

Benigni the Poet Makes Life Even More Beautiful

Grace Russo Bullaro * (August 25, 2008)



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Despite eventually winning 2 Oscars, Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997) created a maelstrom of positive and negative criticism. I decided to study the film and its issues more deeply and thus published "The Protection of Innocence: Fable, Fairy Tale, or Just Excuses?" an analysis of the basic premises that underlay the film in *Post Script*, a respected academic journal on the study of cinema. Still convinced that there was much more to say about *Life is Beautiful* and the rest of Benigni's cinematic output, I went on to publish a book, *Beyond Life is Beautiful, Comedy and Tragedy in the Cinema of Roberto Benigni* in 2005. Being a gentleman, Benigni wrote to enthusiastically thank me for the copy I had sent him and for the serious academic interest that I took in his cinema, and we exchanged holiday wishes after that. His post-Oscar career, with the unmitigated flops of *Pinocchio* and *La tigre e la neve*, became a classic illustration of the mixed blessing that Oscar brings. What an



astounding development occurred then in 2002 with the readings of Dante's *La divina commedia* that Benigni staged first on television and then in piazzas all over Italy! Suddenly once again Benigni became the idol and pride of the Italian public and critics. Infinitely curious to know more about this unexpected twist in the comic's career, I requested an interview. He said yes. In the extended conversations that we recently had in Rome we discussed not only the Dante performances that were to be the original subject of our encounter, but a host of other fascinating topics. As a result of our conversations, my conviction that the complexity of this director, actor and private individual has been vastly underestimated grew. His serious study and profound understanding of Dante, for example, can certainly rival that of any established Dante scholar. His views on politics, national identity, globalization and cultural miscegenation, topics that academics like me usually reserve for the pages of professional journals that speak to the few, are expressed with the fire and vivacity that interest not only those few experts who study his cinema, but the vast public that loves his films-and him, of course.

(As many American filmgoers already know, Roberto Benigni does speak English. But as he said when he collected his second Oscar: "This is a terrible mistake! I've already used up all my English!" The point of course is that while he is comfortable acting in English, from a pre-written script, he prefers to have extensive conversations in Italian so that he can express whatever nuance he wishes. Our conversations, drawn over the period of two days, were held in Italian. I have translated this interview into idiomatic, fluent English in order to convey Benigni's natural style in his native language.)

1. What is your daily life like? Are you able to go about doing "normal" things like eating out or going for a walk? Or do you have to hide from your fans?

Well, you know I think it was Marcello Mastroianni who said that actors spend half their lives becoming famous and the other half hiding from their public. I guess I'd have to say that no, those things are not possible for me. It's not as if I were Bob Dylan or the Pope but still, celebrity induces a state of feverish unreality. I can't take a bus, for example. That becomes unbearable, even though I appreciate that people want to show me their love. Everyone has a camera phone these days and everyone wants to take a picture with me. That's very disruptive. I can't even go for a walk, or visit a museum or an art gallery, or the theater because people are relentless. For example, even when my parents were in the hospital, my fans expected the Benigni laugh, the jokes and the souvenir photo as soon as they saw me-in the hospital! I've reached the conclusion that there is nothing I can do about it. And yes, I really miss those common and even trivial things, like the ability to just sit and observe others, as I used to do. Everyone needs a respite, what Hegel called "the Sunday of the spirit."

2. That must be very annoying! How do you manage?

Well, yes it is, so I always go to the same restaurant, where they're used to seeing me. If I go to the movies I sit in the last row and maybe wear a cap. My good friend Massimo Troisi didn't go out at all anymore to avoid this kind of life. But I've decided that I'm just going to face it the best way I can. I walk at a clip, or I answer people with a cheerful wave but go on doing what I was doing. I used to like to write in waiting rooms, in station cafes, anyplace where you can sit and watch a lot of interesting kinds of people go by. Now I can't take the train at all, they make me take private planes and so on. Yes the price is high, but as they say, it would be worse if no one recognized me.

