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THEATRE AS CHURCH SERVICE:  
*BRAT MAGARAC* (“BROTHER DONKEY”)— A DRAMA  
ABOUT SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI BY THE CROATIAN  
AUTHOR AND DIRECTOR RENÉ MEDVEŠEK  
AND ITS STAGING AT ZKM ZAGREB

I.

According to a common prejudice, contemporary literature is a-religious. On the one hand, this is due to the gradual secularisation of the arts from the early modern period onwards, on the other hand, especially after the Enlightenment and the French revolution, when religion no longer served as a general means of understanding and explaining the world, it increasingly became a matter for an individual private life. Nevertheless, authors have not yet ceased dealing with religious subjects in their works. In particular, Saint Francis of Assisi has been the subject of numerous works of art, be it visual arts (e.g. several pictures by Giotto di Bondone, see Thode 1904 and many more), literature, or film. Novels about Saint Francis, to mention just a few examples by well-respected writers, are *The Poor Man of Assisi* (Nikos Kazantzakis)<sup>1</sup>, *Brother Fire* (Luise Rinser)<sup>2</sup> or *The Very Low* (Christian Bobin)<sup>3</sup>. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German writer Hermann Hesse described the life of Saint Francis (HESSE 1904), and in the 1930s the Russian writer and

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<sup>1</sup> Kazantzakis 1954; English translation *Saint Francis*, by Peter A. Bien, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962; published in the United Kingdom as *God's Pauper: Saint Francis of Assisi*, (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962, 1975; London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> *Bruder Feuer* (RINSER 1975).

<sup>3</sup> *Le très bas* (BOBIN 1992).

emigrant Dmitrii Merezhkovskii also published a book on him.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, novels about the founder of the Franciscan Order often became a model for film scripts. The most famous films about Francis of Assisi are *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (“Francis, juggler of God”) by Roberto Rossellini in 1951, *Francis of Assisi* by Michael Curtiz, 1961, and *Fratello sole, sorella luna* (“Brother Sun, Sister Moon”) by Franco Zeffirelli in 1972; further, there are even three films by Liliana Cavani: *Francesco d’Assisi* (“Francis of Assisi”, 1966), *Francesco* (“Francis,” 1989), and *Francesco* (“Francis,” 2014). The great number of film portrayals of Saint Francis’ life points to the inherent theatricality and performativity of his life, another hint to which is also the saint’s description as a juggler. German historian Helmut Feld writes about him:

He relied more on the active example than on many words. In this context must be understood his numerous symbolic acts, the theatrical representations (performances) of “God’s minstrel” (ioaculator dei [...]), which became increasingly grotesque, and which also were adopted by some of his first companions. They express the ideal of “holy simplicity” (*sancta simplicitas*). (FELD 2013, 42)<sup>5</sup>

Like classical works of art, the life of the saint, understood as a text, takes on a specific meaning in each epoch. Rossellini’s film, for example, made in the time of neo-realism, contrasts a life devoted to poverty as a source of happiness with the prevailing ideologies of that time, that is to say, the early 1950s, and so does Michel Curtiz’ film, which is more in line with the then norms of Hollywood cinema. Franco Zeffirelli’s film understands Francis of Assisi as a hippie, and Juliana Cavani’s films focus on religious questions. In the same way, the drama “Brother Donkey” fulfils a special function in the time of its creation and staging in Zagreb. The following analysis of the drama and its staging aims, among other things, at a definition of this function.

<sup>4</sup> A translation into German of Dmitrii Merezhkovskii’s biography of Saint Francis was published at the end of the 1930ies (MERESCHKOWSKI 1938).

<sup>5</sup> “Er setzte mehr auf das tätige Beispiel als auf viele Worte. In diesem Zusammenhang sind seine zahlreichen Zeichenhandlungen, die bis ins Groteske sich steigernden theatralischen Darstellungen (Performances) des ‚Spielmann Gottes‘ (ioaculator dei [...]) zu verstehen, die auch von einigen seiner ersten Gefährten übernommen wurden. Sie bringen das Ideal der ‚heiligen Einfalt‘ (*sancta simplicitas*) zum Ausdruck.”

