL *fascicoli personali*, d'Amico, Silvio.

Points 1 and 2 below address these personal aspects in particular. Secondly, through De Pirro's journalist stances, we are able to interpret, at the very least, his vision of the Ministry and the regime's role in the hoped-for theatrical reform. De Pirro's evolution in many ways mirrors that of the Theatre wing and, above it, the Ministry and the regime. Namely, these articles allow us to trace an increasing "activism" – especially from an artistic point of view – as the *ventennio* progressed. These more explicitly political dimensions, though overlapping with 1 and 2, are the focus of points 3 and 4.

1. Most striking, especially in light of the magazine's "*ufficiosità*", is De Pirro's use of it as a platform to speak to two publics at once: to his higher-ups and to the theatrical community. The mobility of position he sought, and attained, can be seen even in the choice to sign some articles with his own name and others with the seemingly impersonal signature of «Scenario». Most of these articles were sorts of reports from the underground of fascist offices, usually the Inspectorate or the Corporation, confusing the issue of whether «Scenario» was observing and judging the regime's endeavors or if the government was using the publication as a means of communication to the sector. With De Pirro in the middle – and as author or at least authorizer of each article – it could, of course, be one or both. In this way, De Pirro crafted an image of himself as a go-between, a champion of the thespians' cause with the government, but also the representative who knew which government line needed to be held and when. It is not at all impossible that his working life in the syndicates had profoundly shaped his approach to his job and that, therefore, he presented himself as a mediator precisely because that is how he saw his position.³¹

Particularly illustrative of this approach is the article that appeared in the July 1932 issue, *Conquiste della corporazione dello spettacolo* (*The Conquests of the Performance Corporation*), reproduced below, where it is unclear if it is the regime making conquests *on behalf of* theatre folk or *of* them. This is an effect produced, at least partly, by De Pirro's linguistic choices. The reform of the theatre, desired by regime officials and thespians alike, would be just one of many «battles» of the so-called revolution. De Pirro writes

³¹ As a side note, it is worth underscoring that there was no monolithic "regime viewpoint" on the theatre for De Pirro to hold: debates on practical and aesthetic issues alike were rife throughout the period, so it was never as simple as artist vs. regime. But, the columns of «Scenario» could be used to good effect on the readership: not only did De Pirro have control over the picture of any situation he presented, the mention of the right Minister's praise, of or Mussolini himself, was a way to imply – whether it was honest or not – that De Pirro's opinion might be the preferred one "where it counted" in any disagreements that arose.

proudly – and, it could seem, as a man of the theatre – of the praise received by Minister Bottai for «our» corporation. But when he shifts into speaking of the «discipline» necessary in the sector, the point of view seems instead to be that of the *gerarca* called in to impose an order that the industry has been unable to create for itself:

Many have felt the need for a disciplining of supply and demand of labor in the artistic realm; but ideas on how to enact it are completely discordant. With the rise of Fascism, on one hand, began a take-no-prisoners assault on all the parasitic forms of theatrical labor, which, like all battles, has seen attempts, errors, and even defeats.

But, he argued, «the first and most noteworthy step toward the desired discipline» had been taken; and if not all solutions to all problems had been found, he noted, the path was clear. Concluding the article, De Pirro shifts again, noting that what the Corporation wants to do will require, above all, legislative means and «we have no doubt that these will be granted». Here, then, he assumes that mediating middle position. His is the voice of the Corporation, the go-between for the industry and Mussolini's government. He speaks reassuringly to his artist-companions while also sending a pointed message to the higher powers about what to do for the good of the Art.

