The English Theatre of Hamburg
Established 1976

presents

MASS APPEAL

by Bill C. Davis

Premiere on 20 February, 2014
Preview Performances at reduced prices on 17, 18 and 19 February
Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours
Matinee Performances at 11.00 Hours on Tuesdays and Fridays beginning 25 February

The English Theatre of Hamburg
Lerchenfeld 14, 22081 Hamburg
U-Bahn Mundsburg
Telephone: 22 77 089
www.englishtheatre.de
Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere MASS APPEAL by Bill C. Davis on 20 February, 2014 with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 17, 18 and 19 February. Bookings for this play have already started. The cover of this material can be used as a small poster to notify others of the production. We appreciate your help in advertising the play. The text of the MASS APPEAL may be ordered from Samuel French, 52 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 5JR, England. theatre@samuellrench-london.co.uk.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill C. Davis was raised in the Hudson Valley in New York State. He was one of four children and had twelve years of Catholic education. Mr. Davis was playwright in residence at the Manhattan Theatre Club and recently at Brooklyn College. His plays have been performed around the world, on Broadway, off-Broadway and in regional and state theatres. In addition to MASS APPEAL his plays include AVOW, WRESTLERS, DANCING IN THE END-ZONE, EXPATRIATE and COMING2TERMS. He has just completed a new play, FATHER-LAND, about the American German relationship as seen through the prism of two modern day families of both countries.

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ABOUT THE PLAY

MASS APPEAL premiered off-Broadway in New York City and then moved to Broadway in 1981. Since then it has been performed around the world. It was made into a movie starring Jack Lemmon with the screenplay written by Bill C. Davis. The play was born from the author's inner dilemma. As an artist, does one say what he believes people need to hear or what they want to hear? The play is about the bravery needed to put principles before popularity. Father Tim Farley, an experienced Roman Catholic priest, has made himself popular with his congregation by accepting the Church’s traditional views on such subjects as celibacy and whether women and gay men should be allowed to become priests. Mark Dolson, a young seminary student and candidate for the priesthood, irritates the older priest right from the first scene with his insistence on challenging certain traditions of the Church. And he questions whether one should strive to make things right or sit back, be comfortable and tell the congregation what they want to hear, what makes them feel good. Father Tim Farley and Mark are two specific characters who do battle with each other in the specific universe of the Catholic Church – and yet this drama of “need to hear” vs. “want to hear” could be acted out in many different universes – a law office, a government, a family. The joy and key to this play is that audiences seem to relate to both characters and ironically this has, over the years, been what has given MASS APPEAL its Mass appeal.
Summary of Bill C. Davis’s

MASS APPEAL

Scene: The action of the play takes place in Father Tim Farley’s office and in St. Francis Church.

Time: It is autumn.

Act I

Scene 1: Sunday morning, 10:15 Mass

Father Farley is giving what he calls a “dialogue sermon” where people in the congregation are invited to ask questions or voice their opinions. The subject of the sermon is “Current Crises in Catholicism”, in particular the question of whether women should be priests. A woman, who is against the idea, points out that the Pope has said that priests should be in the image of Christ. Then a young man stands up and says with fervour that he believes women should be allowed to become priests. It is Mark Dolson, who is studying to become a priest at St. Francis Seminary nearby. After all, he says, two of the people who stayed with Christ until the very end were women: his mother Mary and Mary Magdalene. “All of the men either denied him or were hiding out.” Mark feels that the loyalty these women showed to Christ qualifies them as being “in his image”. He adds that it is “foolish to continue depriving ourselves of the beautiful qualities a woman could bring to the priesthood.” Father Farley is somewhat disturbed by Mark’s statements, so he concludes the Mass by making a few commonplace announcements and dismissing the congregation.