3. In America there's a superstition that the Oscar brings bad luck. Do you believe it?

I think the only thing that Oscar brings is...an Oscar. If there's passion behind your work it can't bring bad luck. Passion kills all superstitions and diseases. Like when you kiss someone. The passion kills all viruses. And there was a lot of passion behind the film that got me the two Oscars. As William



Blake says, "exuberance is beauty" and I felt the beauty of exuberant love. That Oscar brought only beautiful things for me. Maybe from the public's perspective winning an Oscar is the apex of any career but you have to keep in mind that in our personal lives there are many more powerful moments than winning an Oscar.

4. After winning two Oscars you had the cinematic world at your feet. How did you decide what projects to pursue after *Life is Beautiful*?

Yes it's tough to win such acclamation because you may remain the same, but the others change. When people met me in the street, they no longer called out "Benigni!", it was "Maestro!" [1] [2] I couldn't even joke around anymore. I wanted to take piano lessons, for example but they called ME maestro! Maybe had I been American it would have been different but when you win the Oscar as a foreigner it has great resonance in your own country. So my life changed. But then life changes for the smallest things too-and change is beautiful, healthy and mysterious. Then too in *Life is Beautiful* I played a father for the first time in my career as an actor so even if I hadn't won the Oscar this film would have been a watershed for me.

5. So how were the films after *Life is Beautiful* born?

With *Pinocchio* I started out wanting to make a small film and instead it ended up being the most expensive film of my career. Sometimes it's really hard to understand how things come about. *Pinocchio* was like a runaway train that I had no way of stopping. I gave myself to it completely and at a certain point I realized that I had lost control, it persisted in going its own way. Eventually it became the film that Fellini and I had meant to make for a long time, the most "monstrously" Italian film possible. I call it "monstrous" because my *Pinocchio* is big, distressing, even terrible because it tells the story of a person in search of happiness who realizes that happiness is not possible.

6. So it's very philosophical.

And how! Collodi's original story is the very symbol of a book that transcends its author. He never realized that he had written such a powerful work. Afterwards Disney came along and totally transformed it, but the original is terrifying. The good fairy, in the interest of forcing *Pinocchio* to grow up, repeatedly confronts him with death and its realities.

7. So in the end were you happy with the end result or was it not the film you intended to make?

Well let's just say that it's a film that made itself. I put everything I had in that film, physically and spiritually. It may sound silly to say it like this, but making *Pinocchio* was a journey to Hell for me, to the very depths of the abyss. I've never worked so hard to make a movie. But really, artists should never say that they've worked hard, they should do what the circus performers do, take a bow with a big smile and pretend that the death-defying stunt they just did was nothing out of the ordinary. Making art is a privilege and a gift we offer to our public. I'm saying it to you in a private interview but I wouldn't say it publicly.

8. But I've read many times that *Pinocchio* is a movie that you've wanted to make for the longest time!

That's true, but I wanted to make it with Fellini. He had asked me to, and in fact the last time that I



saw him, in the hospital shortly before he passed away, I said to him, "You can't leave us now Federico, we still have to make Pinocchio." And he answered me with, "You'll have to do it alone Robertino." Federico's vision of the Pinocchio he wanted to make was downright nightmarish. In any case I ended up making what I think was the most Italian Pinocchio possible-or maybe I should say universal-- the one with which most Italians had always identified me. In a sense I has already done it because there were many traces of him in Little Devil, where I played Pinocchio and Walter Matthau was Geppetto. Since I made it right after having won the Oscars, I had a lot of pressure to cast international stars, but I'm proud to say that I resisted that pressure and the cast was completely Italian.

9. And then you made *The Tiger and the Snow*. How did that come about?

Sometimes we are haunted by a feeling that we can't exorcise. That was the impulse behind *The Tiger and the Snow*. It's a film tied to the all-pervasive anguish of the Iraq war. I was completely taken with the idea because the story is a perfect blend of comedy and tragedy, which as so many have come to realize, reflects my vision and style of storytelling. But I guess that the immediacy of the war made the story too dark and threatening in a vaguely distressing manner. Paradoxically, as far as I know, it was also the first film about the war in Iraq. My heart fluttered with joy as I wrote it and filmed it. I loved that story! What's more, it was the only film that I know of where the protagonist is actually a working poet, one who earns his livelihood by writing poetry.