2. Over time, De Pirro writes and signs more articles. His pieces appear occasionally from 1932 to 1938, and then multiply from 1939 onward (with a silent period in 1941 when he enlisted). It is not, however, only the quantity of articles that changes over time. He also begins to address aesthetic issues. He does so at first abstractly and tentatively, and most often in the context of his typical business-report-like articles, as in the February 1933 piece *L'ufficio di collocamento dello spettacolo* (*The Performance Placement Office*) where he vindicates the particularity of artistic work, defending the rights of company heads to select their own troupe members against the Syndicate offices that would have liked tighter control over distribution of employment; or in the August 1935 piece, a reproduction of the first radio speech he gave in his new role, where he stresses that «the Inspectorate naturally cannot occupy itself only with economic and professional problems: the artistic factor is essential for the life of the Theatre».³² By 1938, however, he strikes out boldly, with an article such as *Verso il teatro di domani* (*Towards the Theatre of Tomorrow*, May, below), which was a written version of the concluding remarks he had

³² «l'ispettorato naturalmente non può preoccuparsi solo di problemi economici e professionali: il fatto artistico è essenziale per la vita del Teatro». *L'Ispettorato del Teatro*, August 1935, cit.

delivered in a speech at the Italian Cultural Institute of Budapest on March 24. Here he claimed that a new (fascist) spirit was afoot and that perhaps

the signs of this new spirit are in the phenomenon of a reaching out to the people that the Italian theatre is doing through the Thespian Trucks, Theatrical Saturdays, and the rebirth of so many open-air shows. The entities charged with organizing the theatre in Italy are sensitive to these new orientations, from which the Italian theatre might take the new path that history asks of it. The epoch of the Bourgeois theatre being concluded, perhaps tomorrow this art form can once again become one of the maximum expressions of civic and social life, the rite and festival of a people spiritually united to hear the poet's song³³.

From this point on, De Pirro's tendency to speak explicitly about new directions – as a reflection of social changes but also an imperative – became consistent; and it would seem that the very fact of his increased and increasingly substantive writing signals both private and public developments. On a private level, Nicola De Pirro (the attorney who found himself at the apex of theatrical programming that would have been more appropriate in the hands of what we today call an artistic director), evidently gained confidence in himself and his own expertise over the years. He had been given power in 1935; by 1939, it would seem, he had come to believe he also had authority.

3. As the above commentary on the July 1932 article suggests, De Pirro's writings were thoroughly steeped in fascist rhetoric and ideology; in them we see an amalgam of many of fascism's core principles, and how these concepts would be applied in the theatrical sector. Mussolini's totalitarian-revolutionary ambitions are salient, as are the approach to them that would be taken. If the theatre was so crucial to fascist cultural schemes «for its social ramifications» (as De Pirro wrote in the July '32 piece), we see in his language that its institutions and individuals would be treated as any other: they would be subjected to reclamation (*bonifica*) and discipline, and their devotion to the State was expected. A most striking example of the condescension that came with such an approach is offered in the aforementioned August 1935 article, in which the novice Inspector notes that «those likeable people, actors [...] are, both collectively and as individuals, a bit difficult to deal with. All those people who live the Theatre and for the Theatre aren't very easy either». The discipline enacted on them, in fact, would be a «continuous, slow, progressive action»³⁴. Actors, in particular, bothered De Pirro: nearly a decade later, in

³³ Nicola De Pirro, *Verso il teatro di domani*, «Scenario», anno VII, n. 5, pp. 247-249.

³⁴ «Ora bisogna confessare che quelle simpatiche persone che sono gli attori, [...] sono, sia collettivamente che singolarmente, un poco difficile a trattare. Né sono facili tutti

June of 1943, in a piece entitled *Il giuoco delle parti* (*The Rules of the Game*), he continued to rail against their lack of discipline and sense of responsibility, even while praising their talents and legitimizing their artistic aspirations. Although this article dates to the period beyond my focus here, it is worth citing also because it speaks to a troubling continuity already addressed elsewhere in this dossier: as we have seen in Raffaella Di Tizio's commentary on «Il Selvaggio», such an attitude was prevalent among the more intransigent fascists; and yet, as crucially underscored in Mirella Schino's prologue, such prejudices were hardly isolated within the walls of the fascist house³⁵. Indeed, we must think not only that they were part and parcel of the sector's "crisis", but that they conditioned the regime's interventions and, especially, the ways they spoke of them. Note, for example, how De Pirro implies that supposedly selfish behaviors created a need to reeducate actors:

