

Legal Oracle Speaks on Cabalistic Fine Print in Car Insurance Policies, Jury Awards \$2.9 Million

By Garry Abrams

Over the last couple of weeks, Santa Monica attorney Jerome L. Ringler has been receiving pilgrims like a holy man on a mountain.

Strangers from faraway cities keep showing up at Ringler's office to ask him complicated questions in a language he does not understand.

The wayfarers have been coming to Ringler the way the Greeks and Romans used to visit oracles, because they believe Ringler can enlighten them—about the profound mysteries of California personal injury law.

For instance, they tell Ringler through interpreters that they are fascinated with the cabalistic fine print of liability insurance policies sold by car rental companies.

Oh, really? How intriguing. Tell us more, too, please, about the formula for calculating economic loss from a severe knee injury. We are enchanted by your arcane knowledge.

The curious folks visiting Ringler are Spanish-language television crews from places as distant as Miami and Mexico City. They have been coming to the shrine of Fogel, Feldman, Ostrov, Ringler & Klevens because of what normally would be a routine sport-utility-vehicle-hits-pedestrian-and-sends-her-into-low-earth-orbit lawsuit.

At least the dispute would appear to be unnewsworthy if you watch and read only English-language media. In that universe, apparently not a word has appeared about the case except this column.

But if you pay attention to Spanish-language news, the Los Angeles Superior Court lawsuit filed by Ringler on behalf of Elizabeth Clemmons is a headline-making revelation.

That's because the defendant in the case was Kate del Castillo, a famous young Mexican actress. She has had starring roles in soap operas and telenovelas, such as "Ramona," an epic about 19th century California. A "telenovela," the rough equivalent of a miniseries, is a multiepisode drama and a specialty of Spanish-language moviemakers. Clearly, del Castillo qualifies for celebrity treatment.

"I'd never heard of her," Ringler said. "I never expected anyone would have an interest in the case outside of the participants."

But today, based on the interview requests he has received, Ringler figures that the English-language tabloid equivalent of what happened to his client would be "getting run over by Julia Roberts."

Ringler told me he only began to get an inkling of del Castillo's fame last month, shortly after a jury awarded Clemmons \$2.9 million for injuries and economic loss.

Clemmons, who had been knocked unconscious by the impact, claimed to have suffered extensive damage to her left knee that required arthroscopic surgery. She also asserted that she had been knocked unconscious in the accident and suffered lingering neurological problems.

Before the verdict, Ringler explained, he had been dimly aware of del Castillo's acting career because it had come up during deposition. He also knew that del Castillo, 28, had been studying film at the University of California, Los Angeles, when in 1997 she drove a rented, heavily insured Chevy Blazer through a red light and in to Clemmons at 20-25 miles an hour.

Two days after the verdict, Ringler said, he got a call from La Opinion, the Spanish-language paper in Los Angeles, seeking the first of what proved to be many interviews.

A few days later, on Sept. 30, La Opinion ran a full-page story on the case under the headline "Kate del Castillo: Culpable!"

The stampede was on.

First, Spanish-language television stations in Los Angeles called Ringler. Then the ripples spread across the country and international borders.

Ironically, the result of all the media attention may be that Ringler has had his 15 minutes of fame in a foreign language.

It has been a slightly eerie, parallel-universe experience, Ringler said, watching himself being interviewed on local Spanish television, his English legal explanations being translated into Spanish.

The case reminds him forcefully of how vast cultural gulfs can be, even when we live in the same cities and drive the same streets, Ringler said, noting that language differences can make even the most blaring headlines invisible.

Another irony, Ringler added, is that, before the accident, Clemmons and del Castillo had something in common. Clemmons also wanted to be an actress, he said.

Everybody speaks Hollywood.