10. So how do you explain the harsh criticism that it was met with?

I really never figured it out because although there were some among the public and the critics who judged it to be my best film, others criticized it in a way that implied I had somehow gone wrong. Well criticism is important, no doubt about it, but not because the artist should chase after its demands. If you do that you end up making "mall films," you know the kind that they screen in sneak previews so that they can alter them as the public wishes. Doing that is the very contradiction of art and authorship. Anyway, in this film I played a mature character-for the first time. In fact I played a character involved in a love triangle. I guess that this too didn't fit in with the public's view of my character and persona, the Benigni they've come to expect, cheerful and carefree. In my opinion transitions in life are healthy for those who go through them and for those who witness them, but apparently my public had a great deal of difficulty in imagining me in a different manner.

11. In any case after these films you practically re-invented yourself. Tell us about your readings of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

Oh, my love for Dante! Few artists have been loved as he has. I'm only one of the very many who have added their grain of sand to the magnificent dunes of Dante's sensual poetry. My passion for him is also a way of showing my gratitude for the extraordinary gift he left us. For the first time in literary history a writer allowed us to feel that we were the protagonists of our own story. Even if our existence up to that point had not seemed significant to anyone, Dante came along and said to each of us, "You are central and unique." No one had ever said this to us before him. Then too he was passionately concerned about this strange gift that God gave us, and about which no one, not even the Church cares about today-- life. He made us feel that what happens in our earthly lives is not the end of everything, but he did it in a secular manner. Dante is never preachy. On the contrary!

12. And what about on the esthetic level?

Well on that level the sheer entertainment value of *The Divine Comedy* is practically limitless. It's as if God had said to us, "Since you've been so good I will gift you with this book" as a reward. Then too



I had the good fortune to be born in a town where Dante was very popular, he seemed to be all around us, in a manner of speaking. Dante was synonymous with poetry and was the very symbol of Italian identity.

13. And where did you get the idea for the dramatic readings?

By chance really, just because I've always read *The Divine Comedy* for my own enjoyment. I already knew some stanzas by heart and then in the stretches between one film and another I decided to learn some Cantos by heart. You know, the way you would learn a song, even just for the beauty of the sound. Besides, you probably know that as a kid I recited improvisational poetry, right? My father put me on the stage, so to practice, like everyone else, I used to recite Ariosto's poetry because it's written in octaves. The tercet wasn't suitable for improvisational poetry because it's so long, but the octave, although shorter, is also much harder. You know what Borges has said, "The octave drives you crazy." Once you master the octave you can master anything! So I was already very comfortable with Dante from my childhood and besides, the *lectura dantis* is a long-established tradition.

14. Now that's exactly what I would like to know, how do you prepare to interpret, comment and recite an entire Canto?

To memorize you need to approach your text like a musical score. I stand before Dante's text in all humility, I don't try to "act it out" like the sublime actor Carmelo Bene, for example. The line between the sublime and the ridiculous is extremely fine, and Carmelo Bene, whose manner says, "I'm better than Dante, I improve his text" skirts the ridiculous, but he still remains sublime. On the other hand, what I do is very simple. To recite Dante you don't need to interpret him, all you need is to understand where to place the emphasis, the accents-this is very important. Then you need to convey the music in the words, the rhythm, the diction. It's called a canto and not a chapter for a reason. Dante practically gives you musical notation like an orchestra conductor. So it gives me great joy when I succeed in transmitting the essence of Dante without being pedantic, conveying the symphonic quality of the Comedy, where every canto is different yet expressive of the whole.

15. Well ok, but you're being excessively modest. You don't stop at the esthetic and poetic level, you delve deeply into its politics, philosophy and metaphysics as well.