It is necessary on one hand to appeal to those few already illustrious actors whose love for the art is bigger than that which they have for themselves, to the point that they, as the late Duse implored, make themselves collaborators of the writer, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. But, on the other hand, we need to educate a large batch of new actors that is inspired from the start, as much as possible, to this unusual love, of subordination and of discipline, offering them in compensation the certainty of working in companies that provide everyone with the satisfaction of a most noble nature, that of participating in a first-class artistic activity³⁶.

This sort of work was being done, De Pirro continued, in d'Amico's academy; but true improvement of the sector would only occur, he noted,

gli altri che vivono del Teatro e per il Teatro. Su tutti costoro eserciterà l'Ispezzorato, attraverso le Organizzazioni sindacali, una continua, lenta, progressiva azione disciplinatrice». *L'Ispezzorato del Teatro*, August 1935, cit.

³⁵ Mirella Schino further completes the picture of the tensions surrounding actors and their increasing power as *capocomici* in *Sette punti fermi*, part of a previous dossier in *L'anticipo italiano. Fatti, documenti, interpretazioni e testimonianze sul passaggio e sulla ricezione della grande regia in Italia tra il 1911 e il 1934*, a cura di Mirella Schino, Carla Arduini, Rosalba De Amicis, Eleonora Egizi, Fabrizio Pompei, Francesca Ponzetti, Noemi Tiberio, «Teatro e Storia», n. 29, annale 2008, pp. 29-39 (especially 36-38).

³⁶ «Occorre da un lato fare appello a quei pochi fra gli attori già illustri i quali sentano un amore per l'arte più grande di quello che hanno per sé stessi, fino al punto di farsi, come implorava l'ultima Duse, collaboratori dell'autore, anche a costo di sacrifici personali. Ma, dall'altro lato, occorre la formazione di un'ampia schiera di attori nuovi, a cui fino dai primi passi sia per quanto è possibile ispirato questo insolito amore, della subordinazione e della disciplina, offrendo loro in compenso la certezza di sboccare in formazioni teatrali che diano a tutti una soddisfazione della più nobile natura, quella di partecipare a una attività artistica di gran classe», Nicola De Pirro, *Il giuoco delle parti*, «Scenario», anno XII, n. 6, June 1943, pp.185-86.

when multiple schools, producing hundreds not dozens of these responsible artists would be formed. The question goes beyond the scope of this essay and dossier, of course, but how and whether remnants of this vision of responsibility impacted the ways and means of governmental sponsorship under the DC, and still under De Pirro, are questions to be further explored.

In a fascist context, the extent to which these efforts could contain a certain level of “violence” was a matter of course – and implicit in De Pirro’s language. De Pirro’s early adherence to fascism seems important here: for a *squadrista*, violence was both real and rhetorical, and accepted as a proper method of achieving political goals. Even a journal like «Critica fascista», which under a so-called “revisionist” fascist like Giuseppe Bottai theoretically represented the less intransigent, more intellectual and “enlightened” set, took for granted that the new order would be imposed if necessary. And so in a column of «Aforismi Mussoliniani», it could reproduce a quotation by the *Duce*, «when the masses are wrong, one must go against the masses»³⁷. De Pirro’s prose frequently encapsulates this mindset. As noted above, the ambiguity of the Conquests article – by or of the thespians – and the suggestion that it was the regime’s structures that would shape them up makes this clear. Consistently, implicitly, the celebration of struggle at fascism’s core returns in the squadrist-cum-editor’s writing.

