

# Massively appealing *Mass Appeal* appeals to masses

by Chris Morash

Catholic Mass is great theatre—even when it's not funny. In half of the scenes in *Mass Appeal*, running until March 18 at Neptune, playwright Bill C. Davis uses the rich ritual theatricality of the pulpit—sometimes hilariously, sometimes poignantly; he sets the other half of the play in the closely personal sanctum of a priest's office. With these two settings, Davis creates a visual metaphor for one of the central tensions in the play—the tension within a church that on one hand seems to have become an empty, conscience-clearing ritual, a sort of mass tranquilizer, and, on the other hand, has at its roots an intense spiritual quest.

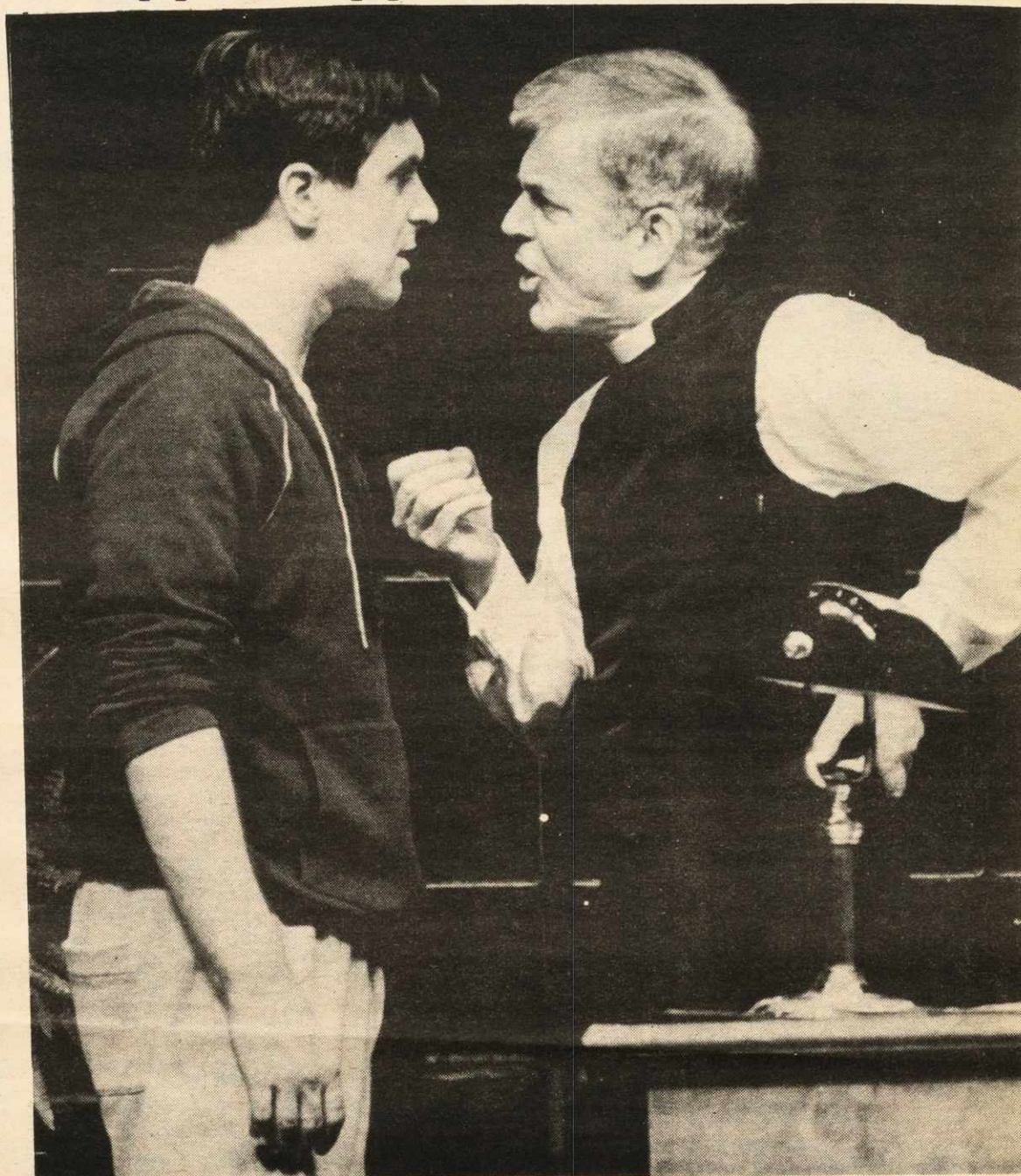
I'll admit this sort of thing doesn't sound marvellously entertaining, expressed bluntly. However, Davis embodies his problem in two characters who are marvellously entertaining, as well as being human, funny and moving. Father Tim Farley, played by Sean Mulcahy, is the complacent old parish priest whose chief concern seems to be keeping his parishioners and the church hierarchy happy, while Mark Dolson, played by John Moffat, is the brilliantly witty, yet intensely serious seminary student who wants to single-handedly make the church a meaningful spiritual force again. Yet, while the issues in the play are important, it is the characters we ultimately care about.

