

Roberto Benigni on TuttoDante

Interviewed in Spanish by Diego Senior of Caracol Radio

Interpretation by Violet Vandever

D: *So how have you felt for the past three years presenting your play, TuttoDante, across Europe and now in the United States?*

Benigni: Well. Extremely well, dear Diego. I find myself so well in places like South America and the Spanish world because we Italians are so similar in our hearts, in our passions, and our temperaments—these are things we have in common with Latin Americans and those places that speak Spanish. This last part of the trip is really the best; it is where I hope to be the most prepared and the most inspired and full of love and energy. All of this tour in Europe and the U.S. has been so spectacular, and such a big production, a big show; but coming here, where I am not among cousins but among brothers really, where I find myself so well, and where there are so many Italians...I experience something more sincere, more beautiful, more full of passion.

D: *They're turning you into an honorary citizen of Buenos Aires. What is your reaction to that?*

Benigni: [laughter] I feel like I am already a citizen of Buenos Aires. Whenever I see a beautiful place, a beautiful house in Buenos Aires, I want to rent it. I want to move in and plant myself there. And so making me an honorary citizen is really like a confirmation of mutual love, so I will accept it very happily. Very, very happily.

D: *So you have to say a little bit about Berlusconi, it is inevitable. Tell me, in what section of hell would you place Berlusconi?*

Benigni: Berlusconi in hell? Ah...poor Berlusconi [laughter]. Well, I hope he goes to heaven...however, in l'Inferno there are all types of sins and sinners, so I think Berlusconi could go very well anywhere there in Dante. Actually I think that we could do a good show together, Berlusconi and me, because he has really become a real showman, with all the dancers and stripteases and whatnot. We could do a show together with strippers. We could do it all over the world. And surely in l'Inferno we could construct a *circolo* for him, his own personal circolo, just for him.

D: [laughter] *Just for him?*

Benigni: Yes, we can make a trip and a circolo just for him.

D: *I've noticed that your play does not have any subtitles, yet you are performing for such a huge universal audience. Why don't you use them in your play?*

Benigni: It changes continuously, so it is true that we cannot use subtitles because the show is always changing. So we can't use them, not in English, not in French, not in Spanish...because I never say the same thing. And so instead I talk a little bit about things that happen that same day, about the city in which I find myself. I talk about the people I meet, about the hotel I'm staying in, about the restaurants, all of these things.

D: *In your adaptations for various audiences you have left some parts of the show in its original Italian to remain true to Dante's vision. Can you speak a little bit about this?*

Benigni: Precisely. Bravo, Diego, you speak the truth. That which never changes, I would say, is that which happens at first. And that...the final part in Dante, written in its original Italian, is so beautiful, it feels like a musical work, like a concert from God and Beethoven together...with Frank Sinatra, and who else? Bach, together with Brahms and the Doors...and the Rolling Stones....and Puccini. There.

D: *Why did you choose to adapt a book from Dante?*

Benigni: Because in Italy everyone knows Dante--it is the only thing everyone knows. It is like when you say Cervantes or Don Quixote in Spain--who doesn't know him? It is the same thing. All the grandmothers, sons, everyone, everyone knows him. He is really like one of our friends. A relative, part of the family, you know?

D: *Dante and Cervantes, they're both two of the great universal authors.*

Benigni: Precisely, Dante and Cervantes. I remember hearing that Dostoevsky, the great Russian author, once said that the day that he would appear before God, before *Il Signore*, he would want to appear before him with a copy of Don Quixote. And he would tell Him..."I come from the people that gave the world this book."

For the most part Dante and Cervantes are very similar to one another, Don Quixote and Dante, the liberty and the beauty and the poetry. They are two great, extraordinary things.

D: *You perform as a clown very often. Please, tell me what is the key to being a good clown?*

Benigni: Oh, ah, no, I don't know if I could respond to this question, it would be heresy. Because it would be a very exceptional thing if I knew how and what makes a good clown. Because it's a mystery--how can you know how one is able to really come alive, I don't know. Yes, it happens,

but when it does it is always a mystery. When I see that people are laughing or they are responding in some way, it seems to me that [the character] is alive and it is a miraculous thing. But I wouldn't know how to find the formula, or what exactly the secret is to this mystery. And I am happy to not know it.

D: Do you use a script when you are made up as a clown, some predetermined act?

Benigni: No, I don't have a script. I want to make a comedy, not divine, but a comedy, cinema, to make people laugh. That is the thing that pleases me the most.

D: The Divine Comedy is such a grand work of art. Has anyone ever approached you, or have you ever thought about making a movie out of it?

Benigni: Oh yes, many times. Many, many times. But it is too difficult. Italians and Americans both have approached me with proposals to make it, to make the Divine Comedy. But it is a work of poetry, and you would lose the poetry, it would become a work of prose, a script. A million dollars would not be enough to do the special effects for even one canto of the work because of its *grandezza*. And because of the amount of time--each canto becomes a two-hour story. It is incredible.

D: Can you speak a little bit about the universality of Dante?

Benigni: You said it very well, Diego...Dante is universal, like all the great creators. And like Cervantes, like I said before. It is universal and it is forever. Por todos. Por siempre.

D: Thank you so very much for speaking with me today and for speaking to Columbia, it has been a great honor to have you. Thank you.

Benigni: It has been a great honor. It has been a great honor to be in Spain and Argentina and all the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America, it has been a great honor for me, thank you.