The «Scenario» article announcing the creation of the Inspectorate and De Pirro’s appointment celebrated a victory, but cautioned, «the field to be cultivated is, we will not say virgin land – if that were true, we would merely need to seminate it – but, unfortunately, land still covered with numerous and crumbling residues of the past. We must first demolish, then rebuild»³⁸. The fascist revolution, they stressed, would be massive, enduring, continuous; but more than a reminder that the work would take time, this was a recalling of the spirit of *bonifica*. When the Theatre Inspectorate was created on April 11, 1935, the regime’s much-vaunted reclamation of the Agro Pontino was in full force: in just three days, the first anniversary of Sabaudia’s inauguration would arrive. The language of reclamation had permeated the fascist imaginary and was spendable, it seemed, in every area of intervention.

In the articles officially and solely De Pirro’s, the language of fascism’s youthful and reconstructive powers girded the continuation of the same logic.

³⁷ «Quando la massa ha torto bisogna andare ‘contro’ la massa», «Critica fascista» Anno II, n.14, 15 July 1924, p. 538 (but originally from «Il Popolo d’Italia»).

³⁸ «Il campo da coltivare è, non diremo un terreno vergine – se così fosse, basterebbe ararlo e seminarlo – ma, purtroppo, un terreno tuttora ingombro di innumerevoli e crollanti residui del passato. Bisogna prima abbattere, e poi ricostruire», *L’Ispektorato del Teatro*, April 1935, cit.

In his speech and corresponding August 1935 article, the analogy was clear. Like the *Opera nazionale combattenti* rid the marshes of malaria, so too would the Duce's plans free the theatre of ill bodies and minds: the state of affairs was miserable, and «a good part of this misery is thanks to the broken and spoiled mentality» of the theatre people (one sees why d'Amico would reprimand his attitude years later). «But I am optimistic», he continued: «The force of persuasion of the fascist systems and the unparalleled prestige of our Chief are virtually infallible remedies, which will surely cure the Italian Theatre, and lead to its rescue»³⁹. Put another way, if the Agro Pontino had been born of the labor of regime and *popolo* alike, so, too, would the reclamation of the theatre depend on everyone's dedication and, chiefly, non-egoism. Here was a vindication of Giovanni Gentile's ethical state, in which the new Italy would be built also thanks to the will of its citizens and their *faith* in the project. De Pirro's repeated admonition of those who live for the Theatre is just that: a reminder not to ask what the country can do for you, but what you must do for your country. On this point, and the appeal to faith in the creed, it is worth citing the article in which «Scenario» celebrated the fascist decennial in October of 1932, although it must be considered co-signed by De Pirro and d'Amico (the opening article of the issue, there was no signature). «Believers in Art», it calls out,

Let us salute October 28 for what it is: seal on the first decade of the Revolution, the beginning of an activity both the same and different in all of the fields where the Italian spirit today ferments. Our time is not a time of ivory towers. The artist of the Italian Twentieth Century does not ignore twentieth-century Italy. Especially if he is an artist of the Theatre: that is to say, of that art which, born from rite, will not live today – in any of its forms, from the stage to the screen, or even those devices that transmit invisible spectacles to those far away – if it does not appeal to a public's passion⁴⁰.

³⁹ «[U]na buona parte di cotesta miseria è dovuta alla mentalità guasta e viziata di coloro che vivono nel Teatro e per il Teatro. Ma io sono ottimista. La forza della persuasione degli ordinamenti fascisti ed il prestigio senza pari del nostro Capo sono rimedi pressoché infallibile, che guariranno certamente e condurranno a salvamento il Teatro Italiano», *L'Ispezzorato del Teatro*, August 1935, cit.

⁴⁰ «Credenti nell'Arte, salutiamo la data del XXVIII Ottobre per quello che è: suggello al primo decennio della Rivoluzione, inizio d'un attività uguale e nuova, in tutt' i campi dove lo spirito d'Italia oggi fermenta. Il nostro non è il tempo delle torri d'avorio. L'artista del Novecento italiano non ignora l'Italia del Novecento. Soprattutto se sia un'artista del Teatro: di quell'arte cioè che, nata dal rito, anche oggi non vive – in qualunque delle sue forme, dalla scena allo schermo, e sino all'apparecchio che trasmette ai lontani la rappresentazione invisibile – se non facendo appello alla passione d'un pubblico», *Decennale*, «Scenario», anno 1, n. 9, October 1932, s.p.