No really, the most important thing is to convey the poetry, the rest is just explication. For that I love to read all the critical texts and pick up information that helps me to interpret. But don't forget that Dante addresses the Muses repeatedly in the text, so to be faithful to Dante's intentions first you must attend to the poetry. His rhythm, diction, meter, are perfect. Absolutely perfect!

16. I'd say that it is thanks to your incredibly popular readings of Dante that you have inspired the public to reevaluate this great work that sadly, today is considered a bore. You've turned it into a best-seller!

Yes, isn't it great? It's as if they had discovered a world of beauty.

17. How did Dante go from being the poet of the little people to the very symbol of Italian high culture?

Easy! It's because Dante invented everything! He was the first true intellectual of the modern age. He "invented" concepts and feelings that before were not defined and articulated. For example, he invented synesthesia when he gave a sound quality to light in the *Divine Comedy*. Or another



example, when we say, "I'm troubled," we don't realize that it was Dante who crystallized this concept. Poets like Dante are an extension of our souls, they allow us to go beyond our paltry human limitations. Our human souls are insignificant and they allow them to soar higher. Besides this Dante also approached language in a modern manner and he had the courage to write about politics in both a concrete and abstract manner, naming names but also reflecting on principles.

18. In a blog I read that you are the poster boy for Italy's cultural greatness and that you remind us of that heritage. What do you think about this?

Hmmm, I've never read that blog! In any case I'm just proud to be Italian. We gave the world so many things, musical terminology and instruments; poetry in the modern era was born thanks to Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarca. Even someone as great as Shakespeare was simply reworking concepts and techniques started by them. In politics the Romans invented everything that we take for granted in the modern world, the Renaissance has never been equaled for its scope and greatness. Think of the terminology in architecture and the arts in general, they were conceived by Italians. And yet we shouldn't get carried away and become jingoistic, that's an ugly thing. We should keep in mind that just as the Italians gave all these gifts to the world today the Americans have made equally important contributions in the areas of computer language, global commerce and others.

19. Okay, let's get back to your Dante readings. The noted critic Paolo Della Sala has charged you with having misunderstood Dante's conception of love and of having reduced it to mere sex. What do you say to that?

Well, I haven't read this critic but I know that there have been others who have made similar accusations. I can say that at times I take some liberties when recounting anecdotes about Dante's personal life, but I never do this in the reading itself. Maybe Della Sala misconstrued something I said? Or extrapolated from my words? In general when I talk about Dante, or Paolo and Francesca, for example, I'm very careful not even to suggest sex. I may mention that Dante loved women, but even when I'm the jokey Benigni that people have come to expect I'm careful about that. In any case, if we really think about this, when Dante says, "...he who ne'er from me shall separate, at once my lips all trembling kissed..." [\[3\]](#) [\[3\]](#) what can we conclude that he was thinking of? You will never find a verse as sensual as this in Petrarca, never. There's a powerful charge of both tenderness and sensuality in it. Dante was a very sensual poet.

20. So I guess you're saying that on second thought there is sex in Dante!

Certainly! There's sex even in the Bible. In order for a text to endure the way that the Bible or the Divine Comedy have done, it must be full of piety but also eroticism. I assure you that there's no sexophobia in the Bible or the Divine Comedy. It's part of the allure and power of a true work of art.

21. Another critic, Ariana Luciani claims in an article[\[4\]](#) [\[4\]](#) that the great Dante scholar Vittorio Sermonti has accused you of having reduced Dante's masterpiece to one idea: love-and that as a result the viewer cannot fully appreciate the true grandeur of the poet. Do you think this is fair criticism?

