

Roberto Benigni  
and  
Robert Hollander  
at the  
**UNIVERSITY OF MALTA**

April 2008



## Message from Rector

The University of Malta invited Maestro Roberto Benigni, on the initiative of the Faculty of Arts, primarily to confer on him the degree of Doctor of Literature (Honoris Causa) in recognition of his outstanding career. However, through this, University also wanted to be instrumental in disseminating Benigni's love for Dante's work among students and the Maltese public. To this end, University opened wide its doors and turned the event into a week of activities related to the study of Dante. Professor Robert Hollander and Dr Jean Hollander who are amongst the world's finest Dante experts shared their knowledge with us, while Monika Beisner exhibited her wonderful illustrations, created for the Divina Commedia, at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura.

As I had stated at the beginning of this academic year, I believe that the University of Malta should present every possible opportunity for students to achieve self-fulfilment, and to develop fully and holistically in their pursuit of knowledge. I hope that University serves as a source of wisdom and of love for knowledge and act as a journey of discovery and creativity.



**Media Briefing conducted by  
Professor Dominic Fenech and Dr Gloria Lauri Lucente,  
Dean and Deputy Dean respectively of the Faculty of Arts**

**Thursday, 10 April 2008**

**1100hrs**

**Council Room, Officer of the Rector,  
University of Malta, Msida**

The University of Malta will honour Oscar-winning film director and actor Roberto Benigni with a doctorate honoris causa for his contribution to the humanities. Benigni will arrive in Malta on Monday, 21 April, on a four-day visit, on the initiative of the Faculty of Arts. During this visit he will treat the University of Malta to a Serata Dantesca and inaugurate an exhibition of illustrations of Dante's Divina Commedia.

Accompanying him will be Professors Robert and Jean Hollander, authors of the new annotated and illustrated translation of the Divina Commedia. Benigni and the Hollanders work together on the dissemination of knowledge about Dante worldwide. Benigni has prefaced the Hollander's publication with a 'Lettera a Dante'. The new translation is embellished with the illustrations of artist Monika Beisner, which will be exhibited at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Valletta.

On Tuesday, 22 April at 1300hrs the media will meet Roberto Benigni at a press conference to be held at the Aula Magna, Old University Bldg., St Paul's Street, Valletta.

The ceremony of the conferment of the degree Honoris Causa will take place at the Jesuits' Church, Merchants Street, Valletta on Tuesday, 22 April at 1630hrs.

After the ceremony, Maestro Benigni will proceed to the Istituto Italiano di Cultura where he will inaugurate the Exhibition of Monika Beisner's illustrations in a private preview.

The following day, Wednesday, 23 April, there will be the Serata Dantesca at Sir Temi Zammit Hall, on the University campus at Tal-Qroqq, during which Roberto Benigni will give a recitation from the Divina Commedia. The recitation will be preceded by a discussion on Dante between Benigni and Robert Hollander. The event will commence at 1830hrs.

Seats at Sir Temi Zammit hall have been reserved mainly for students and the academic staff of the University of Malta. However, the Serata Dantesca will be also transmitted 'live' via a maxi screen in the Atriju Vassalli (Main Quadrangle), for the benefit of those who are unable to secure a seat inside the hall and interested members of the general public. The event is free of charge. Since this event cannot be recorded, this will be the only opportunity to experience it.

Professor Hollander\* will be giving a seminar on Thursday, 24th April on campus entitled: Dante's "Sympathetic" Sinners. Francesca, Farinata, Brunetto, Ulysses, and Ugolino (among others), most pronouncedly in the Romantic era, but still today, tend to be dealt with as though they are larger than their sins rather than being defined by them. While not arguing that they are without attractive qualities, this presentation will make a case for their punishments as befitting their crimes.

On 25 April at 1830hrs the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta will present the superb limited edition of the Divina Commedia, translated into English by Robert Hollander (Princeton Univ.) and Jean Hollander with over 100 illustrations by Monika Beisner. Present at the evening will be Monika Beisner, Robert and Jean Hollander and Livio Ambrogio who commissioned the special edition. Gloria Lauri Lucente, senior lecturer at the University of Malta, will coordinate the event.

\*Professor in European Literature, emeritus (Princeton University), Robert Hollander has published twelve books and more than eighty articles on Dante and/or Boccaccio, most recently a new translation (with his wife, the poet Jean Hollander) of Paradiso (Doubleday 2007). He has been honoured with the Gold Florin both of the City of Florence (1988) and of the Dante Society of America (2005). This year, on 30 May, both Hollanders will receive the Gold Florin of Florence for their translation of the Commedia.

**Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature (Honoris Causa) on  
Maestro Roberto Benigni  
Church of the University, Valletta • 1630hrs • 22 April 2008**

**Programme**

Arrival of the President of the Republic

Innu Malti (orchestra)

The University Vocal Ensemble

i) Concerto per Clavicembalo and orchestra (Mov. 1) Domenico Paradisi

Organ - Romina Morrow.

ii) Aria "What is St. Elmo" (Jester) from The Maltese Cross by Charles Camilleri

Soprano - Joan Mangion.

Oration by Dr Gloria Lauri-Lucente

Conferment of the degree of Doctor of Literature (Honoris Causa) on Maestro Roberto Benigni

The Registrar proclaims the resolution of the Senate and Council of the University

The Sponsor presents the graduand to the Rector

Conferment of the degree by the Rector

The Chancellor presents the degree scroll

The Honorary Graduate signs the Liber Aureus

Address by the Honorary Graduate, Maestro Roberto Benigni

The University Vocal Ensemble

Magnificat by Simon Brixì

Choir, soloists and orchestra

Soprano - Claire Caruana

Mezzo Soprano - Connie Francis Zerafa

Tenor – Charles Vella Zarb

Bass - Kevin Caruana

Innu Malti

La Vita è Bella (Theme) arr. Mark Anthony Cachia

H.E. the President of the Republic leaves the Church

The Honorary Graduate leaves in procession with the Chancellor, Rector and the Academic Body.

## ORATION

**Dr Gloria Lauri-Lucente, B.A.,D.Lett.(Siena), Ph.D (Michigan)**

### **On the Occasion of the Conferment of the Degree Of Doctor of Literature (Honoris Causa) to Roberto Benigni**

There is only one Charles Chaplin, one Buster Keaton, one Stanley Laurel and one Oliver Hardy, one Totò. And there is only one Roberto Benigni. This oration is a tribute to a unique artist who enables us to suspend our disbelief and draws us into a fantasy world where everything is dreadful and everything is joyous, where everything is sad and everything is funny or, as Luigi Pirandello would have put it, where everything is fable and everything is true. In what follows I hope to do justice to the unequalled inventiveness and range of virtuosity of the art of Benigni, whose oxymoronic genius makes us laugh till we cry, and cry till we laugh. Benigni, quite simply, has understood the true meaning of the duality and variegatedness of comedy in filmmaking, in literature, and in the humanities generally, and a greater appreciation of his work must acknowledge his intuitive affinities with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. That comedy encompasses pain – though ultimately, it always suggests a transcendence of adversity and a joyous celebration of life – is the great lesson that Benigni draws from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In an "imaginary letter" to "Mr Dante Alighieri," Benigni places the Florentine poet in the First Terrace of the Holy Mount of Purgatory together with the souls engaged in purging themselves of the sin of pride, Dante's selfacknowledged sin. With his typically oxymoronic dose of tongue-in-cheek playfulness and deep reverence, Benigni thanks Dante for having taught him the startling doubleness of the paradox of life. Benigni tells Dante: "It was you who made me experience both good and evil, made me go to sleep frightened out of my wits, moved me to tears .... And it was you who made me die of laughter...." Balanced on a precariously narrow and shifting threshold between tears and laughter, Benigni's verbal and visual humour lives within the same type of duality he discerns in Dante, whose *Comedy* derives its shaping features from the contradictory nature of life itself.

Dante, however, taught Benigni more than the paradoxical nature of human life. He also led him to fall in love with poetry, with its unfathomable mysteries, and with its voice. And the debt has been most handsomely paid. There is no greater tribute that Benigni could have paid Dante for having communicated to him the awe-inspiring experience of poetry at its most sublime than his explication and recitation of the *Comedy*. In paying tribute to Dante in the public squares of Italy and in the virtual public squares that his appearances on television make so real and immediate, Benigni's contribution has been simply inestimable in helping renew an oral tradition which has illustrious origins. The *Lectura Dantis* is a tradition inaugurated by no less than Giovanni Boccaccio, who gave a series of public lectures commissioned by the Florentine Commune in the Church of Santo Stefano in Badia between 1373 and 1374. What better words can describe Benigni's legacy in the revival of such a tradition than those uttered by the eminent Dante scholar Robert Hollander, who is with us today to share this memorable occasion. This is what Hollander has to say about Benigni: "He has lectured on the poet to three-quarters of a million people in the past two years alone. Each of his lectures concludes with a memorable and moving recitation of a canto of the *Commedia*. He is rebuilding an audience for this great poem, which has been too much forgotten, and is as relevant today as it was more than seven hundred years ago, when it was begun."

