

[Title](#) || Carmelo Bene - biographical notes

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[Published in](#) || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com

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Carmelo Bene - biographical notes

by Donatella Orecchia

"We are born with a spasm, we die with a grin"
(Carmelo Bene)

Carmelo Bene was born September 1, 1937 in Campi Salentina, where his parents Amelia Secolo and Umberto Bene managed a tobacco factory. He spent his childhood and adolescence in the Salento region, moving between his village and Lecce, but adopted the city of Otranto as his origin of choice.

‘There is a longing for things that never had a beginning. To sink one’s origin – not necessarily connected to birth – in the land of Otranto is to sink into a real-imaginary space. And it was there, in fact, that I was born on a 1st September. Otranto. Forever beautiful and extremely religious brothel of a land, the land of a tolerant culture, imbued with Islamic, Jewish, Arab, Turkish, Catholic influences.’ (C. Bene, *Sono apparso alla Madonna*).

In 1955 he moved to Rome to study at the Faculty of Law and at the Sharoff Academy, and in 1957 he enrolled at the National Academy of Dramatic Art ‘Silvio d’Amico’, which he left after one year. His theatrical début dates back to 1959, when he acted in *Caligula* by Albert Camus, directed by Alberto Ruggiero (October 1st, at the Teatro delle Arti in Rome). The show, which got good responses from the audience and from critics, signaled Bene’s first encounter with a character who went on to become the icon of the “monstrosity” of the subject (the human subject and the subject of artistic imagery), irreducible to the normative horizon established by the empire of the ego’ (R. Tessari, *Caligula* by Carmelo Bene, in ‘L’Asino di B’, n. 4, 2000). The line inaugurated by encountering this character will continue to be threaded through Bene’s work in the following years.

From 1960 to 1968 Carmelo Bene’s production was intense. After an extensive stay in Genoa (where he created a new *Caligula*, under his own direction, made his *Tre atti unici* by Marcello Barlocco and a first version of Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), he began to gravitate towards the Roman scene, playing in theatres such as the Teatro Eliseo (*Lo strano caso del Dottor Jekyll e del Signor Hyde e “Gregorio”*. *Cabaret dell’800*), as well as in spaces he found and managed himself, such as the Teatro Laboratorio di S. Cosimato – a short-lived venue only open between 1962 and 1963, where he showed a rich season which included *Pinocchio*, *Spettacolo-Mayakovsky*, *Capricci* by Marcello Barlocco, *Hamlet*, a second version of *Spettacolo-Mayakovsky*, *Addio Porco*, *Federico Garcia Lorca* and *Cristo 63*. In this period, he also played in other small Roman spaces, such as the Teatro Arlecchino, Teatro dei Satiri and the Teatro delle Muse (where he showed *Salome* ‘by and from’ *Oscar Wilde*, 1964). From 1966 onwards, he dedicated himself to his rewrite of *Pinocchio*, to the show *Il Rosa e il Nero*, which he drew from M.G. Lewis’s *The Monk*, and to a series of performances shown at the basement theatre Beat 72: *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*, *Basta, con un “Vi amo” mi ero quasi promesso*. *Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale*, *Salvatore Giuliano* and *Salomè*.

The year 1967 was the year of the Ivrea Conference, which Bene took part in. Here he met Carlo Quartucci, Leo De Berardinis and Perla Peragallo, with whom he immediately developed a bond of deep artistic respect that will than grow over time: in 1968 he made a *Don Quixote* with De Berardinis and Peragallo, and they later made their *Tamerlane* for television, directed by Carlo Quartucci.

In these years, Bene alternated his theatrical activity with intense literary research. In 1964, he published the critical text *Pinocchio Manon and Proposals for the Theatre*, followed by his first novel *Our Lady of the Turks* in 1966, which was followed by *Credito italiano V.E.R.D.I.* in 1967.

The latter text provides the basis also for Bene’s first short film *Hermitage*, which inaugurates yet another route for Bene, and the cinema kept him temporarily away from the theatre from 1968 onwards. He made his first feature film, *Our Lady of the Turks*, which won the special jury prize at the Venice Biennale and then presented his *Capricci (Whims)* at the Cannes Film Festival, which was welcomed enthusiastically by French critics. From 1970 onwards, Bene embarked on another two film projects, this time with Eduardo De Filippo: a film based on Elsa Morante’s *La serata a Colono* and a *Don Quixote* for television which included the participation of Popov and Salvador Dali. Both projects eventually ran around. His *Don Juan*, on the other hand, was finished and brought to Cannes and Venice. *Salome*, his fourth film, was presented at the Venice Festival in 1972, while *Un Amleto di Meno* was released in cinemas in 1973.

Between 1973 and 1974 Bene did a lot of work for television, recording the TV pieces *Bene! Quattro diversi modi di morire in versi*, *Majakovskij-Blok-Esènin-Pasternak* and *Hamlet by Carmelo Bene (from Shakespeare to Laforgue)*. For radio,

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he recorded a *Pinocchio* and a *Hamlet* and in 1975 made his *Salome* by Oscar Wilde for radio; he also starred in and the radio version of Marlowe's *Tamereane the Great*, directed by Carlo Quartucci.