No I don't think so. But I will tell you that Vittorio Sermonti is the first person that I consulted for suggestions when I set out to do these readings. I consider him a truly great Dante scholar. Well, maybe it depends on the moment in which he caught my reading. There's nothing easier to transmit to the public than the sentiment of love. We could say that just as the Iliad shows us that all life is a struggle and the Odyssey that our life is an endless journey, and the Book of Job that life is an



enigma, then Dante shows us that life is about understanding love. But in all these cases if we take a phrase out of context we can change their meaning. Even in the Bible maybe we could read, "God does not exist" and then we turn the page and it continues with, "said the fool." I do believe that it's impossible to discuss The Divine Comedy without talking about love because Dante knew the sacred texts by heart and the New Testament is THE book about love, absolutely! Dante talks about love in the most profound manner and when I do the same I never do it in a scurrilous manner. That I would never do, because it would be a kind of desecration. I blush just to think about it.

22. So how do you explain this very harsh criticism on the part of Sermonetti?

If Sermonetti said it then maybe he was trying to understand the incredible popularity of my readings. About fifteen million television viewers, an average of eight thousand people in every piazza where I performed, (and as many as fifty thousand in Siena!), the videos that are number one on the charts, maybe Sermonetti was trying to find a justification for such popularity. Maybe he was trying to say, "Dante is not like that." And he would be right because Dante is like the universe, everything is in there. Sermonetti is right, Dante is not only about love, but he would also tell you that you can't create a dramatic reading or any other spectacle by repeating generalities. You take some aspects of the work and delve into them deeply. The important thing is to convey the greatness of the poet-and my unbounded love for him.

23. Then we come to Franco Zeffirelli's criticism. He has said that Dante is a serious matter that must be left to serious people, and that poor Dante would be rolling over in his grave to hear you declaim his verses in that accent from Prato. [\[5\]](#) [5] He added that it's heresy and your accent suggests more the Apennine mountains than the streets of Florence. [\[6\]](#) [6]

Oh this is very funny. This criticism is very chic (laughing uproariously). Très chic, très chic. Well, when you're dealing with a crowd you have to expect all kinds of judgments. In any case this was the most humorous of all.

24. In fact I would say that you are the muse who has inspired a new love for Dante in our time.

That's a beautiful thing you just said and I thank you. If I have succeeded in doing this then I ask no more.

25. So Berlusconi is back in power, were you surprised that he was elected once again?[\[7\]](#) [7]

Surprised? Not at all. You know, [Indro] Montanelli used to say that Berlusconi is like a vaccine, you need to be exposed to him in multiple controlled doses. So I was happy to see him back in power. Paradoxically, it's very difficult to satirize Berlusconi because he himself is so funny and ridiculous. To get a laugh all I have to do is walk on stage and say, "Hi everyone. So, Berlusconi..." and the audience erupts into uncontrolled laughter. Then I move on. I don't need to add anything else. It's like a guaranteed performance warm-up. At one point Nanni Moretti made a very successful film about him, called *Il Caimano*. He made it as a tragedy and really, it's the only way to think of him. He's both tragic and comic at the same time. But Italians elected him and I love Italians and so I continuously try to understand what it is that I'm missing. He's incomprehensible in every way and yet he has this inexhaustible energy, this force that attracts people. I'd love to make a film about him but I can't figure out what kind. Anyway he himself does a great job of Berlusconi playing Berlusconi.

26. What circle of Hell do you think Dante would have put him in?



No, Berlusconi is just too funny to send to Hell. I think Dante would just have had a good laugh too.

26. Will you continue to make fun of him?

Of course! You know I don't like to do satire but in his case it's irresistible.

27. What? You don't like to do satire? Come on, you're pulling my leg!

No really, it just looks like I do satire. I don't like satire because it's moralistic, it makes me look like I'm judging others or that I know better than they do or that I'm sneering. My "satire" is different. It's shaped by the theatricality of the body. My satire is in my movements, in the childlike nature that I adopt to do the most outrageous things. For example I can touch a person's genitals, or strip onstage or do any number of things and the suggestion of childlike innocence just cracks satire wide open.