"Too much forgotten." Hollander's words succinctly describe the plight not only of the *Comedy* but of poetry itself. The novelist Arnold Bennett said more than a century ago that the word "poetry" is capable of dispersing a crowd faster than a fire hose, and it is a sad truth that indifference and incomprehension in regard to poetry have depopulated the very spaces where poetry seeks to house itself. This is why it is

wonderful to see a crowd like this today, assembled to celebrate poetry rather than be dispersed by it. Benigni has rescued poetry from the unfortunate and quite mistaken perception that it is the most useless and most obscure of the arts, and with unashamed joyousness, he has brought it back to our consciousness. His *terzina-by-terzina* commentary provides the audience with a clarification of Dante's verse that is as incisive as it is sensitive, while evoking a mode of thinking that is at once literal and transliteral or, to use Tzvetan Todorov's words, "at once verbal and transverbal." And, as we know, Benigni does all that with an innate sense of theatre and of just the right modulation of tone and mood, and with the capacity to read the emotions of his audience even while interpreting the sublimity of what he is performing.

For words like Dante's do need a reader to recite them, in solitude or in public: one who understands that poetry is to be understood not only in the mind of the reader but also through the operations of the voice. Benigni knows that verse is inseparable from utterance, and that "the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning," as T.S.Eliot has put it. In each and every single recitation, Benigni's persona recedes to a point where we can almost believe that we are hearing Dante's own unique and distinctive voice. This is the ultimate achievement that any reader of Dante can aspire to – indeed, Benigni's own and unique achievement. This is one of the reasons why there is only one Roberto Benigni.

It is, self-evidently, not the only one. Those of us who have watched Benigni's *Lecturae Dantis* have been struck by the enormous range, not only of passionate engagement, but of learning, that they encompass. Indeed, we have been struck by the dazzling ability to bring together the most disparate of elements: comedy and tragedy, politics and poetry, medieval literature and television, fairy tales and satire, reality and illusion, evil and innocence, Dante and Pinocchio. There is a telling cue in this juxtaposition of Dante and Pinocchio. The paradoxical and oxymoronic mode of thinking that was to become the artist's hallmark was already at work in Benigni, the child. Benigni recounts the story of how, when seeing Dante's statue in front of Santa Croce in Florence for the first time, he thought it was that of Pinocchio: "My mother as a child used to tell me: 'If you tell lies your nose will become long like Pinocchio's and then Dante Alighieri will send you to hell!' Until one day in the square I saw a statue of Dante and that nose made me think he was Pinocchio."

Allow me therefore at this point to turn to Pinocchio, Dante's "double." In Benigni's profoundly enigmatic realm of the comic there is perhaps nothing more enigmatic than the filmic postscript he appends to the ending of Carlo Collodi's cautionary tale of initiation into adulthood in his movie *Pinocchio* (2002). The author Pietro Citati contends that Pinocchio actually exists before he is carved into a puppet by Geppetto, who is responsible for materializing the Platonic idea hidden in the piece of wood which miraculously ends up in his hands. In Collodi's conclusion, however, the Platonic idea dies even as Pinocchio turns human: the puppet is turned into a piece of lifeless wood, and only the reality of a pre-established social hierarchy governed by strict regulations and conventions prevails. Rather than following Collodi's ending, Benigni takes us by surprise and carries forward the notion that the Platonic idea simply cannot die. Benigni's film refuses to end as expected, and continues with the haunting image of the puppet's shadow and a butterfly. The dancing shadow, a rebellious figure that is peripheral to the human image and yet also inextricably bound to it, chases the butterfly, the uncanny symbol of an evanescent object of desire, forever pursued, yet forever out of reach. The oneiric vision with which Benigni ends his version of Collodi's tale transports us into a fantasy world, beyond the responsibilities demanded by social integration. This is a particularly succinct instance of the way in which the art of Benigni is constantly on the border, striving to penetrate "the unknown realm of the comic," as Milan Kundera calls it.