## II.

In October 2001, the premiere of the drama by Croatian director and playwright René Medvešek, *Brat Magarac* ("Brother Donkey") about Saint Francis, took place in Zagreb's Theatre of the Young (ZKM). This theatre is famous for its experimental staging. As one of the most important Croatian theatres, it is, in spite of its name, much more than a youth theatre. René Medvešek is not only a director and author, but he is also an actor who has appeared in numerous films. Further, he is a professor of the Academy of Dramatic Arts (Akademija Dramske Umjetnosti) of the University of Zagreb<sup>6</sup>, and, in addition, he is a Christian, as he confirms in interviews with various magazines (MEDVEŠEK 1998, 58; DUJIĆ 2001).

In his staging, the director focuses on the essential elements of the life and teachings of Saint Francis: the highest poverty, holy simplicity, radical obedience, peace, virginity and chastity (cf. FELD 2013, 39–54). The portrayal of poverty is also embodied in the staging principles. The stage, which is located below the audience, is completely empty, the props and costumes are very simple—instead of (artificial) flowers, for example, the scenery uses sticks with colourful pennants. Snježana Babić Višnjic points out that the props are, without exception, things of domestic appliances, things "of low importance," without aesthetic qualities (BABIĆ VIŠNJIĆ 2001, 46). Even the text is very short. Moreover, especially at the beginning, but also in places that are important for the development of the figure and teachings of Francis of Assisi, elements of pantomime play a major role. For example, Francis' childhood and youth are presented on stage without words. Only when Francis falls into conflict with his father does the dialogue begin (p. 2).<sup>7</sup> After the decision to leave the family home, the father himself reacts with pantomime. The scene in which the leper appears is also dominated by pantomime; meanwhile, Francis' pantomime, which shows what Francis does after leaving his parents, is underlined with irony. Before the announcement of the monastic rules, Francis lies on the ground, slowly wakes up and, to the music of the ensemble Compagnie de Bousca, which sings paschal

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Homepage of the Academie of Dramatic Arts (Akademija Dramske Umjetnosti): [www.adu.unizg.hr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=213:rene-medvesek-izvanredni-profesor&catid=35:nastavnici&Itemid=72](http://www.adu.unizg.hr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=213:rene-medvesek-izvanredni-profesor&catid=35:nastavnici&Itemid=72) (last access March 29, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> The drama has not been published up to date. Quotes refer to the computer printout that the author of the drama has made available to the author of the article. The hints on the page at the end of the quotations refer to this printout. The author of the present article has also received a record of the staging, for which she expresses her deep gratitude to the author of the play.

chants, wanders up on the stage and dances. A silent scene plays between Francis and Clare, accompanied only by the music of the same *Compagnie de Bousca*.

At times, the performance resembles children's theatre. In the 1990s, Medvešek did indeed have his first successes with stagings for children<sup>8</sup>, but in the case of "Brother Donkey," which is not (only) a play for children, this impression is rather due to the character of Francis himself and the principle of the "holy simplicity" of his teaching.<sup>9</sup> The critic Babić Višnjić characterises the actors' play in this staging as "a society of playful Franciscans, imbued only with childish joy and simplicity" (BABIĆ VIŠNJIĆ 2001, 46).<sup>10</sup>

Not only at the beginning can one notice a self-referential element when everyone says: "And now... the performance follows... // Only that the team is getting along."<sup>11</sup> (p. 2), but also when Francis' followers propose to spread their own example of living in poverty not only through the word but also through the play (p. 10). In these scenes, the performers say that "they act going upstairs" or "they act being upstairs" (p. 13),<sup>12</sup> in other words: the actors play that they play.

The staging takes on the principle of a medieval mystery or folk drama and is played as it used to be played in town squares and at fairs. This principle is further emphasised by certain elements of dance, although the dance is sometimes rather contemporary. In particular, those scenes which present the play within the play have a choreography and remind one of contemporary ballet (for example, when Francis "wakes up" before announcing the rules for the Order or when Franciscans are looking for Lady Poor). The dances often also look like a children's play, for example, when the Franciscans have found Lady Poor and solemnly receive her.

