



Italian Actor Roberto Benigni Creates a Stir in New York

Susannah Gold (June 03, 2009)



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When many people think of Italy, they often focus on the wonderful food and wines, the fabulous landscapes or the glorious art works that can be found throughout the peninsula. For opera buffs, Italy can also mean performances at La Scala in Milan, La Fenice in Venice or the Auditorium in Rome, as well as a host of smaller theaters throughout the country. Design is the next aspect that people think of when they consider Italy.

Many of the most famous tradeshows in the design world are held in Milan, the Salone Del Mobile and Euroluce are two that come to mind immediately. No one could blame you if you didn't look any further but you would be missing out. What a shame that would be.



Italy has many modern artists to share with the world. Among them is R

oberto Benigni, the Tuscan actor who is most widely known in the U.S. for his film about the Holocaust, *Life is Beautiful*, for which he won three Oscars. Benigni was in town for one night only to do his one-man show, *Tutto Dante*, where he was up to his usual antics and comments before he launched into a recitation of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*.

Getting into the Manhattan Center was a real feat. Tickets were sold out weeks in advance. The scene at the door looked like a who's who of Italian society in New York. Most of the Italian community came out to see Benigni as did many others including film director Jim Jarmush. Scalping tickets was impossible and the line to get into the show snaked around the corner on 8th Avenue.

Benigni, dressed in blue, flew onto the stage with his trim build and began a long monologue about his inability to speak English. Despite this handicap, he was the same Benigni that one sees in Italy. Excited, energetic and even maniac at times, Benigni told a series of jokes centered around Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, sex, young woman, old age and when all failed back to Berlusconi. He has done a riff on Berlusconi for the past 15 years, ever since Dio Silvio entered politics. Even those in the audience who don't follow Italian politics that assiduously got a real kick out of the actor. His enthusiasm for life and the *Divine Comedy* was effervescent and most of the packed audience sat through his 90 minute show without moving.

Benigni did his show in halting English, immediately putting the audience at ease when he explained how he wanted to kiss each and every member of the audience. Many remember his performance when he won the Oscar, climbing on chairs and kisses those who gave out the awards. Pictures of that event went around the world and to this day, even for the Americans who didn't see his seminal film, Benigni is recognizable. This same ruckus was in full swing on Saturday night. His shtick got a lot of laughs from the crowd although some Italians were distressed that he didn't do the whole show in his native language.

Instead the audience was treated to a stanza by stanza description in English of what was taking place as Dante and Virgil descended into hell. Thanks to the brilliance of the English translation done by one of the foremost Dante scholars in the U.S., Robert Hollander, and Benigni's power and love of the story, the audience was quite taken with the show. By the time the screen went a beautiful steamy red and Benigni began to recite the entire quinto canto by memory in Italian, the audience was rapt. One could have heard a pin drop as the audience followed Benigni's flawless recitation. When he spoke the last words of the canto, the audience burst into a resounding standing ovation for over 10 minutes and Benigni danced happily off stage. It would be more accurate to say that he went off stage and came back for more applause numerous times, as is the comedian's way. The audience was happy to oblige.

While this weekend was very special, throughout the year, numerous Italian directors, artists, journalists, designers, musicians, scientists and intellectuals come to the Big Apple. While the old stones of Italy are what draw you in, it is the combination of the old and the new that keeps you coming back for more. It is refreshing to see modern Italy alive and well and in New York.

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