Benigni's postscript to Collodi's conclusion ends the film on a note of ambiguity, which demands further elaboration within the imagination of the audience. If Pinocchio's transformation into a compliant boy may be seen as the attempt to placate the subversive element in his relationship with the world, the shadow is a subtle reminder that the apparently happy ending is achieved only through illusion and fabrication: in short, only through a lie. This opposition of truth and falsehood intertwined with the notion of playfulness is also at work within the representation of both the real and the fantastic in Benigni's Oscar-winning masterpiece, *Life is Beautiful* (1997). Ludwig Wittgenstein's contention that comedy is an important form of "play" or "game" which is governed by an understanding of boundaries or limits, and therefore, of the distance that has to be maintained in the treatment of evil in an inherently tragic situation, is relevant to much of Benigni's art and never more so than here. Benigni's comedic talent displays a keen understanding of the crucial concept of boundaries, and *Life is Beautiful* derives its creative force from the ability to establish the right distance from the horrors of the Holocaust at the right moment. A true maestro of the narrative technique of allusion, which operates at a level of invisibility and forms part of the unrepresentable, Benigni is capable of making us imagine a scene without actually showing it to us. What better example of such an ability than those moving last sequences of Guido marching silently to his death in an offscreen space, away from the eyes of his son Giosuè, who is thus shielded from the horrors of the war.

Within the limited space of an oration, it has not been possible to do justice to all the qualities of an artist as immensely versatile as Benigni. The talents which have not been touched upon are numerous: the linguistic skills of his early theatrical monologue, *Cioni Mario di Gaspare fu Giulia* (1975); the rich variety of acrobatic gags and slapstick physical actions of *The Little Devil* (1988) and *The Monster* (1994); the ability to develop a parodic narrative in *Johnny Stecchino* (1991); and the delicate interplay of conflictual emotions in *The Tiger and the Snow* (2005).

In his autobiography, Charles Chaplin wrote that his clowning stems from the awareness that "the theme of life is conflict and pain." This is the same lesson that Benigni also imparts throughout his own multifaceted art, and it is one which he has drawn from his reading of Dante. Indeed, great comedy is always a paradox, and its inherently ambiguous nature poses a dilemma which continues to intrigue us: how can one create laughter out of tragic circumstances? Benigni's realm of the comic constantly strives to provide an answer to such a dilemma. For as Benigni himself observes, "...even in horror there is always the germ of hope, there is something which resists everything, every form of destruction.... Laughter saves us, seeing the other side of things, the surreal or funny side, or being able to imagine it, prevents us from being shattered to pieces, from being carried away like twigs, and helps us fight back and get through the night, even when it appears to be interminable." Benigni, indeed, has been unique in placing at the centre of his aesthetic the potential for discerning the comic even within situations which are desperately fraught and tinged by the tragic. Others have visited the theme of melancholy behind jollity, but Benigni's originality and singularity lies in understanding that the comedy he perceives nestling in the tragic need not model itself on or be solemnly limited by "black humour," but can afford to be – and sometimes has to courageously be – exuberant and unrestrained and joyous. It takes a very special artist to see that -- and, we must not forget, a daring one too, and that is also one of the attributes which we are honouring today. We deeply thank you, Maestro Roberto Benigni, for having brought to the arts and the studia humanitatis a tragicomic genius and an experience of joy, one which has been uniquely able to strengthen our ability to sustain the bearable as well as the unbearable lightness of being, thus winning us over to the view that *la vita e` bella*.

*Gloria Lauri-Lucente*



## In occasione del conferimento del Dottorato in Lettere (Honoris Causa) a Roberto Benigni

Abbiamo avuto un solo Charles Chaplin, un solo Buster Keaton, un solo Stanley Laurel e un solo Oliver Hardy, un solo Totò. E abbiamo un solo Roberto Benigni. Questa “laudatio” è un tributo a un artista unico, il quale ci permette di vincere la nostra incredulità e di farci entrare in un mondo di fantasia in cui tutto è terrificante e tutto è gioioso, tutto è triste e tutto è divertente o, come avrebbe detto Luigi Pirandello, tutto è fiabesco e tutto è veritiero. In quel che segue spero di rendere giustizia all’inventiva ineguagliabile e al virtuosismo straordinario dell’arte di Benigni, la cui genialità ossimorica ci fa ridere fino a piangere, e piangere fino a ridere. In sostanza, Benigni ha afferrato il vero significato della duplicità e della variegata ricchezza della commedia nel cinema, nella letteratura e, per estensione, negli studia humanitatis, e un genuino apprezzamento della sua opera deve partire dal riconoscimento delle sue affinità intuitive con la Divina Commedia di Dante.

