

Francis

By David Radcliff

A play for one actor. Set in the Italian town of Assisi in the late 12th and early 13th Century.

Scene One—the Lord of Merriment

[Scene opens with Francis lying on an incline facing audience—a reenactment of his death. Hands are outstretched, revealing stigmata—the wounds of Christ’s crucifixion. Similar marks are on his feet and on one side. He is dressed in a simple brown tunic.]

[Rises and speaks]

That’s how it ended—44 short years after his birth, Francis of Assisi lay on the floor of the small chapel where his pilgrimage had begun, just outside the Italian town of Assisi. He was surrounded at that moment by his friends, the brothers of his order, Clare de Favrone—who had run away from her family to join his movement at the tender age of 18—“Brother Giovanni”, a rich widow whom he called “brother” because she was so much a part of his ministry—as well as townspeople, visitors from afar—it is even said that a flock of larks uncharacteristically circled above, singing their farewell.

He had died of natural causes. Well, perhaps earlier than nature might have intended, as he sometimes failed to treat his body with the respect it deserved. Once when he found himself finding too much pleasure from the scraps he had begged for a meal, he mixed them in ashes and water and before continuing to eat. Why would someone punish himself so? Not punishment really—more like penance. See these marks? For the first time since the death of Jesus, another person bore the stigmata—marks of the nails in the hands and feet, and the spear in the side—for the first time these marks appeared on another human being—inflicted this time not by pounding hammer and sharpened spear—but by God. Could it have been that God graced him with such as these because Francis identified so personally with the suffering of our Lord?

But this be too sorrowful a discourse for a time such as this. It is a time of song and celebration!

[beginning to dress himself in finery]

First the larks circling above, but it wasn’t long until everyone joined the chorus--singing, chanting, giving praise to the Maker for making one such as this! Francis would have approved—he loved a good song—he’d been singing all his life. Certainly songs to the Creator for God’s mercy and love, but earlier on, before he did an abrupt about-face, songs of love and revelry. You see, Saint Francis hadn’t always been so saintly. He had always been the life of the party though, able to bring the crowd along with him—whether by his preaching or by his merriment. And it was the merriment that came first—

[assumes role of Francis]

*Let us now rejoice,
give mirth its fullest voice,
for youth will soon have given 'way,
to steady march into the grave;*

*So come ye fellows and ye dames,
let passion rise to brilliant flame,
and drink and song and love invite
to join us on this merry night.*

Yes, father, I'm here to work at the shop. Then why am I dressed this way? Well, am I not the best promotion you have for your fine imported cloth? Did we not just last spring bring this all the way from France—the homeland of my dear mother—for the purpose of placing our clothes on our neighbors' backs as they place their coins in our purse? And what better enticement than for them than to see your dear son arrayed in it—the “Lord of Revelry” himself—oh, no, father....I am not proud of that title! Yes, I know there are more important titles I could have been given by my friends—and I can only wish that I had been named “Most Likely to Succeed in Business.” It's just that—well, God has given me the gift of exuberance, and I dare not try to contain it or deny it—else who would they have to lead them in their merriment? What's that, father? Yes, I suppose there is always the devil himself—but that's just it, father. Better me than the devil leading the youth of Assisi. Speaking of which—I believe I hear them calling—what's that father—sorry but I can't quite make out what you're saying—

Angelo, dear friend! And who have we here—Isabella—look what has become of you...my, how you have grown...—and in such fine fashion.

*May I take thee to the square...
...and hope to find some dark spot there
where as young doves do wings enlase
find ourselves in warm embrace*

Aye! Let us pass by to the other side of the lane, my dear. There are some of those hideous lepers up ahead. Can't they keep out of our sight—they and their disfigured faces, their rotting flesh, the stench that trails them as surely as the flies. Haste my dear—yes, pitch them a few coins if you will—let it be some small solace for the miserable life they lead on this earth.

Angelo, will you be with me in battle when we march against those despised Perugians? Though they lie so near—just across the river—they are so far by affinity. How many generations have we hated them—and them us? They came from different stock and always seemed allied with our adversaries, first the pope, then the Germans. And now, the rich land-owners from our own hillsides have fled there—in fear for the rising strength of the middle-class, whose wealth is based not on inheritance but on commerce.

Perugians, beware! Like a knight from King Arthur's court, I will fight for town and honor. My raiment alone will dazzle them—*[as he dons fighting garb]* and then mounted on my steed I'll charge shoulder to shoulder with the best and brightest of our fair burgh—scattering the enemy before us!

[pantomimed fight scene ensues, until...]

Mercy!! I beg you! What if I sing for my life!? A-a-a-agghhh! Wait!! What if my father is wealthy and will pay richly for my ransom! [as his life is spared, to audience] No one appreciates good music these days...