<sup>8</sup> See the interview with the director in the theatre magazine *Glumište* (MEDVEŠEK 1998), concerning the staging of a play for children, or the director's own commentary on another staging for children, and the criticism of Zrinka Kiseljak (1999).

<sup>9</sup> René Medvešek's staging in the ZKM theatre, *Kristofor Columbo* (premiere November 22, 2014), a drama by the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža, which is undoubtedly a play for adults, also shows elements of the children's theatre at the beginning, when the main character is carrying a model of the ship, on which the action later on really will take place, in his hands and plays with it. At the same time, this act can be understood as an effect of alienation. On this production see also GAŠPAROVIĆ 2015, 37–39, and FAZEKAŠ 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "[...] družina zaigranih franjevac, urešena samo djetinjom razdraganošću i prostodušnošću." (All translations from Croatian by the author of the article.)

<sup>11</sup> "A sada... predstava slijedi... // Samo... samo da se družina rasporedi."

<sup>12</sup> The self-referential nature of the drama is also pointed out by critics such as Snježana Babić Višnjić (2001, 46).

Between the pictures, of which the drama is composed, as well as at the beginning of the performance, the actors form a music band and announce in simple poems what the following picture will be about, for example, "How the boy became a young man // How the father stayed without his son"<sup>13</sup> (p. 2), or, "About the event that happened once — // Who said what! — plingg"<sup>14</sup> (p. 3), or "For those who started following him, Francis composed a small book of rules"<sup>15</sup> (p. 6).

The music in general is also very simple and only very simple instruments are used, such as the recorder, the rattle and a small drum. In several scenes, liturgical chants in French reverberate from the tape. These songs are paschal chants, performed by the already-mentioned ensemble, Compagnie de Bousca. The paschal chants emphasise the understanding of Saint Francis as the equivalent of Christ.<sup>16</sup> As the author himself said,<sup>17</sup> one of the performances was attended by friars from the Franciscan Order and they sang their own songs. But it was not only in this performance that the "performance" was liturgical. The regular change of words and chants in relation to the theme of Saint Francis gives the drama and the staging the character of a liturgical performance. The scene of sharing the bread suggests the last supper or communion.

The drama uses different sources and presents the life and most important teachings of Saint Francis. The scenes from his life are, for example, his encounter with a leper, with Clare, with Lady Poor. According to the author, he not only used translations of the writings of Saint Francis into Croatian (e.g. Damianović), but also drew on Christian Bobin's novel *Le Très-Bas* (BOBIN 1992) and Rossellini's film *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (see above). Bobin's novel tells a very poetic story of the life of Saint Francis, while at the same time explaining the "low" understanding of God, who, in this interpretation of Francis of Assisi's teachings, is the God of children and the God of love. For Bobin, holiness and joy are synonymous. This can also be seen in Medvešek's drama: it is repeated several times that Francis wants to give people joy, for example, when sending forth his disciples, he says: "I want you to spread joy! Give quickly, give a new image — so that I can spread joy in the world immediately!"<sup>18</sup> (p. 5). When

<sup>13</sup> "Kako je dječak mladićem postao... // I kako je otac bez sina ostao — pljingg."

<sup>14</sup> "O događaju što se netom zbio — // što je kto govorio! — plingg!"

<sup>15</sup> "Za one što su slijediti ga stali, sastavio Franjo pravilnik je mali."

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, FELD (2013, 63 ff.).

<sup>17</sup> Interview by the author of the article with René Medvešek in Zagreb, October 7, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> "Pronositi radost želim! Dajte brzo, dajte sliku novu — da svijetu smjesta prenesem radost ovu!"