Che la commedia comprenda il dolore – anche se in ultima analisi implica sempre una trascendenza dell’avversità e una gioiosa celebrazione della vita – è la grande lezione che Benigni ha attinto dalla Commedia di Dante. In una lettera “immaginaria” al “Signor Dante Alighieri”, Benigni colloca il poeta nella prima cornice del Monte del Purgatorio assieme alle anime che stanno scontando il peccato di superbia, peccato in cui lo stesso Dante si riconosce. Con il suo spirito tipicamente ossimorico di giocosità provocatoria e profonda reverenza, Benigni ringrazia il poeta fiorentino per avergli insegnato la duplicità sconcertante del paradosso della vita. Benigni dice a Dante: “Sei stato tu a farmi capire sia il bene sia il male, a farmi andare a letto terrorizzato, a commuovermi a tal punto da farmi piangere .... E sei stato tu a farmi morire dalle risate...”. Precariamente in bilico fra le lacrime e la risata, l’umorismo verbale e visivo di Benigni vive dentro lo stesso tipo di dualità che discerne in Dante, la cui Commedia deriva appunto le sue caratteristiche dominanti dalla natura contraddittoria della stessa vita.

Dante, comunque, non ha insegnato a Benigni soltanto la natura paradossale della vita umana. E` stato lui a farlo innamorare della poesia, dei suoi misteri insondabili, e della sua voce. E il debito e` stato ripagato splendidamente. Non esiste un tributo più grande che Benigni potesse fare a Dante del suo commento e della sua recitazione della Commedia. Con il tributo a Dante tanto nelle piazze pubbliche d’Italia quanto nelle virtuali piazze pubbliche televisive, Benigni ha contribuito in maniera inestimabile a rinnovare una tradizione orale dalle origini antiche. Difatti, la Lectura Dantis al pubblico è un’illustre tradizione che risale a Giovanni Boccaccio, il quale tenne una serie di lezioni commissionate dal Comune di Firenze nella Chiesa di Santo Stefano in Badia fra il 1373 e il 1374. Quali parole potrebbero meglio riassumere l’autentico significato del contributo di Benigni di quelle pronunciate da Robert Hollander: “Ha tenuto delle lezioni sul poeta davanti a quasi un milione di persone solo in quest’ultimi due anni. Ognuna delle sue lezioni si conclude con una indimenticabile e commovente recitazione di un canto della Commedia. Sta ricostruendo un pubblico per questo grande poema, finora troppo dimenticato, anche se oggi è tanto rilevante quanto lo era più di settecento anni fa, quando fu iniziato”.

“Troppo dimenticato”. Le parole di Hollander, l’autorevole dantista che è qui con noi per celebrare questa memorabile occasione, descrivono sinteticamente il destino non solo della Commedia ma della stessa poesia. Più di un secolo fa, il romanziere Arnold Bennett disse che la parola “poesia” è capace di fare disperdere una folla più velocemente di un estintore, ed è una triste verità che l’indifferenza e l’incomprensione nei riguardi della poesia continui a spopolare quegli stessi luoghi in cui la poesia cerca un suo spazio. Ecco perchè è meraviglioso vedere così tante persone qui riunite per celebrare la poesia invece di essere disperse da essa.

Benigni ha salvato la poesia dalla percezione infelice e del tutto errata che essa è la più inutile e la più oscura delle arti, e con gioiosa spontaneità, l'ha riportata alla nostra coscienza. Il suo commento incisivo ed efficace di ogni singola terzina rende accessibile il significato del verso dantesco, ed evoca un modo di pensare che è letterale e nel contempo transletterale o, per usare le parole di Tzvetan Todorov, "verbale e nel contempo transverbale". E come sappiamo, Benigni compie tutto questo con un'innata sensibilità teatrale, con la giusta modulazione di tono e di timbro, e con una capacità di cogliere le emozioni del pubblico nel momento stesso in cui sta recitando i versi sublimi di Dante.

Perché parole come quelle di Dante hanno bisogno, in solitudine o in pubblico, di un lettore che le reciti: un lettore dotato della consapevolezza che la poesia va capita non solo nella mente di chi legge ma anche attraverso le operazioni della voce. Benigni ha perfettamente capito che il verso scritto non va separato dall'aspetto prosodico, e che "la musica della poesia non è qualcosa che esiste avulsa dal suo significato", come ha detto T.S. Eliot. In ogni singola recitazione, la persona di Benigni recede e si dissolve a tal punto da farci quasi credere che stiamo ascoltando la vera voce di Dante. È questa la massima aspirazione di ogni lettore di Dante, aspirazione che Benigni ha realizzato in pieno. Ecco uno dei motivi per i quali abbiamo un solo Roberto Benigni.