[marched off to prison with other Assisians—stripped to tunic once in dungeon]

[later]

So, here we are comrades, jailed in the bowels of the enemy's fortress. The food is wretched, the rats are magnificent, our jailors are arrogant in their victory—and we have not touched the warm flesh of a fair maid in months now—so I say let us lift a song of celebration for our good fortune. What good fortune, you ask? To be alive—when so many perished in the same battle that led us here! And why should we sulk and moan—this is only a momentary affliction. And we have bread and water, without even lifting so much as a finger in labor to earn it. So who will join me? Pietro? Leonardo? Alright—I'll do the verses and you only the chorus? Say what? I am a fool? You may think me foolish—but one day the whole earth will come to respect me. And don't worry—when that day comes, I'll not forget the “close fellowship” we shared together in these days.

*Ifffff, 40 days and nights were spent
By Jonah in the whale
Sharing he the darkness there
With creatures foul and stale*

*Then why complain when here we are
Safe in this fine jail
All in all we're doing well
Even if quite pale
Even if quite pale*

*Aaaannnd 40 days poor Noah spent
Afloat amidst the gale
With boatload full of animals
Manure by the pail*

*Then why complain when here we are
Safe in this fine jail
All in all we're doing well
Even if quite pale
Even if quite pale*

*They say our Lord spent 40 days
Away from food or ale
Tempted there by Satan's hand
When he was weak and frail*

*Then why complain when here we are
Safe in this fine jail
All in all we're doing well
Even if quite pale
Even if quite pale*

See gents, our life is what we make it—I'll have another crust of bread—I've actually grown fond of the mold....

Mother! It is so wonderful to see you—and father, where is he? Away at the bazaar on the day of my release?? Y-y-yes, I am fine—save this cough—the quarters weren't like home, but we made the best of it. And mother, one night I had a dream. In the dream I was the inheritor of a large palace, and on every wall were hung fine battlements: shields, and swords and armor—I am sure that it must be a sign of some kind of future glory—that I shall one day be the knight I have longed to be for so long—or perhaps even a prince! What is that, mother? Yes, I know dreams can have many meanings—but I can just feel that the future has something...something magnificent in store for me. Just wait, mother, you'll see—yes, mother, I know—that's what mothers do—wait...and hope for the best for their sons...

For now, let me rest—it has been long since I've felt the warmth of a real bed and not had to check my blanket for fleas or rats... And I must rest, for soon I must be off to fight again, if indeed I am to be this knight—or perhaps even a prince—there will be brave commanders to follow into battle in our fight for freedom and against tyranny....

Scene Two—Transformation

[half awake]

Who's there?!...What do you mean, "Where am I going?" I am preparing to go to follow our leaders into war. I know this is my destiny now—I have had a dream—and I was a knight—or a prince—and in order to achieve these things I must go again into the fields of battle...

[listening] What? Who would reward me better for my efforts—the master or the servant? Well, the master of course! [listening] Then why am I leaving the master for the servant? What does this mean? Am I headed on the wrong course—following the wrong leader? Lord, tell me, what must I do instead? [listening] Not go to battle—but remain at home—and wait there for you to tell me what to do. As you wish, Lord...

[later the next day] My father has so many fine things in his shop—I'm sure he won't mind if I share some with the poor people of this town. Well, actually he will mind a great deal, but these people are in need and we have much more than we need. And isn't it the Christian thing to do?

[distributing clothing] Here brother—don't you think you'd look good in this? Oh, and just for you, my dear—how delightful. No, no, it's yours. Compliments of my father! Of course he knows...[aside] or he will when he takes inventory.

[spotting a leper] Oh—a leper. Those foulest of God's creatures...never to drink from a spring or well—must remain downwind from others—living apart in the leprosy house—certainly never touched by other humans—virtually nonexistent...but are they not children of our Lord as well....Oh, Lord, what would you have me do...

What has come over me? Have I fallen for the fairest of brides, the noblest of damsels, that love before which all others pale—none other than the Lord Jesus himself? I must pray on these things... perhaps a cave in the mountain...

[Makes his way into a cave, where he kneels, arms outstretched, nearly going into a trance. Repeats: "My God and my all." He finally emerges to the bright sunlight, but with a noticeable limp from his ordeal.]

[Come upon a small chapel in disrepair.] Look what has become of this small chapel—it is in ruins! But for a small amount of my father's money, it would be restored again.

[scene shifts] Here, yes, I'm selling this fine cloth at a very good price—and for a very good cause—to restore St. Damian's Chapel just in the woods outside of town. Oh yes, my father is very generous to offer this cloth at such a good price for such a worthy cause...