Francis proclaims the rules of the new order, he ends with the words “Therefore, let us try to follow our Lord in humiliation and poverty, let us try to respond to every evil with good and let our poverty make us rich in virtue and true joy”<sup>19</sup> (p. 6). The insight that is expressed in this quotation, that poverty is the way to true joy, is repeated several more times throughout the whole performance. A childish joy, expressed during the whole play by the actors, underlines the outstanding importance of the aspect of joy in this staging. The aspect of childishness, as already mentioned, can be found in Bobin’s novel, too:

The man of childhood is the opposite of a man adding to himself: a man taken from himself, reborn in every birth of everything. A fool playing at the ball. Or a saint who talks to his God. Or both at the same time. (BOBIN 1992, 110)<sup>20</sup>

A common trait of Medvešek’s staging and the film by Rossellini is the principle of presenting individual stations from the life of the saint. In the film, each new station is announced by a title link, just like in silent films. In the drama, these are the aforementioned short poems recited at the beginning of each picture. If one looks closer at some of the details, it seems that Medvešek deliberately deviates from the film. For example, in the film, the brothers bring flowering branches of apple trees to the meeting between Francis and Clare, while in the play, Francis and Clare sit in front of an apple bowl, which moves in opposite directions during the meeting, symbolising, in a way, the overcoming of original sin.

Indeed, the drama also takes up the well-known legends about Saint Francis, for example his sermon to the birds, which, like other scenes, is underlined with good-natured irony. Before the end of the drama, the Canticum of the Sun is visualized in a very impressive way: again accompanied by the singing of Compagnie de Bousca, on the dark stage the actor is carrying tin shields symbolising the sun and the planets, which are illuminated while he is almost invisible. It seems that the planets are circulating around the sun, which would be, indeed, an anachronism, but in one dialogue, introducing into this scene, one can find even an allusion that

<sup>19</sup> “Zato nastojmo svi slijediti našega Gospodina u ponizosti i siromaštvu, nastojmo dobrim odgovarati na svako zlo i neka nas naše siromaštvo učini bogate u kreposti i pravoj radosti.”

<sup>20</sup> “L’homme d’enfance est le contraire d’un homme additionné sur lui-même : un homme enlevé de soi, renaissant dans toute naissance de tout. Un imbécile qui joue à la balle. Ou un saint qui parle à son Dieu. Ou les deux à la fois.” — A fragment of this text, between others and quoted here in the original, is printed in the *Kazalište* magazine with the information that the whole text was a compulsory reading for all actors. See BOBIN 2001.

Francis anticipates the knowledge that Copernicus discovered only later (p. 19). At the end of this sun dance to the music of Compagnie de Bousca, Francis appears with a light in his hands and, before his very death, he pronounces a shortened version of the Canticle of the Sun:

Praised be, my Lord,  
 By Sister Water  
 Praised be, my Lord,  
 By our brother Flame  
 Praised be, my Lord,  
 By our sister and mother Earth  
 Praised be, my Lord,  
 By our sister Carnal Death  
 Which no mortal can escape

(pp. 20-21)<sup>21</sup>

The words "Because everything comes to"<sup>22</sup> are followed by music. Francis first undresses, lies down on earth and covers himself with his robe. Then he gets up and goes away and finally one brother completes the interrupted sentence with the word(s) "The End!"<sup>23</sup> (p. 21). These words not only mark the end of Saint Francis' life, but also the end of the performance, and as a self-referential device, it is not only an element of irony. At the end of the performance one sees a burning candle on the stage, which does not go out. Even when the actors bow to the audience, the candle still burns. This burning candle has a symbolic meaning. Just as Francis is generally, as already mentioned, known as the "second Christ," this candle and Francis' standing up on the stage after death highlight the immortality, if not of his body, then of his teachings. The scene in which Francis and his brothers and sisters share bread can also be understood as an allusion to Christ – as in some other parts of the play, here, too, not without irony, because the bread is hard and the company decides to soak it in water (cf. p. 12).

<sup>21</sup> "Hvaljen budi, Gospodine moj, // Po sestri Vodi // Hvaljen budi, Gospodine moj, // po bratu nazem Plamenu // Hvaljen budi, Gospodine moj, // po sestri i majci nam Zemlji // Hvaljen budi, Gospodine moj, // i po sestri nam tjelesnoj Smrti // Kojoj nijedan smrtnik umaći neće."

<sup>22</sup> "Jer svemu dođe."

<sup>23</sup> "Kraj!"