Carmelo Bene's return to the stage is marked by several important milestones: *La cena delle beffe* from Sem Benelli according to Carmelo Bene, and the piece *S.A.D.E. ovvero libertinaggio e decadenza del complesso bandistico della gendarmeria salentina. Spettacolo in due aberrazioni*. A series of Shakespearean rewrites followed: in 1976, *Amleto di Carmelo Bene (da Shakespeare a Laforgue)* and *Romeo & Giulietta (Storia di William Shakespeare)*, which took part in the Festival d'Automne in Paris the following year. Also in 1977, Bene rewrote his *Richard III* (of which he made a version for theatre and one for television), which he published in 1978 with a note by Gilles Deleuze followed by Bene's answer to Deleuze. In 1979 he made his début at the Quirino in Roma with *Otello (da Shakespeare) secondo Carmelo Bene*, of which he also made a radio version and a television adaptation which he never finished.

After his début in Paris with *S.A.D.E.* and *Romeo & Juliet*, Bene's work received outstanding approval when, in 1976, he attracted the attention of international researchers, most notably Pierre Klossowski and Gilles Deleuze. From then on, Bene's poetics transformed, partly due to pressure from French deconstructivist philosophy, partly as a clear expression of the Eighties.

However the real and deep schism in Bene's path occurred in 1979, with Byron's *Manfred* with music by Schumann. The form of the recital-concert inaugurated at this time shifted his work towards aspects which – while already present in previous years – became more powerful and acquired a certain hegemonic force. These include the study of the voice as *phonè* and the idea of the 'actorial machine', both of which signal a tension towards the unrepresentable (replacing the confrontational antagonism of 'non-representation'), towards Symbolist lyricism (which replaces grotesque allegory), and towards the invention of song (which replaces the rejection and demolition of fiction). The theatrical works of this period include *Spettacolo-concerto-Majakovskij* with music by Luporini, Bruno Maderna's *Hyperion*, *Pinocchio* (1981), *Macbeth* (1983) and *Egmont* with music by Beethoven (also 1983); these were followed by *Adelchi* with music by Luporini (1984), *Lorenzaccio* (1986), and *Homelette for Hamlet operetta inqualificabile* (1987), a cycle which was eventually concluded with *Hamlet-Suite*. Many of these spectacles were also made for radio or for records (see list of items); Bene was joined in the making of these pieces by musicians and composers such as Bussotti, Vittorio Gelmetti, Gaetano Gianni Luporini and Luigi Zito.

Bene's 1980s were also marked by an assiduous frequentation of opera houses and of spaces usually reserved for mass gatherings, where Bene experienced the power of 'electronic amplified instrumentation'. These are the years in which, at the same time as making his concert-performances, the actor also experimented with poetry readings in large spaces with particularly sophisticated amplifying systems. These include his readings on July 31st, 1981 for the anniversary of the Bologna massacre, where he performed a memorable *Lectura Dantis* at the Torre degli Asinelli, his reading of Dino Campana's *Orphic Songs* in 1982 at the Palazzo dello Sport in Milan and the piece *...Mi Presero gli Occhi...* from Hölderlin and Leopardi with music by Gaetano Gianni Luporini, performed in 1983.

In 1988, Bene staged a new edition of his *Cena delle Beffe*, with music by Lorenzo Ferrero. Later that year he was appointed Artistic Director of the theatre section of the Venice Biennale; his direction, which was vehemently criticised because it was considered 'anti-spectacular', ended in 1990 due to criticism and financial management problems.

In 1989 Bene began work on the *Achilleide* project, whose first stage was *Penthesilea: the Actorial Machine – Actoriality of the Machine*, shown at Castello Sforzesco in Milan, and the second leg of the project took place at the Teatro Olimpico in Rome. In July of the same year he presented his *Hamlet-Suite, show-concert by J. Laforgue* at the Shakespeare Festival in Verona, at the Roman theatre. In 1996 Bene premiered a new rewrite of *Macbeth* entitled *Macbeth-Horror Suite* at the Teatro Argentina in Rome (which was then followed by a television version). The piece went to Paris (at the Festival d'Automne) and to Berlin (at the Hebbel Theater). In the last few years of his life, Bene mostly showed work in Rome: *Adelchi* by Alessandro Manzoni, *Voce dei Canti*, which was a concert-piece on Leopardi's *Canti*, *Pinocchio ovvero lo spettacolo della provvidenza*, and the piece *Gabriele d'Annunzio: Concerto d'autore. Poesia dalla Figlia di Jorio*.

The last opportunity Bene had to meet his audience was his *Lectura Dantis* of September 5th 2001, in the moat of Otranto Castle, where he was accompanied by Fernando Grillo on bass.

Carmelo Bene died in Rome, on March 16th 2002.