A likewise representative article in which nearly all these linguistic tropes return is *Verso il teatro di domani*, below.

4. If Nicola De Pirro's writings offer insight into his sense of self and the evolution of his work as Director General over the years, these mirror in many ways the intensification and expansion of the regime's (and the Ministry of Popular Culture's) intervention in theatrical enterprises. They also show the espousal of a very specific aesthetic approach, if not exactly style.

As regards the intensification, two observations seem productive. First is the fact that De Pirro had overseen the development of several theatrical programs with which the regime was rather pleased. First among these were the *carri di Tespi*, which predated De Pirro's management, having been implemented in 1929, but carried on steadily and with much fanfare throughout the 30s. Several «theatre for the masses» projects were erected or largely taken over by the government – the *Istituto nazionale del dramma antico*, *sacre rappresentazioni* and *concerts*, the *Sabato teatrale* program that offered inexpensive tickets for the working masses to the important theatres, and major festivals like the *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino*, etc⁴¹. Many of these initiatives fell under the operations of the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* and developed in conjunction also with the Ministry of Instruction; they were all a result of the regime's efforts to «andare al popolo», as the slogan famously went. They were designed, that is, to reach broader swaths of the population and to bring, if not always higher culture, a high quality of performance to popular audiences. On one hand, it was satisfaction with progress that spurred them on. Conversely, in the wake of encounters with Nazi officials in Germany, there was a sense that more could be done; Mussolini would grow increasingly angry with the failure to “break” the bourgeoisie of their bad habits, and he would also suggest that one bastion of resistance to him was, precisely, the theatre⁴².

The restlessness contained within such observations, however, points to another area of debate regarding the role of theatrical performance in Mussolini's Italy: if there was to ever be a “fascist theatre,” what would that mean? What would it look like? (“How much propaganda was too much propaganda?” was just one of many queries.) And so, in step with the intensification of efforts and De Pirro's more frequent writing came a greater willingness to have his say

⁴¹ For a geographic and quantitative survey of these initiatives, see Patricia Gaborik, *Lo spettacolo del fascismo*, in Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà (eds.) *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, cit., pp. 589-613.

⁴² Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, Renzo De Felice, ed., Milano, Rizzoli, 2006 [1980], 56 and 139. On Mussolini's mounting anger against the bourgeoisie, see in particular Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007, especially Chapter 10, «Gli italiani non sono romani».

in the aesthetic debates that had begun over a decade before – «Critica fascista» had hosted a major exploration of the topic in 1926-27 – and still raged.

Even the most exigent of theatre intellectuals, from Pirandello and Bontempelli to d'Amico and Renato Simoni, had accepted in some form the idea that the theatre's future lie in making it appreciated and accessible to larger audiences. But, of course, «going to the people» meant something different to all of them; whereas Bontempelli for instance was intrigued by various «theatre of the masses» projects, which could even be performed for thousands at a time, d'Amico insisted time and again that if the popular classes were wanted in the theatres, one had simply to make the tickets to existing good prose performance affordable. Most of this set was not surprisingly adverse to the development of propaganda theatre, understood as drama that specifically explored fascist themes and values, and the types of historical plays championed by Giovacchino Forzano, whose parallels to the present day were too easily drawn. The opinion was shared by hierarchs like Bottai and De Pirro; even if, in the late thirties, he would preside over an expansion of more militant experiments (which Alessandro Pavolini championed).