## III.

One could ask not only why the drama about Saint Francis was written and staged in Croatia in 2001, but also, why it was extremely successful: the staging even received various awards, for example for the leading actor, who was considered the actor of the season (cf. MEDVEŠEK and MIKIĆ 2001, 40).<sup>24</sup> The reason for this is probably not (only) the fact that 2001 was the 775<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Francis of Assisi. The drama, which, according to the author and director, was created by workshopping with the actors (cf. DUJIĆ 2001), not only emphasizes the theme of joy, but also the importance of poverty, which brings real joy to man. At the beginning of the third millennium, Croatia was still in the process of political transformation after socialism and the Yugoslav wars. The country was undergoing significant changes. On the one hand, social problems were increasing, more and more people were becoming poorer and, on the other hand, some people, albeit only a few, were becoming very rich. Material wealth became increasingly important. In such a situation, it may make sense to remember the principles of Saint Francis' teachings—they draw attention to the most important things in life: love of one's neighbour, joy and disregard for material well-being. Reasons for alienation in the present are not only the conditions of production, but also the conditions of communication and the excess of information (cf. DUJIĆ 2001; BILIĆ 2005, 527).

The director himself, indeed, explains the success of his drama as offering not only an answer to burning social questions, but also demonstrating the necessity of faith. Saint Francis occupies the director above all because he was not only a great man, but also very conscious of his own nothingness. All this contrasts with what is important for contemporary society and what is actually important for humanity (cf. DUJIĆ 2001). Moreover, the critic Darko Gašparović describes Medvešek's theatre productions in general as underpinned by spirituality (cf. GAŠPAROVIĆ 2015).

Another reason why the drama of Saint Francis was so successful at the beginning of this millennium, might be related to the role of the church in Croatia; it has increasingly become mixed up in political matters. The model of Saint Francis shows the essence of the Christian faith, which is based not on political, but on pastoral action.

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<sup>24</sup> Krešimir Mikić, the actor who played "Brother Donkey," became one of the most famous Croatian actors, not only in theatre but also in films, for example in the tragicomedy *Svećenikova djeca* ("Children of the Priest") by VINKO BREŠAN 2013.

Moreover, the Franciscan tradition in Croatia is very old and continuing. Franciscan monasteries have been widespread since the 13th century on the territory of contemporary Croatia. An anthology of poems about Saint Francis testifies that almost every famous Croatian poet who was a Christian believer wrote at least one poem about him (cf. LONČEREVIĆ, PETRAČ, and VIDEK 2009).

No matter how we interpret the drama and staging of René Medvešek in Zagreb in 2001, we are dealing here with an impressive and convincing attempt to combine liturgy and performance. The staging is interactive from the beginning, not in the sense that the actors directly approach the audience, but in a much more subtle way. At the beginning of the performance, the actors are standing on the stage and watching the audience in a friendly manner. Sometimes there are words that the actors speak aside, but this is not the fundamental principle of interactivity of this performance. Medvešek himself says about his theatrical concept, that theatre has to be a common event: "This, in my opinion, is just theatre; not that certain people watch certain other people do something, but that we are together for a while" (MEDVEŠEK and MIKIĆ 2001, 41).<sup>25</sup> Therefore, not only the drama, but the director's understanding of the theatre in general includes a liturgical element, because liturgy also serves the co-existence of believers and celebrants. Similar to the religious service, which has a purifying effect on believers, spectators of this play often commented that after the performance they felt differently than before watching the performance. Numerous statements made by different viewers confirm this impression, partly in joint interviews with the director or statements made by the director himself in which he talks about it. The director Nina Keflin, for example, says that productions such as "*Nadpostolar Martin*, *Brat Magarac*, are performances which really leave something noble in the soul of man" (BILIĆ 2005, 525).<sup>26</sup> As early as the end of the 1990s Medvešek compared theatre with a church:

If we could agree that theatre has a mission, I would prefer it to be more similar to a particular church than to a sect — to turn to everyone, but to offer more layers of understanding. The idea of theatre in a certain way is also that for one or two hours we play collectively and become childish [...]. (MEDVEŠEK 1996, 41)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "To je, po mom mišljenju i samo kazalište; ne da neki ljudi gledaju neke druge ljude kako nešto rade, nego da to vrijeme budu zajedno."

<sup>26</sup> "'Nadpostolar Martin', 'Brat Magarac', to su predstave koje zaista nešto plemenito ostavljaju u čovjekovoj duši."