Ovviamente, questa non è la sua unica impresa. Tutti coloro che conoscono le *Lecturae Dantis* di Benigni non possono non essere colpiti dall'intensità passionale che le animano e dalla vasta erudizione che le sottende. Colpisce, addirittura, l'abilità di mettere insieme gli elementi più disparati: la commedia e la tragedia, la politica e la poesia, la letteratura medievale e la televisione, la fiaba e la satira, la realtà e l'illusione, la malignità e l'innocenza, Dante e Pinocchio. La giustapposizione fra Dante e Pinocchio è rivelatrice. Il modo di pensare paradossale e ossimorico di Benigni che successivamente sarebbe diventato la sua cifra stilistica è già percepibile nella sua infanzia. Lo stesso Benigni, infatti, racconta quando per la prima volta vide la statua di Dante davanti a Santa Croce, e pensava che fosse quella di Pinocchio: "La mia mamma da piccino mi diceva sempre: 'Se dici le bugie ti si allunga il naso come a Pinocchio e poi Dante Alighieri ti mette all'inferno!'. Finché un giorno in piazza vidi una statua di Dante e con quel naso che si ritrovava pensai che Pinocchio fosse lui".

A questo punto, dunque, permettemi di rivolgermi a Pinocchio, il "sosia" di Dante. Nel mondo profondamente enigmatico di Benigni, forse non esiste nulla di più enigmatico del poscritto visivo che il suo film *Pinocchio* (2002) aggiunge alla conclusione del racconto di Carlo Collodi. L'autore Pietro Citati sostiene che in realtà Pinocchio esiste prima del burattino "fabbricato" da Geppetto, il quale è responsabile di aver dato corpo all'idea platonica già nascosta nel pezzo di legno. Nella conclusione di Collodi, comunque, l'idea platonica muore nel momento stesso in cui Pinocchio diventa umano: il burattino torna ad essere un pezzo di legno senza vita, e resta prevalente soltanto la realtà dominata da una gerarchia sociale, da regole, e da rigide convenzioni. Invece di attenersi alla conclusione di Collodi, Benigni ci coglie di sorpresa e porta avanti la tesi che l'idea platonica non può morire. Il film di Benigni rifiuta di concludersi con Pinocchio divenuto bravo bambino, e aggiunge l'immagine suggestiva dell'ombra del burattino e di una farfalla. Una figura ribelle, ombra danzante e periferica all'immagine umana dalla quale tuttavia dipende, si distacca da essa per inseguire la farfalla, simbolo enigmatico di un evanescente e irraggiungibile oggetto del desiderio. La visione onirica con la quale Benigni conclude la sua versione del racconto di Collodi ci trasporta in un mondo di fantasia, oltre le regole della società costituita. È questo un esempio particolarmente rivelatore del modo in cui l'arte di Benigni è costantemente alla ricerca di un "oltre", di quel "regno sconosciuto del comico", di cui parla Milan Kundera.

Il poscritto visivo di Benigni alla conclusione di Collodi chiude il film con una nota di ambiguità che invita il pubblico a un ulteriore lavoro dell'immaginazione. Mentre la trasformazione di Pinocchio in un ragazzino ubbidiente può essere vista come il placarsi dell'elemento trasgressivo nel suo rapporto con il mondo esterno, l'ombra è invece una sottile allusione ammonitoria al fatto che il lieto fine è solamente un'illusione, se non una bugia. Tale opposizione fra il vero e il falso intrecciata con l'elemento di giocosità sta alla base della rappresentazione del reale e del fantastico nel film Premio Oscar *La vita è bella* (1997). Questo film sembra riproporre la tesi di Ludwig Wittgenstein, secondo la quale la commedia è un'importante forma di "gioco" governata da una conoscenza dei confini e dei limiti, e quindi, della distanza che va mantenuta nella rappresentazione del male in una situazione intrinsecamente tragica. Il talento comico di Benigni dimostra una fine comprensione del concetto cruciale di confine, e *La vita è bella* deriva la sua grande forza creativa dall'abilità di mantenere la giusta distanza dagli orrori dell'Olocausto al momento giusto. Vero maestro della tecnica narrativa dell'allusione ad una realtà invisibile e non rappresentabile, Benigni è capace di farci immaginare delle scene senza doverle mostrare. Quale miglior esempio di tale abilità di quelle commoventi ultime sequenze di Guido che marcia, burattino silenzioso, verso uno spazio fuoricampo incontro alla morte, lontano dagli occhi del figlio Giosuè, che viene così protetto dagli orrori della guerra.