Scene 2: The following Wednesday afternoon

Mark, wearing his running clothes, is in the office of Father Farley who has called him for a meeting. Father Farley is surprised at how Mark is dressed. Mark explains that he runs eight miles every day. As Father Farley gets a bottle of wine and two glasses, he asks Mark if he knows that, in addition to being a parish priest, he is also an advisor at Mark’s seminary. Mark, he says, has a reputation there for being outspoken, much the same way he was during the sermon in church the previous Sunday. He says to Mark, “I admired the things you were saying during my Mass and don’t ever do anything like that again.” Mark, who refuses the wine offered to him, explains that he usually goes to Mass at the seminary, but the rector, Monsignor Burke, sent him to Father Farley’s Mass so he could learn something about tact from the most tactful priest in the diocese.

Father Farley asks Mark what he knows about seminary students Frank Kearney and Alfred Virasi. Mark replies that they work with emotionally disturbed children and are very good and patient. Then Mark is told that Monsignor Burke finds the two men suspicious because they are together a lot. Given the Catholic Church’s views against homosexuality there is the serious possibility that the Monsignor will not allow the two men to take the vows of priesthood. Mark thinks this is as ridiculous as not allowing women into the priesthood, but his opinion, he knows, carries no weight within the Church. It becomes clear to Mark that Father Farley always tells Monsignor Burke what he wants to hear. He does not dare to question the Church’s precepts, and is perfectly satisfied to sit in his office and drink the bottles of wine that the parishioners bring him as gifts for making them feel good at Mass.

Scene 3: Friday, one week later

Mark appears at the church office for the second time in his running clothes, and Father Farley asks him if he runs in order to work out his hostilities. Mark, knowing that the final step to becoming a priest is to take a vow of celibacy, replies that he runs regularly in preparation for a life of celibacy in the Church. Father Farley informs Mark that he may not have to prepare for celibacy because Monsignor Burke has been having second thoughts about him becoming a priest. Monsignor Burke feels that Mark, along with several others, may be too immature to be considered for the priesthood. He suggested that Mark take a year off to decide whether or not he really wants to become a priest. Father Farley explains, sarcastically, that that is Latin for “Get lost.”

Monsignor Burke also told Father Farley that Mark had verbally attacked him the previous Wednesday for forcing a leave of absence on Frank Kearney and Alfred Virasi. He even called Monsignor Burke a “homophobic autocrat”! Mark admits that he used those words, but with good reason. Apparently, it is perfectly all right, he says, for seminarians to have TVs and sound systems in their rooms, and to drive brand new cars and fly to Europe whenever they choose—which they might instead be doing some praying or meditating. Living the life of luxury is seemingly okay with Monsignor Burke, but, Mark says, “when he hears a few rumors about Frank and Alfred he takes out his trumpet to blow down the walls of Sodom and Gomorrah!”

Father Farley tells Mark that he has been assigned by Monsignor Burke to come to him on a regular basis in order to work on curbing his tendency toward enthusiastic outbreaks. Only by doing this, does he stand a chance of becoming a priest. Mark says that Father Farley may be popular but that does not mean he is qualified to prepare Mark for the priesthood. Everything Mark believes in clashes with Father Farley’s efforts to be appealing to parishioners so that he can live a comfortable life. Popularity and worldly comfort have nothing to do with Christianity, as Mark sees it.

Father Farley persists. He tells Mark they are to meet every Friday, and he has broken down their work into three lessons. As he continues to talk, Father Farley pulls out a bottle of sparkling burgundy, a gift from a
member of the congregation. Lesson one, he tells Mark, will be about sermons. Referring to a copy of one of Mark’s sermons that Monsignor Burke gave him, he explains that Mark should not directly criticize the congregation with the words “you” or “your”. Instead, he should be more indirect by using the words “we” and “our”. Mark’s sermon should read like this: “Jesus is not impressed with ‘our’ designer shirts, ‘our’ luxury cars or ‘our’ platinum line of credit”.

Mark insists that he will say what he wants from the pulpit. People in the congregation “feel more secure when someone states his position clearly,” he says. Mark asks Father Farley if the only reason he gives sermons is to be liked. Father Farley answers that he likes being liked. “That and wine are the only warmth I get,” Farley admits. Mark, however, insists he will be liked much more for being real and sober.