<sup>27</sup> "Kad bi se mogli složiti da kazalište ima svoju misiju, onda bih više volio da ono nalikuje nekoj crkvi nego nekoj sekci – da se obraća svima, ali da pritom nudi što više slojeva razumijevanja. Pa ideja kazališta je na neki način da se na sat-dva kolektivno zaigramo i podjetinjimo [...]"

Thus, theatre fulfils the function of a place where people meet and experience catharsis, not only in the dramatic sense:

I think there are many more performances that enable real encounters. Many people came to me after the performance and said that it filled, purified and carried them for a few days. (MEDVEŠEK 2001, 41)<sup>28</sup>

Medvešek understands theatre in general as an institution that brings together people of different generations and different beliefs:

I like it when theatre enables communication where it gets stuck in life, from generational, ideological or, I don't know, all prejudices, and not when it gathers around its staging a ghetto of connoisseurs and like-minded people. (MEDVEŠEK 2001, 43)<sup>29</sup>

In this theatre, the actors' performances not only fulfil an entertaining function, but they have an effect on the spiritual state of both the spectators and the actors. In the play "Brother Donkey," this function is grounded additionally in its subject, but principally every drama in the theatre performance fulfils this function. In this sense, Medvešek's theatre can be called a secular church service, in which the dramatic text has liturgical qualities.

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<sup>28</sup> "Mislim da nam puno više trebaju ovakve predstava koje će nam omogućiti prave susrete. Meni je jako puno ljudi došlo poslije i reklo kako ih je predstava ispunila, pročistila, kako su je nosili po nekoliko dana."

<sup>29</sup> "Volim kad kazalište omogućuje komunikaciju tamo gdje ona u životu zapinje, iz generacijskih, idejnih ili ne znam kakvih predrasuda, a ne da oko svojih izvedbi okuplja geta znalaca i istomišljenika."

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AND DIRECTOR RENÉ MEDVEŠEK AND ITS STAGING AT ZKM ZAGREB

S u m m a r y

The paper deals with the drama *Brat Magarac* ("Brother Donkey") by the Croatian playwright and director René Medvešek, and the author's staging at the Theatre of the Young (ZKM) in Zagreb in 2001. The drama presents the life of Francis of Assisi. Numerous film productions on this subject offer evidence of the inherent theatricality of Saint Francis' life. Medvešek's staging corresponds to Saint Francis' teachings since the scenery and costumes are very modest. In addition, by integrating musical elements the whole performance takes on liturgical qualities. This corresponds to the author's idea of theatre in general, which, in his view is not confined only to presenting a show for the audience, but which, similarly to a church service, brings people together and enables them to experience a catharsis.

**Keywords:** Saint Francis; theatre; liturgy; René Medvešek; "Brat Magarac."

TEATR JAKO NABOŻEŃSTWO: *BRAT MAGARAC* („BRAT OSIÓŁ”)  
— DRAMAT O ŚW. FRANCISZKU Z ASYŻU CHORWACKEGO DRAMATURGA  
I REŻYSERA RENÉ MEDVEŠKA I JEGO SCENA W ZKM W ZAGRZEBIU

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy dramatu *Brat Magarac* („Brat Osioł”) chorwackiego dramaturga i reżysera René Medveška oraz inscenizacji autorskiej w Teatrze Młodych (ZKM) w Zagrzebiu w 2001 r. Dramat przedstawia życie Franciszka z Asyżu. Liczne produkcje filmowe na ten temat świadczą o teatralności nieodłącznej od życia św. Franciszka. Inscenizacja Medveška odpowiada nauczaniu św. Franciszka, ponieważ dekoracje i kostiumy są bardzo skromne. Dodatkowo, integrując elementy muzyczne, całość nabiera walorów liturgicznych. Odpowiada to w ogólności wyobrażeniom autora o teatrze, który jego zdaniem nie ogranicza się tylko do przedstawienia dla widowni, ale – podobnie jak nabożeństwo – łączy ludzi i umożliwia im przeżycie *katharsis*.

*Przełożył Stanisław Sarek*

**Słowa kluczowe:** św. Franciszek; teatr; liturgia; René Medvešek; „Brat Magarac”.