[back at chapel] Here, friar, a few coins for your work. [startled at father's approach] Oh, father, no...I mean, yes...I mean, the needs here are great and we have so much...No, I cannot return to town with you—there is work to do here... No, father, no!... [flees back to cave]

[finally exits cave to return to town; bedraggled and haggard; entering town is derided by villagers, things thrown at him] Father, please save me from these ruffians...[forcefully led away by father, beaten with strap when home]

[at home, locked in cellar] Father, is this the day you will unlock the door? Not until I promise to come again to work for you—and stop giving your money to the poor? How can I, father?

[coming out of cellar] Oh, mother, thank you. Father cannot understand what is happening to me. You understand, don't you, mother? I did not choose this—Christ has chosen me! The great things I thought I was destined for—chivalry, fame—I think now they will not be found on the field of battle or at the king's court, but at the court of another king. Please tell me you understand, mother... [they embrace]

[outside now] Oh, Lord, a leper. God's foulest creatures, yet last night I saw plainly in a dream a vision of our Christ crucified. If he so suffered for us—what is my discomfort with one such as this? [Approaches leper tentatively, then kisses his hand, then embraces him] And here, brother, a few coins for your purse.

[back at chapel, greeting priest, moving to sit down] Father, the work on the chapel is coming along quite well. It will soon be a fitting place to honor our Lord.

[sits listening to homily, then...] In the lesson today, it is amazing that our Lord sent off his disciples telling them to take no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic to preach the gospel to all creation. Can this be what our Lord expects of us yet today?

[his father approaches] Oh, father, you have come for me. I cannot return to your home, my father. My home is now here. What, father? Give up my inheritance...? Yes, it does seem only fitting, if I am not to take the role of your eldest son and inherit your business. But I will not renounce my right before a judge of the court—they have no authority over me—only before the priest in town. You will agree? Then let us go.

[standing before priest] I, John Bernadone, but know by all as Francis, do swear before God and this company to renounce my rights as the first born of Pietro Benadone, including all property and wealth I have or might receive from him. [removes cloak, tossing it to ground, stands girded in loin cloth, puts on a rough tunic] The Lord give you peace, father.

[standing in his tunic] Now what? Now what, Lord? You have me in your service—you also must take me into your care. No longer do I have my father's house to fall back on—it's just you and me, Lord... and that wealthy lady I see approaching. The Lord give you peace, ma'am. Yes, I am Francis. You have heard of my work on behalf of the poor? Only as the Lord gives grace, m'lady. [as she hands him coins] Oh, thank you...madam...? Giavonni de Settesoli? You have just gotten me...and the Lord...out of a tight spot.

[moving on; sung to tune of "Johnny Appleseed"]

Ohhh, the Lord's been good to me,

And so I thank the Lord

For giving me, the things I need

The sun and the rain and madam Settesoli

The Lord's been good to me!

Yes, the Lord does provide for those in his service. [seeing ravens ahead by road] As he has for you, my fine-feathered friends. You ravens, black as night, give thanks to your Maker for giving you what you need—sun, rain, wings to soar above the clouds, plentiful food—o.k., not a beautiful voice, but what you lose in song you make up for in shimmering black feathers. So give thanks to God for the gifts you have been given.

How fair this good earth God has given us. And how fortunate am I not to be trapped in a carriage pulled by foul-smelling horses—but left here to wander by foot, enjoying finery not known by knight or prince.

Scene Three—the Movement Grows

Hail, friend. And who might you be? Bernard of Quintavalle? The Lord grant you peace, Bernard. Yes, I am Francis of Assisi... You have heard of me? And what have you heard?! That I am Christ's fool, God's jester, that I am known to preach to the animals and live like one myself, depending on the Lord to provide? .And you want to join me? Are you feeling well? I'm afraid you do not know what you ask—to come with me means to leave all behind—to take on the poverty and joy of our Lord—to greet friend and stranger alike as beloved—to depend on the generosity of others—to embrace the leper—or worse, the fat noblemen—as our brothers. If you can do these things, then come along—and God give you grace.

[scene shifts] Ah, a knighting ceremony for some fine young man. And to think—this is what I used to think might befall me....What a joyous occasion—and what a grand opportunity—captive crowd, festive spirit, receptive to a bit of entertainment...

[Hopping to high place] Friends, Italians, Assisians, the Lord give you peace.

*These here are troubled times we're living in
Everywhere you look there's trouble
There's trouble over here, there's trouble over there
Everywhere you look there's trouble*

*Kings want to march us off to war—that's trouble
Noblemen always wanting more—that's trouble
Women being abused by their men—that's trouble
Clergymen living in sin—that's trouble*

*Troubled times like these require
A knight-like valor to inspire
To lift each one to give their life
To overcome this hate and strife*

*Through deeds of mercy, acts of love
We conquer without shedding blood
Just like our Lord who went before
Who now awaits at heaven's door*

[hops down]

[kneeling] Oh, sire. I trust I did not disturb the ceremony for your son. I only wanted to...what is it you say, sire? You were touched by my preaching? You'll give me this mountain to use as a Mount of Prayer?! Bless you for your generosity...