On the defensive now, Father Farley claims that he is so popular with his congregation that he has to sign autographs after every Mass. To this, Mark replies that he never liked song and dance theology.” He goes on to say that he thinks people will respect a priest who says what he really wants to say. Father Farley retorts: “If it’s not their position, they’ll turn on you.” Father Farley warns Mark that he dare not give his congregation a “kick-ass” sermon. The pulpit is not the place to ventilate one’s anger, he insists. Mark says he understands that, but believes “there are serious moral and social conditions that can be tended to from the pulpit”.

In frustration, Father Farley tears up Mark’s sermon. Mark starts to walk out, but Father Farley calls him back. He pleads with Mark to give the kind of sermon the congregation wants to hear. He warns Mark that the only thing that can change Monsignor Burke’s opinion of him now is the congregation. Father Farley begs Mark to give a friendly sermon, to be charming, to make it personal and to even talk about himself, his childhood and the positive experiences he had going to Mass. If he is successful, Father Farley tells him, the congregation’s good opinion of him will find its way back to the seminary and to Monsignor Burke, who will immediately begin proceedings for his canonization. Without saying a word, Marks leaves Father Farley’s office.

Scene 4: Sunday, one week later, 10:15 Mass
Mark is standing in the pulpit now. He follows Father Farley’s advice about saying something personal about himself. He refers to his own childhood and how, as a boy, he looked forward to Mass because he knew that afterwards his father would drive the family to a bakery where he could choose jelly doughnuts for himself. This reason for going to Mass apparently does not sit well with the congregation. Coughing is heard, and, as Mark continues to speak, it gets louder. Mark explodes angrily. He reverts to the sermon of his that Father Farley tore up, and continues by saying, “Ideally the purpose of the church is to become obsolete. But until it is, we need the habit of coming together and collectively recognizing that there is another world. There is a world that coexists and gives order to this world. ...We must come with our hearts open to that.” Mark concludes his sermon by saying, “But you come here with your designer shirts, your smart phones and your SUV’s. Those things are your shackles—they are accessories you have made essential. YOU are essential.”

Scene 5: That afternoon
Father Farley is on the phone with one of the female parishioners who is upset by the sermon Mark Dolson gave. Having succeeded in calming her down, Farley thanks her for the bottle of wine she and her husband gave him. Mark enters the office, and Father Farley wastes no time in telling him that eighty per cent of the parishioners interviewed disapproved of his sermon. Even the collection went down by thirty percent. Sarcastically, he adds that the faculty members from the seminary who were present were “thrilled to hear from you that the purpose of the church is to become obsolete.”

On a more sympathetic note, Father Farley explains that he himself was unpopular when he first came to St. Francis Church because people compared him to the priest they had had before. In private he either threw things or burst into tears. He could not sleep at night. People finally accepted him, however, and for the last ten years he has basked in the knowledge that he is popular and beloved. Now he wants to know why Mark said what he did in his sermon. Mark, refusing to apologize for his words, starts to leave the office.

Father Farley stops him. He insists that they continue their work together by beginning the second of his lessons: Consolations. He asks Mark if he feels empathy with people. Mark says he does, but every time someone’s relative has died, or a child is left without a parent due to a nasty divorce, everything he thinks of saying sounds stupid to him. Father Farley tells him it is supposed to sound stupid because hearing clichés is what gets grieving people through their tragedies. Then they do a role-play in which Father Farley poses a problem and Mark is supposed to provide a suitable response that would console a person. Instead, most of Mark’s responses are comical. Eventually, Father Farley poses a problem that is really one of his own. Pretending to be someone else, he says, “I wanted everyone to be perfect. Especially my mother. When I thought she wasn’t, I cut her off. She’d write—she’d call. I’d never answer. Once she called, and I came so close. I had the phone in my hand. But I hung up. Three weeks later, she was dead.”

(Mark puts his hand on Father Farley’s shoulder.)