Nei confini limitati di una "laudatio", non è stato possibile fare giustizia a tutte le qualità di un artista così versatile come Benigni: le capacità linguistiche di *Cioni Mario di Gaspare fu Giulia* (1975), il monologo teatrale che risale ai primi anni della sua carriera; la ricca varietà di "gag" acrobatiche e di gestualità fisiche de *Il Piccolo diavolo* (1988) e *Il mostro* (1994); l'abilità di sviluppare una narrativa parodica di *Johnny Stecchino* (1991); e l'interazione delicata di emozioni conflittuali del suo ultimo film, *La tigre e la neve* (2005).

Nella sua autobiografia, Charles Chaplin scrive che la sua "clownerie" deriva dalla consapevolezza che "il tema della vita è il conflitto e il dolore". È questa la lezione che Benigni impartisce attraverso la sua arte poliedrica, ed è la lezione che lui stesso ha imparato dalle sue letture di Dante. La vera commedia è sempre un paradosso, e la sua natura intrinsecamente ambigua pone un dilemma che continua ad affascinarci: come si può creare la risata da circostanze tragiche? Alla ricerca perenne di una risposta a questo dilemma, Benigni osserva: "Ridere ci salva, vedere l'altro lato delle cose, il lato surreale e divertente, o riuscire a immaginarlo, ci aiuta a non essere spezzati, trascinati via come fucelli, a resistere per riuscire a passare la notte, anche quando appare lunga lunga". La singolarità di Benigni, dunque, sta nell'aver posto al centro della sua estetica l'abilità di discernere il comico anche in quelle situazioni che sono disperatamente cariche e colorate di tragico. Altri comici hanno visitato il tema della malinconia che si nasconde dietro l'allegria, ma l'originalità di Benigni sta nell'aver capito che la commedia che si annida dentro il tragico non ha bisogno di limitarsi alla solennità dell'"umorismo nero", ma può essere – anzi a volte deve coraggiosamente essere – esuberante e irrefrenabile e gioiosa. Solo un artista speciale e persino audace ha la capacità di discernere tutto questo, e oggi stiamo onorando anche questo attributo particolare. La ringraziamo di cuore, Maestro Roberto Benigni, per aver apportato negli studia humanitatis una geniale vena tragicomica e una gioiosità che hanno rafforzato la nostra capacità di sostenere il sostenibile e l'insostenibile leggerezza dell'essere, convincendoci così che la vita è bella.

*Gloria Lauri-Lucente*

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

# BENIGNI on campus Serata Dantesca



a unique opportunity to listen to Roberto Benigni reciting from the Divina Commedia, preceded by a discussion about Dante between Roberto Benigni and the renowned Dante scholar, Robert Hollander



**'LIVE' MAXI SCREEN VIEWING  
ATRIJU VASSALLI ON CAMPUS**

**OPEN TO STAFF AND STUDENTS  
and the GENERAL PUBLIC**

Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2008 - 1830hrs  
ADMISSION FREE - seating available

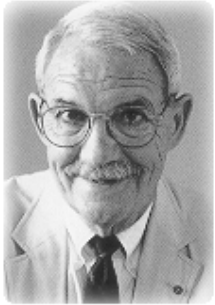
## Dante al fresco —

### Open-air viewing of Roberto Benigni's recitation

The University grounds may lack the quaintness of a Florentine piazza, but any shortcomings in the setting will be more than compensated for with dramatic verve when celebrity actor Roberto Benigni takes to the University stage on Wednesday. All eyes will be on the Oscar-winning director and actor (*Life is Beautiful*) whose extraordinary oratory skills have made his show "Tutto Dante" a runaway hit with Italian television audiences. His much-anticipated performance in Malta takes place on Wednesday, 23 April at 18.30 hrs. In order to open up this unique event beyond the academic and student communities, the University is extending an invitation to the wider public to view the recitation on maxi screens specifically erected for the purpose at the Atriju Vassalli, the University's main quadrangle. Seating will be provided and refreshments will be available at the bar. Admission is free of charge.