Whenever I see a two-character play like *Mass Appeal*, (or Neptune's last mainstage show, *The Seahorse*) the cynic in me immediately pictures a back-room accountant saying to himself, "We can't afford any more than two actors' salaries for this show. Not after the cast of a zillion we had in *West Side Story*." But a play like this one shows that a two-hander is more than financially advantageous; it focuses the attention sharply on the two actors, so when the acting is good, the play takes off.

The acting in *Mass Appeal* is very good. Sean Mulcahy, with his strong bard's voice, has that uniquely assured presence of a seasoned actor that's like a good glass of Irish whiskey; it goes down smooth, but packs a punch. His Father Farley is a character with depth, whose past is a believable trauma and whose present is a believable compromise. Mulcahy understands Father Farley, whatever weaknesses he has chosen to live with.

John Moffat as the young Mark Dolson balances Mulcahy's performance with an equally strong showing of his own. His character may not have the inherent roguish charm of Father Farley, but the compassionate insight with which Moffat approaches his role makes the audience care deeply about the character. And, like Mulcahy, Dolson has an explosive energy that rumbles along beneath the surface, and can erupt unexpectedly, creating a chemistry between the two that is exciting to watch.

Consequently, the true focus of the play is clearly brought out—the personal relationship of Father Farley and Mark Dolson. It is a relationship that forces the two men to re-evaluate their pasts, and look into themselves for the roots of the love of humanity that has drawn two such different men toward the priesthood. It is a relationship that brings the two men to a higher awareness of themselves, and thus offers the audience some insights as well. Director Larry Lillo, making his Neptune debut, injects a subtle touch of ritual into the scenes where the two men tell each other about their pasts, conjuring up the soothingly magic atmosphere of the Confession through some skillful blocking and a subtle pace change. Lillo creates this atmosphere of ritual again at the play's end, in a very moving scene in which the student solemnly



Shown in a scene from Neptune's production of *Mass Appeal*, a compelling comedy, are John Moffat and Sean Mulcahy. This show runs until March 18. (Photo by George Georgakakos)

invests the older man with his clerical robes.

Yet, for all of its pointed seriousness, *Mass Appeal* is a very funny play. Playwright Davis seems to love playing with words, and Lillo paces the action

so that only a very few of the wonderfully witty lines are lost in the melee. Even if you couldn't care less about the other issues the play deals with, you might enjoy this show simply for the laughs it offers. However, when

Davis turns his verbal skill to such evocative tour de force as Mark Dolson's final sermon, you can't help but care about the characters and their situation. Try not to miss *Mass Appeal*; it's an entertaining, worthwhile show.

## CKDU - FM presents The Palace at 4 A.M. on March 10

by Greg Diepenbrock

Occasionally we get a break from the usual acts manufactured by the "Great Canadian-Content Clone Machine" which continually bombards us with dime-a-dozen repertoires. Occasionally we do have the chance to see something from the larger cities that is entertaining, danceable and different.

One of these times will be on Saturday, March 10 in the Garden of the SUB, when the Centre for Art Tapes and CKDU-FM present The Palace at 4 a.m.

This is a Toronto-based band with members Ihor Holubitzky and Walter Yarwood. They will be supported in this Halifax performance by fellow recording artist George Higton.

The Palace at 4 a.m. have been together for about two years. In 1982 they recorded their first LP *Untamed World* on their own label Collective Ego. *Untamed World* and the followup *My Life And Einstein* are also distributed on foreign independent labels in New York and London. The name The Palace at 4 a.m. is taken from 1920's surreal sculpture. At first it was used as the title of a saxophonist duet.

The performance, entitled *Speak and Spell* will include visual staging dealing with the issue of language. Music by the band is performed on instruments ranging from saxophones and synthesizers to an electric typewriter and a propane torch,

although both members have conventional music backgrounds and contribute equally to the band. Walter Yarwood's experience ranges from pop, jazz, rhythm and blues, to "experimental" music. He previously recorded two albums with the band Garfield, and recently completed an album in New York for Celluloid, a French label. Ihor Holubitzky is responsible for most of the lyrics and adds the "international" elements—some of the newer tunes are sung in French and German. The band is influenced by non-western ethnic music although Ihor says he is very much influenced by contemporary German bands such as Kraftwerk, DAF and Klaus Nomi.

Lyrical, Ihor describes his work as "post-modern confession." He feels an affinity to stand-up comedy with its cynicism, satire and humour. Also, he admires beat poets such as Charles Olson and Lenny Bruce.

However, Ihor says, "This is not a lecture. Our objective is to entertain. We think we're suc-

cessful when we surprise both the audience and ourselves. The important thing is for people to enjoy themselves."

On Saturday, March 10 at 8:30 p.m. in the SUB, try something different. Come to The Palace at 4 a.m. and their performance *Speak and Spell*.

## Meet McGee's Maker

Blood and guts may catch your interest at the crime bookstalls, but why they're spilled can rivet you to your seat. John D. MacDonald cottoned on to this in 1950. Since then his more than 70 whydonits have sold nearly 80 million copies around the world.

His famed Travis McGee mystery-suspense stories and his other chillers have made him one of the world's most popular writers.

You can meet MacDonald on CBC Radio's *ANTHOLOGY* on Saturday, March 3, at 10:10 p.m. (11:10 AT, 11:40 Nfld.).