Hello, dear child. And your name? Clare? Is there something you want to say? But how can you join us—we are an order of brothers—and you in your fairness are certainly no coarse brother.... Yes, I believe in the call of God, but.... Yes, I believe that God speaks to women as well as men, but... Yes, there is always need for more laborers for the work of the gospel, but... O.K., yes, yes, yes, and yes, but what will your family say!?!... Yes, my own father objected to my choice.... Yes, your situation is no different than mine. And you are soon to be 18? Then let it be so. Meet me at St. Damian's church in the

afternoon on your 18th birthday—and it is Palm Sunday—a good sign—and we will make a place for you in a nearby convent. Welcome, my dear sister Clare.

Lord, what do I make of this? So many people, longing for something deeper and fuller than what they have known.... Help me to know what to do, what to say, what to be...

Oh, Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, let me sow pardon.

Where there is doubt, let me sow faith.

Where there is despair, let me give hope.

Where there is darkness, let me give light.

Where there is sadness, let me give joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I seek not to be comforted, but to comfort; not to be loved, but to love;

Because it is in giving that we receive; it is in forgiving that we are forgiven; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Scene Four—The Wolf of Gubbio

But as with all such fair words, the truth is revealed when they are put to the test...to wit: What is it, good people of Gubbio! A wolf is terrorizing this town!? You're afraid to venture beyond the city walls? It is large? It is devouring both man and beast? Then we must make peace with this fearsome creature.

[going out into the wild, the people following at some distance behind]

So there it is—and here it comes...! [the wolf runs at him, mouth open—Francis makes the sign of the cross—the wolf stops] Come here, Brother Wolf. I command you on behalf of Christ that you do no harm to me or to anyone. [bending down to address the animal] Brother Wolf, you do much harm in this area and you have done great misdeeds. Not only have you killed and devoured beasts, but you have dared to kill people, made in the image of God. And all the people cry out and complain against you. But I, Brother Wolf, want to make peace between you and these people, so that you do not offend them any more, and they may pardon you every past offense.

Brother Wolf, I promise that I will have food given to you constantly, as long as you live near this town, since I know very well that you did all this harm because of hunger, Brother Wolf. I command you in the name of Jesus Christ: come with me now without any hesitation, and we will go to seal this peace-pact in the name of God. What say you? [as Francis reaches out, the wolf extends its paw]

[walking with the wolf to the crowd] Will you promise to leave food for this creature, if he agrees never to attack you again? Here, receive this animal as a beloved brother. Care for him as you would you own.

This is the harmony our Creator intends for us to have with the creation. Is it any wonder that when take away the forests by building our castles and roads that the creatures become hungry? They must either steal or perish—not a good choice for man or beast.

Final Scene—the End

My movement grows—as I grow weaker. My body is weary from my many sacrifices—forgive me, Brother Flesh, for being inattentive to your needs. My eyesight has begun to fail—but I still see clearly the desires of our Lord for all people—indeed for all creation—that we live together in peace.

To some in the church, we are a welcome breath of fresh air, breathing life into a stale institution. To other church leaders, we are a nuisance—or even heretical—to call for poverty and peace—while they themselves live quite well—and aren't afraid to muster armies to conquer the Moslems—or the Germans.

The rulers of state paid us scant attention—until so many joined our movement and vowed to follow Christ above all—even above the king—that warfare was virtually impossible—no one would fight! Here's a question: What if they planned a war—and nobody came...?

I sense that the end is near—but only for me, not for this witness we are trying to bear. This work will be carried on by those who come after; those willing to forgo earthly comfort in the name of service and peace, and who look to their Lord for all things good.

Here...listen...this is something I have begun writing—my final will and testament to the Lord of all creation—that I might bring him honor with my final breath...

Most high, almighty, good Lord,

*Yours be the praise, the glory, the honor and every blessing;
To you alone, most high, do they belong,
And no man is worthy to utter your name.*

*Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures,
Especially Lord Brother Sun,
To whom we owe both day and light,
For he is beautiful, radiant, and of great splendor;
Of you, most high, he is the emblem.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
You have made them in the heavens, bright, precious and beautiful.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
Through cloud, clear skies, and all other weather
By which you give your creatures sustenance.*

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water,

So very useful, humble, precious and chaste.

*Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
By whom you enlighten the night;
He is beautiful, merry, robust and strong.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth,
Who sustains and looks after us,
Producing the different fruits, colored flowers and the grass.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through those who pardon for thy love,
And bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are they who uphold the peace;
By you, most high, they will be crowned.*

[lies down, revealing stigmata again]

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.
No second death can do them harm.*

*Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,
And serve Him with great humility.*

[lies back, breathes his last]

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