Benigni will be accompanied in Malta by the distinguished Dante scholar Professor Robert Hollander of Princeton University, with whom he will also discuss Dante and place his works within a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Both Hollander and Benigni are acknowledged Dante experts, but rather than merely trading academic perspectives their debate is expected to bring Dante to life, paving the way for the evening's highlight, Benigni's recitation of the last canto of the *Paradiso*. The event is a unique opportunity set up with the general public in mind, and the Faculty of Arts hopes that this unique event may serve to further stimulate cultural events and debates of this calibre in future. A RAI TV crew shall be filming the week's events. Any further information can be obtained from tel 2340 2828 or by email to : [comms@um.edu.mt](mailto:comms@um.edu.mt)

## Literature and Comparison Research Seminar Series, Faculty of Arts



Thursday 24th April, Lecture Theatre 1, 6pm  
Professor Robert Hollander (Princeton University)  
"Dante's 'Sympathetic Sinners'"

As part of the Faculty of Arts' "Literature and Comparison Research Seminar Series," Professor Robert Hollander will give a talk entitled "Dante's 'Sympathetic' Sinners" on Thursday 24th April at 6pm in Lecture Theatre 1.

Professor Hollander will argue that Francesca, Farinata, Brunetto, Ulysses, and Ugolino (among others), most pronouncedly in the Romantic era but still today, tend to be dealt with as though they are larger than their sins rather than being defined by them. While not denying their attractive qualities, Professor Hollander's presentation will make a case for their punishments befitting their crimes.

Professor in European Literature, Emeritus (Princeton University), Robert Hollander has published twelve books and more than eighty articles on Dante and/or Boccaccio, most recently a new translation (with his wife, the poet Jean Hollander) of *Paradiso* (Doubleday 2007). He has been honoured with the Gold Florin both of the City of Florence (1988) and of the Dante Society of America (2005). This year, on 30 May, both Hollanders will receive the Gold Florin of Florence for their translation of the *Commedia*.

## **Dante's Divina Commedia**

issued on 22.04.08

### **Launch of a Limited Edition of Dante's 'Divina Commedia'**

#### **Istituto Italiano di Cultura -- University of Malta**

The Istituto Italiano di Cultura in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta will present the superb limited edition of the Divina Commedia, translated into English by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander with over 100 illustrations by the internationally recognized artist, Monika Beisner. The Istituto Italiano di Cultura is currently exhibiting the illustrations which will be on display until 8th May.

Robert Hollander, Professor Emeritus in European Literature from Princeton University, is a world-renowned Dante scholar. He has published very widely on Dante and Boccaccio, most recently a new translation, with his wife, the poet Jean Hollander, of *Paradiso* (Doubleday 2007). He has been honoured with the Gold Florin both of the City of Florence (1988) and of the Dante Society of America (2005). This year, on 30th May, both Hollanders will receive the Gold Florin of Florence for their translation of the *Commedia*. Professor Hollander is also founder and director of two Internet sites, the Dartmouth Dante Project and the Princeton Dante Project.

Jean Hollander has taught literature and writing at various colleges and universities. Her third book of poems will be published later this year. In addition to this translation, she has published translations of works by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Charlotte von Mahlsdorf.

In this new edition of Dante's great work the Hollander translation meets up with the outstanding art of illustrator Monika Beisner. She has created 100 detailed paintings for this publication, thus joining the panoply of famous illustrators of the *Divina Commedia* that includes Gustave Doré, William Blake and Salvador Dalí while, at the same time, making her the first woman credited with illustrating the entire work.

At the end of the third volume, Marina Warner, a cultural historian, writes: 'Monika Beisner has been scrupulously loyal to Dante's text, rendering gesture and position as described in the poem as well as its unsurpassed precision of spatial, geographical and temporal coordinates.'

Monika Beisner was born in Germany, where she studied painting in Braunschweig and Berlin. Fellowships allowed her to continue her studies in New York and London, where she now lives. Her illustrations for children's books have earned her an international reputation and she has exhibited worldwide. Her illustrations of Dante's *Commedia* have been published in Germany and Italy. She has completed illustrations for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Her next step will be into the world of Gilgamesh.

The three volumes - Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso - are bound in full cloth with a dust jacket and are in a cloth-covered slipcase. The work has been set in Centaur and printed in a limited edition of 500 numbered copies. The first seventy-five are available as a deluxe issue, accompanied by an extra suite of illustrations, on Gardapat Kassica paper by Cartiere del Garda, numbered with roman numerals, signed by the artist, and boxed in a portfolio. The complete production was commissioned privately by Livio Ambrogio, a passionate bibliophile and collector, and was published in Verona by Stamperia Valdonega Group.

Monika Beisner, Robert and Jean Hollander as well as Livio Ambrogio will all be present at the launch to be held at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura on Friday 25th April at 1830hrs. The panel discussion will be coordinated by Gloria Lauri Lucente, senior lecturer within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta. The general public is cordially invited to attend the book launch and to view the exhibition of illustrations.