They are interrupted by the telephone. It is Monsignor Burke who wants to see Mark as soon as Father Farley is finished with him. It seems Monsignor Burke feels
that Mark was so vehement in his defence of the two young seminarians that he suspects there may be a possible homosexual connection between them and Mark. Mark points out that the two men were not yet priests, and, therefore, were not yet bound to a vow of celibacy. They could do whatever they chose to do sexually. Then Father Farley asks if Mark thinks such practices are easily stopped after a vow of celibacy. Mark answers with the first line of Andrew Field’s famous song, “How you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree (Paris)”? Then Father Farley gets more personal by asking Mark if he has ever seen “Paree”? “And if you have seen Paree were they Parisi-ettes (women) or Parisians (men)”? Mark replies, “Both.” There is a long pause. Seeing that Father Farley is shocked, Mark goes on to say, “Yes! Women and men—two sexes. . . . I explored the world by indulging my sexual ambivalence. I searched with my body, and I discovered I could never reconcile my inner emotional world that way.” That is why Mark has chosen celibacy—because in doing so he will be calm enough to help others, and the only real joy in this world for him is helping other people. He feels determined and perfectly prepared to become a priest, but he refuses to become a priest on a lie.

Father Farley pleads with Mark to be diplomatic. Once he is a priest, Farley tells Mark, he can fight Monsignor Burke and others like him all he wants, but he needs to make sure first that he becomes a priest. “You mean lie,” Mark counters. “If you can afford not to be a priest, tell the truth,” Father Farley says, “If you want to be a priest, lie.”

Father Farley admits now that he asked Monsignor Burke to let him work with Mark, not the other way around. “Why”, asks Mark. “Because you’re a lunatic!” replies Father Farley. “You’re one of those priceless lunatics that come along every so often and make the church alive. The only problem with lunatics is they don’t know how to survive. I do.”

Act II

Scene 1: Immediately after the 5:20 Mass
Mark has visited Monsignor Burke and told him all about himself. He enters Father Farley’s office now and finds him pouring himself a glass of wine. Mark reports that Monsignor Burke listened attentively to everything he had to say and responded by saying, “Thank you for being so honest—good day.” Mark felt this was a positive reaction, but now he can see in Father Farley’s eyes that he was wrong. This “means he’s going to get rid of me, isn’t he?” Mark asks Father Farley to help him, but the priest cannot, he replies, because Mark told the truth. When Mark presses Father Farley to persuade the people in his parish to influence Monsignor Burke, Father Farley decides to let Mark give another sermon to try to redeem himself. He advises him to let the people know that he loves them. Perhaps a good reaction will win over Monsignor Burke before it is too late.

Scene 2: Sunday, a week later, 5:20 Mass
Mark gives a heartfelt sermon relating how, in his childhood, someone turned up the heater on his fish tank and boiled all of his fish to death. It was a horrible sight and he wished “that I had the kind of ears that could hear fish screams because they looked as if they had suffered and I wanted so badly to have saved them.” As he stands in the pulpit now as a grown man he compares this event to his present feelings about all those in need. “So now I’m back—listening—listening for the screams of angels,” he says.

Scene 3: The following Monday morning
Father Farley is in his office drinking wine. Mark comes in and scolds Father Farley for drinking so early, but he is ignored. Father Farley is elated because there has been positive feedback from the congregation to Mark’s recent sermon. He is hopeful that Monsignor Burke will change his mind and let Mark become a priest.

The phone rings and Mark answers it because he thinks Father Farley has had too much to drink. It is Monsignor Burke calling to speak to Father Farley. Mark takes this opportunity to apologize to the Monsignor for what he has said in the past and starts to tell him about the sermon he gave yesterday to make up for the previous one. Before he can continue, however, Monsignor Burke tells him quite clearly that he has two weeks to leave the seminary. Angry at hearing this, Mark hangs up after telling Monsignor Burke that what he is doing is a sin. Father Farley is infuriated by Mark’s expulsion from the seminary. Emboldened by the wine he has drunk, he calls Monsignor Burke back and tells him he totally disagrees with his decision. “This whole sexual question is ridiculous. Celibacy is celibacy even if your thing is goats,” Farley says. Furthermore, he tells Burke that if he decides to give a sermon on Mark’s behalf, he will do so.

