

Duo rise to achieve Mass Appeal  
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COLIN HUNTER  
The Record

Noah Danby and Tom Slater give heartfelt performances in Mass Appeal.

GUELPH -- Art imitates life with beautiful results in a new two-man play at the Guelph Youth Music Centre.

First, the art: the play, Mass Appeal, depicts the tumultuous relationship between a well-liked Catholic priest and the zealous, idealistic young seminarian he is trying to steer down the proper path toward priesthood.

Now, the life being imitated: the priest is played by Guelph high school drama teacher Tom Slater, and his young protege is played by former student Noah Danby, whom Slater steered toward a career in acting.

Mass AppealSuch uncanny parallels between the actors and the roles they portray result in some intoxicating onstage chemistry between Slater and Danby, making the production a joy to experience.

Slater's portrayal of the flawed Father Tim Farley is both hilarious and heart-wrenching. Farley is a veteran priest, nestled quite comfortably into a routine of delivering generic feel-good sermons and dispensing empty pleasantries to members his congregation. He enjoys driving his Mercedes Benz, playing golf, and guzzling overly generous doses of sparkling red wine.

But Farley's comfortable complacency is shaken with the arrival of firebrand seminary student Mark Dolson, who accuses him of slipping into materialistic decadence and peddling "song and dance theology." Dolson is sickened by the frivolities of modern society and the unwillingness of the church to take a stand against them. Father Farley is at first outraged by Dolson's lack of respect for the church establishment, but is also reminded of a time when he too was an a young zealot preaching the word of God from a soap box on a street corner. The two men develop a relationship of mentor and protege, but it is not long before the roles are reversed and Farley realizes he has a lot to learn from Dolson.

The roles are demanding, but Slater and Danby rise to, and exceed, expectations. Both men run through a gamut of emotions onstage, and each is completely believable in his role. It helps that they have a Noah Danby - Mass Appealwonderful script to work from, written in 1981 by playwright Bill C. Davis. Though the 1984 film version of Mass Appeal (starring Jack Lemmon) garnered only lukewarm critical response, the script is funny, poignant, and utterly engaging. Although the

plot has religion as its backdrop, the play explores issues that are universally human, regardless of faith -- issues of loyalty, honesty, and friendship.

The play also examines some of the woes the much-beleaguered Catholic church is currently facing, such as dwindling congregations and scandals among its clergy. There is a strong moral message in the story, but the play does not get bogged down by being -- pardon the expression -- preachy. Mass Appeal continues today and tomorrow 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Guelph Youth Music Centre. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$17 for students and seniors. Call 763-3000.