

Enrico Brignano: The Soul of Rome Is Back

Natasha Lardera (May 13, 2014)



Meeting one of Italy's greatest comedy actors who is in New York to perform as Rugantino — the famous arrogant, chatty, coward, gentle, and beloved character from the Papal Rome of the 19th century. "tradition is what drew me to Rugantino. I prepared with great dedication. It is a story of great courage, a story of the power of love that at times goes beyond death. Its ingredients challenge the passing of time, they are eternal, just like the city of Rome where the show is set."

No matter what, he's still a boy from Dragona, a neighborhood of Rome named after giant reptiles that resembled mythical dragons. He's outspoken, ironic and hilarious because his words are sharp and his laughter is a way to fulfill his desire of life, even though the situation he's talking about is not really the most favorable. Enrico Brignano is one of Italy's greatest comedy actors and his humor embodies the voice of Rome, it being the center of his comic repertoire.



It is safe to call Brignano's stage persona a modern-day Rugantino, the theater character (or maschera) who personifies, in a deeply exaggerated way, the citizens of Rome. And indeed he is coming to New York City, with 50 actors, dancers and singers, to bring Rugantino, the musical comedy by Italian directors Garinei and Giovannini, to the New York City Center (June 12-14). The show will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Rugantino's Broadway debut in February of 1964, when it played an exclusive three-week engagement at the Mark Hellinger Theater. This new, grand edition is mounted by MF Production, with executive producer Music Experience.

Born in Rome in 1966, Brignano studied at the Academy for young comedians founded by another great Roman actor, Gigi Proietti.

Through the years he has participated in several successful TV shows, he started by telling jokes in the first edition of *La sai l'ultima?* (literally "Do you know the latest joke?" a TV show where comedians and everyday people competed for the best joke), films and theater productions... his real passion. Between 2010 and 2011, his one-man show "*Sono romano, ma non è colpa mia*" (I'm Roman, but it's not my fault) was seen by more than 200,000 people in indoor stadiums all over Italy. In it, the comedian joked about the characteristics of and highlighted the shortcomings of those living in Rome and in several other places of southern Italy.

The novel version of the stage play was published by Rizzoli and sold over 100,000 copies.

"Publishing the book was an important moment of my artistic career," Brignano has said, "It is about a love-hate relationship for a city that is amazing but that also has plenty of unbearable aspects."

Aspects, or rather a geographic identity, Brignano plays with while presenting them to an audience eager to laugh at its own, or the others', strengths and weaknesses. His artistic path has brought him to play many other roles.

Rugantino represents a young and somewhat arrogant dude who deep down is a good soul. The name of the character himself comes from the Roman word *ruganza*, or *arroganza* (arrogance).

The character was revived by Garinei and Giovannini in their musical comedy by the same name that, for almost 50 years, has been performed worldwide thus giving new prestige and fame to this traditional Roman character without ever clouding its charm. You cannot help but fall in love with Rugantino and his arrogant, chatty, cowardly, gentle, and sweet way of being. Because Brignano's stage persona fits in all these characteristics he has made the role his and has been performing in the show for years now.

Tradition is what drew me to Rugantino," Brignano told i-Italy, "I prepared with great dedication, love and professionalism. I focused on the biographies of not only the performers who have worked in the show in the past but of all those who have actually put the show together: Armando Trovajoli who composed the music, Pasquale Festa Campanile, Massimo Franciosa and Luigi Magni who wrote the dialogues, Giulio Coltellacci who designed the sets and the costumes, and of course Garinei and Giovannini, the original directors.

Rugantino gives you the impression to bring to life something that belongs to the past but that is always contemporary, because it tells a story that belongs to us all. The ingredients of Rugantino challenge the passing of time, they are eternal, just like the city of Rome where the show is set."

Rugantino opened at Teatro Sistina in Rome on December 15, 1962 and through the years several famous Roman actors, such as Nino Manfredi, Enrico Montesano, and Valerio Mastandrea have played the title role. Enrico Brignano himself has played Rugantino first in November 2010 and then in February 2011. From November 2013 to February 2014 he played again at Teatro Sistina in Rome then in Milan and Florence.

"I have decided to use the very first original script with the aim to maintain the accuracy of the dialogues," the comedian, who is not only starring but is also directing, said, "We slightly changed



some of the subtitles (indeed the comedy is performed in Italian, actually in Rome's traditional dialect, with English subtitles) because we are adapting them to modern day slang. The language spoken today is not the same spoken back in 1964.

Some puns cannot be thoroughly understood by a non-Roman audience but theater goes beyond that.. it's the whole experience that counts. Rugantino entertains and touches the audience through realistic characters that are both scoundrels and good-natured people. This is a story of great courage, a story of the power of love that at times goes beyond death. I approached it with my distinctive humor, the same one Italian audiences are so familiar with."

Rugantino's storyline

A story that belongs to all of us

In the Papal Rome of the 19th century, there lives a young and arrogant rogue named Rugantino who despises any sort of work. He survives on his wits helped by his trusted side-kick, a girl named Eusebia, whom he passes off as his sister. The two often manage to get a place to sleep and some food to eat simply by deceiving the first fool they run into on their path and they got to know Mastro Titta, the famous executioner of the Papal State, a real historical character. In addition to being an executioner, Mastro Titta also runs an inn with his son, named Bojetto, and here he often takes care of Rugantino and Eusebia. Mastro Titta is always wandering around bearing the burden of his occupation and he does not foresee falling in love with the spontaneous Eusebia, who cannot help but fall in love as well. Yet these two are not the only characters who fall in love: the beautiful Rosetta is married to Gnecco, Er Matriciano, a city elder who happens to be a very jealous and violent man that is both admired and feared by the young Romans, including Rugantino. Things get in motion with a bet: Rugantino bets his friends that he can seduce Rosetta before the next city's Carnival. Despite many humiliating misadventures, Rugantino succeeds, but ends up falling in love with the beauty. At first, out of respect for her, he does not inform his friends about the real outcome of the bet. Yet his bragging nature cannot be suffocated and he cannot hold up such a discrete demeanor any longer, so he finally tells his friends he seduced her.

This deeply hurts Rosetta's feelings. During the Carnival, Gnecco is murdered by a criminal, while Rugantino is somewhere else entertaining himself with a noble woman. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time (or is it the opposite here?) Rugantino is discovered by accident near the body, and so he decides to redeem himself by taking responsibility of the murder, suggesting that his motive was his love for Rosetta. He is put to jail and sentenced to death. Rosetta declares her love for him, while he stands on the gallows pleading guilty and as he is facing his death, he proves to be a real man. The story ends with Mastro Titta executing Rugantino, who is finally respected and admired by everyone.

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