Scene 4: 10:15 Mass, the following Sunday
In the pulpit Father Farley speaks fervently to the congregation, telling them that their own Mark Dolson is being persecuted—and they have to respond to save him for the priesthood.

Scene 5: That afternoon
Mark, dressed in street clothes, is waiting in the office when Father Farley comes in. They both know that Father Farley’s sermon fell on deaf ears. Mark has no future in the priesthood. They are both disheartened. Father Farley tells Mark he must go because he has an appointment with someone who is coming any minute. There is no appointment and Mark knows it. He accus- es Father Farley of telling yet another “harmless” lie in order to spare his own feelings. Angry now, he criti- cizes Father Farley for always saying “what everyone wants to hear. It doesn’t matter if it’s true...as long as
you pacify whoever is on the other side of the desk. You’ll say anything to get a person in need off your back.” Enraged by this tirade, Father Farley punches Mark in the stomach, but only succeeds in injuring his own wrist. Father Farley laughs at his futile attempt to strike out at Mark, and Mark laughs too. Father Farley confesses that he wanted to help him and he even wanted to be more like Mark, but that he needs the love of his parishioners too much to change.

Mark says he understands, but that, unlike Father Farley, he found out in his unsuccessful experiments with loving other people that it was up to him to find something more constant. “Promises are broken—friends will be fickle—love goes its own course—and all of it ultimately does not matter. What you believe has to be more important than what your congregation thinks of you.” Father Farley says that he is not sure what he believes anymore. They shake hands and Mark returns to the seminary to finish packing.

**Scene 6: That afternoon, 5:20 Mass**
Father Farley steps into the pulpit and speaks to his congregation: “I’ve baptized you, married you, counselled you, buried you—but I never cared enough to run the risk of losing you. Monsignor Burke has expelled Mark Dolson from St. Francis seminary and consequently he is barred from the priesthood. Monsignor Burke will tell you that he has expelled Mark because of his past...because prior to his decision to become a priest Mark made love with women—and with men. But I don’t believe that’s the real reason. I believe Mark’s past is irrelevant. I believe Monsignor Burke has looked for and found a way to get rid of Mark because Mark threatens Monsignor Burke’s picture of what the church should be. But this is not only Monsignor Burke’s church—this is our church. Fight for it. Tell Monsignor Burke you will not accept his decision. We have to show him what Mark has shown me—that you and I and Mark must be allowed to help shape the thing that has shaped us. This is the first time I haven’t tried to win your love. Only now is love possible.”

**Curtain**

**MULTIPLE CHOICE EXERCISE**

1. Mark Dolson believes that women should have the right to become (a. nuns only, b. priests, c. popes).
2. Mark has a reputation for being (a. outspoken, b. an alcoholic, c. a slow student).
3. Mark called Monsignor Burke (a. agoraphobic, b. claustrophobic, c. homophobic).
4. The congregation’s reaction to Mark’s first sermon was (a. negative, b. ecstatic, c. indifferent).
5. When Mark was a child he went to Mass because afterwards he could eat (a. jelly doughnuts, b. sugar cookies, c. pumpkin pie).
6. Father Farley wants Mark to (a. tell the truth, b. lie about what he really believes, c. say nothing) in order to become a priest.
7. As a young man Father Farley expected everyone to be (a. evil, b. perfect, c. imperfect).
8. Monsignor Burke thanked Mark for being so (a. honest, b. trustworthy, c. polite).
9. Father Farley persuades Mark to give a sermon that the people will like, so Mark begins his sermon with a story about (a. diamonds, b. the Good Samaritan, c. fish).
10. Father Farley learns from Mark that always telling people what they want to hear is (a. the best policy, b. not good, c. the way to make friends and influence people).

**Answer Key:** (1. b, 2. a, 3. c, 4. a, 5. a, 6. b, 7. b, 8. a, 9. c, 10. b)

**INTERPRETATIVE EXERCISE**

1. Mark tells people what they need to hear. Father Farley tells people what they want to hear. Which of them is right? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think Mark Dolson would have made a good priest? Why or why not?
3. What is your opinion regarding women and gay men becoming priests?