28. But wait a sec., isn't the intention of satire to criticize society?

Yes, of course. But when I do it there's a suggestion of purity that comes across because of the childlike naïveté that I bring to it. And in any case I never attack individuals. I agree with Italo Calvino who said that satire is valid only when it aims at exposing the tragic nature of humanity, but aiming criticism at a particular person is not satire. So as you can see, since I've never aimed at anyone in particular for their personal flaws, including Berlusconi, I've never done satire.

29. And what do you see as the role of the comic in general in a society?

I think the most powerful yet difficult function of the comic is to hold the mirror up to ourselves, exposing the most sordid aspects of our humanity. In short, it's the comic's job to expose all the worst stuff that we'd like to hide.

30. Is that something like what Beppe Grillo is doing when he holds these tremendous anti-political demonstrations and "outs" corrupt politicians in Italy?

Look I'm a real political animal, believe me. And I can see that Grillo, who is a great comedian, is waging a sacred battle. He's extraordinary. But when I see forty or fifty thousand people screaming "vaffanculo" when Grillo eggs them on against the politicians then I get scared. Alarm bells go off in my head. Brings to mind too many ugly memories of similar rallies held in history.

31. But don't you think that when Grillo "outs" twenty four members of the European Parliament or the Italian Senate as convicted criminals, he's performing a public service?

He's right to do it, but not in that rabble-rousing manner. We live in a democracy and the way to make change is to vote, not to inflame people into hysterics.

32. Today Italy is a multi-ethnic society in a globalized world. How do you feel about the "new" Italy?

I think it's great. I think there's a positive spirit moving Italy today. Our people have lived through a



lot of difficult historical periods, we've known hunger, desperation, we know what pain is. So it's a people that will never let you down.

33. But what about the growing racism against immigrants?

Racists are great fools who don't remember their own history. We've all been unwelcome and vulnerable visitors in no-man's land at some point or another. Racism is an archaic sentiment going back to primeval notions of race and tribes, to the preoccupation with keeping our roots. But no one can threaten or destroy our roots. They grow and are nourished by everything around us. When I look at the wonderful faces of the people who come to our country I see life. They represent an opportunity for us to show our humanity and compassion. I don't understand why some things happen, but to me the new immigrants in Italy are a joy, a wealth of beauty.

34. And what do you think are the most pressing problems facing America today?

That's a great question! I think the most troubling of these problems is that America's image has been seriously tarnished. I can't remember anything like it since I was a kid. Oh sure, at times it's been a little tired, but it's always bounced right back. This time it's different, it will take something out of the ordinary to help restore that marvelous feeling that we all had before: even when we disagreed with America we loved it dearly. "America," even just the word evoked a dream. Not the proverbial "American Dream" that's just a cliché. It was something deeper and more meaningful. It evoked a myth. Today it hurts to think that this is no longer the image of America.

34. And on the personal front, what are your plans for the near future?

Well, I'm taking my Dante readings on tour in England, France, Spain, Germany, Argentina, Canada and the United States. In the U.S. it's most likely that I'll be in L.A. and New York in December. I'm really pleased by this and I can tell you that this is the first time that I make this news public.

35. That's great, thanks for sharing the secret with me. And what are your plans after this tour?

I'd like to make another movie, I'm not sure what, but I think it will be a comedy in the style of Johnny Stecchino.

[\[1\]](#) [8] "Maestro" in Italian means teacher and may be used as a sign of respect.

[\[2\]](#) [9] After Benigni's televised reading of *The Divine Comedy* in 2002, the text became a best-seller for the Christmas holiday., the first time in 800 years.

[\[3\]](#) [10] Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Trans. Rev. Francis Cary. Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1982.

Canto V: 40.

[\[4\]](#) [11] Luciani here

[\[5\]](#) [12] There are 3 things to note here: that Florence and Prato were rivals for almost a thousand years, that in the popular imagination Florentines consider all other accents barbaric, and that Benigni is a native of Prato, not Florence.

[\[6\]](#) [13] Zeffirelli doc here

[\[7\]](#) [14] Berlusconi is a major target of Benigni's satire and jokes and a general figure of fun for Italy's comedians.



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