From the start, as in the piece celebrating the *Decennale*, the eventual direction was foreshadowed. In that and other writings that underscored the «social» mission of the theatre and, indeed, the *responsibility* of theatre artists to communicate with their fellow citizens, the groundwork was laid for more insistent remarks in later years. A rather unique piece in this regard is the largely theoretical exploration De Pirro offered in *Socialità essenziale del teatro* (*The Essential Sociality of the Theatre*) in July of 1939, where he argues that the theatre's capacity to preach common ideals is its aesthetic foundation («fondamento estetico»). Any theatre that was not a force of expression for such shared values was a self-negation, really, not even art («negazione di sé stesso, quindi arte falsa, non arte»), he argued, vindicating a civic function that predated the artistic one: «We could come to admit», he wrote, «that the theatre is, in its evolution, sociality and community before it is art»⁴³.

Read in conjunction with the other pieces already referenced here and two earlier pieces from this same year, *Teatro Anno XVII* (*Theatre Year XVII* January) and *Ritrovamento dei valori essenziali* (*The Rediscovery of Essential Values*, March) it is clear that De Pirro is not calling for mass production of agit-prop or anything similar. Instead – and perfectly in line with the intellectuals he spent his time with – he suggests a harnessing of the ritual,

⁴³ «Si potrebbe giungere ad ammettere che il teatro sia, nella sua evoluzione, socialità e popolarità prima che arte.», *Socialità essenziale del teatro*, «Scenario», anno VIII, n. 7, p. 295.

primordial power the theatre was believed to hold. In January⁴⁴, writing of a more poetic, musical, and even religious theatre, «a force of fancy that transforms reality into a myth» («una forza di fantasia che trasforma la realtà in mito») he is quite obviously seconding the thought of Bontempelli, prominent novelist, dramatist, theorist, Academic of Italy, and, after Pirandello's and D'Annunzio's death in 1936 and 1938 respectively, the regime's go-to public intellectual on literary matters. (Bontempelli, whose direction of the literary journal «900» is also discussed in Di Tizio's piece in this dossier, had already advanced these ideas in the «Critica fascista» debates, and in 1938 released his *Avventura novecentista*, an essay collection that furnished a large block of theatrical theory written by him between '26 and '38)⁴⁵.

In March⁴⁶, De Pirro's references to «the history of our stock as adventure and destiny» («la storia della stirpe come avventura e come destino»), to the importance of the classics, and the «great breath» («grande respiro») of the theatre and renovated spaces, further recall not only Bontempelli but also the romantic-political theatrical palingenesis D'Annunzio argued would come from open-air spaces – D'Annunzio who is remembered in a box alongside De Pirro's article, on the first anniversary of his death. Such observations by De Pirro at this point are the culmination of those earlier, more generic comments against the so-called bourgeois theatre; the insistence on a move toward more spectacular theatre of the masses was also a declaration to «Scenario» readers that the fruits of Mussolini's war on the middle class, its self-image, and its comfortable life could be seen in the theatrical «conquests» already made – and would continue. As an increasingly confident De Pirro pitched it, this was the victory of fascism's culture of consent. This was the regime giving the people what it wanted: «Thus, the public has told us frankly that it will come back to the theatre: but only as long as they are given things worthy of being heard and seen. Joy for the eyes and joy in the heart; spiritual joy, that is, that doesn't come from a game but from a revelation: an intimate and profound joy»⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Nicola De Pirro, *Teatro Anno XVII*, «Scenario», anno VIII, n. 1, January 1939, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Cfr. «Critica fascista», anno IV, n. 22, 15 November 1926, pp. 416-17; Massimo Bontempelli, *L'Avventura novecentista. Selva polemica (1926-1939)* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1938). For Bontempelli's theatre and Bontempelli on the theatre outside of the confines of «900», see my *Watching the Moon and Other Plays*, New York, Italica Press, 2013.

⁴⁶ Nicola De Pirro, *Ritrovamento dei valori essenziali*, «Scenario», anno VIII, n. 3, March 1939, p. 99.

⁴⁷ «Dunque il pubblico ha detto chiaro e tondo che al teatro ci torna: ma al patto che gli si diano cose degnissime di essere ascoltate e viste. Gioia degli occhi e gioia del cuore; gioia, s'intende, spirituale, che non venga da un gioco ma da una rivelazione: gioia intima e profonda», in *Ibidem*.