

# DIVINE INTERVENTION

## Benigni books Dante in Italo stage tour

By NICK VIVARELLI

ROME

**O**n a balmy Friday night in May in a gigantic tent-theater pitched near Rome's main courthouse, Roberto Benigni is reciting from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, verbally waltzing through the *Inferno*'s fifth canto and frequently wiping his brow, as 4,000 Romans hang on his every word.

Billed as "TuttoDante" (Everything About Dante), the show is midway through its solidly sold-out Italian tour, marking a minor miracle in a land where 40% of the population didn't read a book last year.

It begins with Benigni in his trademark dark suit and white shirt doing a little dance onto the stark stage and warming up the audience with a bit of the crackling political standup for which he's long been known here.

He blasts former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, of course ("We survived five years of Berlusconi; we are indestructible"), but also takes shots at the current center-left government and at the Catholic Church for quashing a bill on gay civil unions. That issue provides the comic's transition to Dante and those times when, just like today, the pope meddled with politics.

"If tonight you feel the inexpressible, powerful, arcane beauty of these verses, something great will have happened," Benigni declares before making his descent into the second circle of hell.

The bulk of the show consists of riveting riffs on Dante's cosmology as Benigni reads verses, sometimes making contempo analogies ("Unlike Bush, Dante didn't divide the world into Good and Evil"), climaxing with a pitch-perfect recitation of the entire canto.

It may seem odd, especially to non-Italians, that the mad jester who leapfrogged chairs on his way to nabbing three Oscars for "Life Is Beautiful" has gone so academically highbrow.

But Benigni has always blurred boundaries — a big Walt Whitman fan, he recited verses from "Leaves of Grass" in Jim Jarmusch's "Down by Law," but also famously tackled



Helmer-thesp Roberto Benigni gives his take on Dante's *Divine Comedy* in "TuttoDante," winding its way through Italy in a sold-out tour.

platinum blonde TV host Raffaella Carrà on national television while declaiming a long list of vernacular words for female genitalia.

"This is not highbrow culture; it's entertainment," Benigni tells *Variety* outside his greenroom. He calls Dante "a pop artist, in the sense that he's perfectly suitable for a mass audience."

"I perform in venues that are used for rock concerts, indoor arenas, stadiums; the dirtier the better," he says.

The audience, of all ages and ranging socially from fishmongers to financiers, sometimes screams for a particular stanza, just like a song request at a rock concert.

Former Italian president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and Jarmusch are among recent spectators.

The "TuttoDante" tour — which does not publicize the initial standup portion — kicked off in July 2006 in Dante's native Florence. Benigni is also Tuscan, his comic style stemming from the region's oral poetry tradition. The performer packed in an average of 5,000 per night in bleachers on the Piazza Santa Croce, with popularly priced tickets ranging from €15-€25 (\$20-\$34).

The show has since hit some 20 Italo cities, always in mega venues, including Verona's famed 22,000-seat Roman-era arena, Genoa's Mazda Palace and the specially pitched Rome tent-theater. Prices in Rome were higher than in Florence, \$38-\$61, which is still less than for the local "Cabaret" adapta-

tion, the top musical playing in the Italian capital.

So far, "TuttoDante" has sold some 500,000 tickets — more than 100,000 of them in Rome, per producer Lucio Presta. The goal is 1 million admissions by the end of the tour, which would mean grosses of roughly \$5 million.

Benigni says he has had several offers to travel with the show, including Broadway, which he has turned down in part because of the language barrier — he would perform in Italian, of course. But mostly, he says, it's because by the end of the Italo tour, "I'll be ready to move on, and I'd like to make another movie."

Meanwhile, Presta has just sealed a deal for Italo pubcaster RAI to air an extensive prime-time "TuttoDante" special, followed by a 12-part TV adaptation of the show to air this fall on its flagship RAI 1 station, comprising readings and recitations from all of the *Divine Comedy*'s 34 cantos.

A previous two-hour Benigni Dante special scored a whopping 49% share for RAI in 2002.

As for Benigni's movie plans, following "Pinocchio" and "The Tiger and the Snow," which were local hits but, unlike "Life Is Beautiful," failed to click worldwide, the actor-director cagily claims he has no ideas for a new pic. However, he seems sincere when he says that, given the right script, he would consider just acting in a pic by another helmer, even in a purely dramatic role.

"I have no preconceived aversions to any particular type of film or role, as long as it's something that grabs me," says Benigni.

