

ROBERTO BENIGNI

Tutto Dante



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By Alastair Smart
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Tutto Dante: Roberto Benigni puts on one Hell of a show

The Italian comic is taking Dante on a world tour with his TuttoDante and London's his next stop.

He shot to movie stardom in 1998 with his concentration-camp comedy *Life is Beautiful*, and Italian funnyman Roberto Benigni is now attempting the improbable once again: a one-man, stage rendition of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's cosmos-bestrident, medieval epic of sin, salvation and the everlasting. The clown prince of Italy, famous for stripteasing on television and writing songs such as *Hymn to Loosened Bowels*, has spent the past three years reciting Dante's theological terza rimas in arenas across Italy. And now there's a world tour.

'At heart, *The Divine Comedy* is popular entertainment not an academic text,' says Benigni. 'Besides the God, Virgin Mary and Thomas Aquinas stuff, there's Laurel-and-Hardy farce in there, too. It's not called a "comedy" for nothing.' Because of the august, bowdlerised translations of Victorian times, Dante has come down to English-speakers today as a rather fustian, Christian moraliser but, in certain scenes in hell, he gets pretty ribald. One can only imagine what fun the goofy-grinned, gangly-bodied Benigni will have with Canto XXI, in which 10 devils try poking Dante up the 'groppone' with their pitchforks, and their leader – the aptly named Stinky Tail – breaks wind 'like a trumpet' to call them to attention.

'Dante's not just funny, though; he's contemporary, too', insists Benigni, trying to explain the huge popularity of his TuttoDante shows, which have been watched by one million Italians. By the early 14th century, Dante's home city of Florence had become the international capital of trade and banking, and the poet lamented how many of his corrupted peers - especially popes - valued riches over religion. 'He places the gluttonous and greedy in hell ... [to wallow] in excrement like pigs,' says Benigni. In this, the age of the fallen banker, 'their story couldn't be more modern'.

In a 90-minute show, Benigni hasn't time to recount Dante's entire poetic journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, so he picks out and performs 10 passages instead, explaining the context and present-day parallels of each beforehand. In these secular times, it's perhaps unsurprising the Inferno passages prove most popular: 'They're the most human', says Benigni, 'the ones in which we all see our weaknesses.' But Italian audiences also love Hell for the modern celebs Benigni suggests sending there, notably his long-standing foe Silvio Berlusconi. The Italian PM has been the butt of countless Benigni barbs down the years, and there's no let-up in TuttoDante - in a show last year, the comedian declared that the imperious Berlusconi would have a 'circle to himself' in Hell, with 'his own set of laws'.

Benigni promises to make his targets more international on TuttoDante's world tour, which comes to Drury Lane next Sunday, though he doesn't know yet who they'll be: ever the comic improviser – remember the mad clambering over seats, on his way to collect his Best Actor Oscar for *Life is Beautiful*? – all Benigni can confirm is that, Dante excerpts aside, he'll deliver the show in English. But might the time also be right to readdress the hell of the Holocaust, which many felt Benigni trivialised, sentimentalised and pantomimed in *Life is Beautiful*? Benigni, a Catholic, played a jovial Jew who convinces his young son their death-camp travails are just an elaborate game. 'My movie was actually a tragedy, about a father trying to save his son from horror; it had humour in it, but I wasn't laughing at or diminishing the Holocaust,' says Benigni. 'The Jews are the world's wittiest people, so if anyone can make a comedy about the Holocaust, it's them.'

The Divine Comedy (1314-1320) is, in a sense, as old as the Italian language itself – it was Dante who broke the centuries-old tradition of writing in scholars' Latin, to use vernacular Italian instead – but Benigni reckons he is well qualified to deliver it as freshly as ever: growing up in rural Tuscany, an hour outside Florence, he took up early the Tuscan tradition of publicly reciting poetry, especially that of the local hero Dante. 'My grandma was better, though' he says. 'She could recite the entire *Divine Comedy* backwards.'

'TuttoDante', Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London WC2 (0844 412 4657) Apr 5