

Vatican Falls: An Uncompromising Look at Power, Conscience and Forgiveness

Natasha Lardera (May 14, 2012)



A fictional work, by playwright Frank J. Avella, based on factual accounts and events, takes on the Catholic sex abuse scandal by chronicling the journey of one sex abuse survivor from chaos to clarity and back again.

“I was seriously amazed that the Church kept getting away with what they did. And then they chose a Pope who was actually responsible for covering up the scandal. Why weren't people more outraged?”

Playwright Frank J. Avella, author of *Vatican Falls*, is very adamant about raising awareness on the



real facts concerning the sex scandal that hit, and is still damaging, the Catholic Church.

Based on factual material, his latest play follows the life of one survivor who struggles with understanding how those closest to him could damage him the deepest. The multi-genre, non-linear play probes the conflicting feelings involved in most sexual abuse situations and dares to confront the truth about the ever-growing scandal and the Church's complicity in it.

An ambitious new drama, *Vatican Falls*, is scheduled to be performed in a stage reading directed by Laura Caparrotti of Kairos Italy Theatre on May 15th, 2012 at 6:45PM at the National Comedy Theatre (347 West 36th St., between 8th & 9th Aves). The cast features Francesco Andolfi (Gianluca, a young Italian), Carlotta Brentan (Claudia, an irresistible and sexy Roman woman), Drew Bruck (Charlie, a very blue collar Bostonian), Matthew Crooks (Matt, a geeky Irish-American), Carlos Dengler (Father David, a charming and fearless priest), Joshua Dixon (Vi, a force to be reckoned with), Kalen J. Hall (Monsignor, the commanding and imposing Papal confidante), Liza Harris (Teresa, a strong willed Italian-American), Lucia Grillo (US Government Representative), Devon Talbott (Peter, an innocent teen boy) & Rob Ventre (Riccardo, a charismatic Italian-American singer and songwriter coming to terms with his abuse).

Vatican Falls was set to have its World Premiere in Rome, Italy, last May but was canceled the night before opening amidst controversy and claims of death threats. This will mark the first U.S. presentation of the play to an audience since the last workshop in 2010.

i-Italy reached Frank J. Avella for a few questions that shed some light on the origins of this controversial play.

What brought you to write a play on the Catholic Sex Abuse Scandal?

"In 2002, like so many others, I was appalled by the breaking scandal but not shocked. I had known boys who were molested and never spoke out because of shame or fear or both. The ensuing months produced so many articles, opening a floodgate of allegations that seemed never-ending. I was working on a few different projects at the time but had always wanted to develop a theatrical piece that addressed the enormity of it all via one survivor's journey to hell and back. I wanted to write it for the survivors--I wanted to write it from their perspective. In 2006, I began an all-encompassing research odyssey, interviewing survivors, journalists, and priests; pouring through transcripts, articles and visiting Italy. Documentaries had been produced. A terrific Showtime film, *Our Fathers*, captured the breaking of the scandal very well. And *Doubt* opened (although that play is not about the sex abuse scandal). I wanted to do more.

"I also became fascinated by the fact that there were very few instances of 'retaliation.' I interviewed Michael Rezendes, one of the major Boston Globe reporters responsible for the original series of stories and when I told him of my 'fictional twist' idea he confided that many days around the editorial table he and his fellow journalists would wonder why no one was fighting back in any violent way. So I began studying the genesis of modern terrorism (the Muslims fighting for independence in Algeria) and wondering what would happen if these survivors banded together and took on what my character Vi calls: 'one of the most powerful regime in the world.'"

Frank received a commission from the Know Theatre in Cincinnati (where his play *Iris* had quite a successful run). "They gave me that push to meld all the elements of my epic story together," he concludes.

The story centers on Riccardo, a young Italian-American singer/songwriter based in Rome. He is a member of SCAR (Survivors of Catholic Abuse Refuge), a group of revolutionaries, who initially band together to seek an apology from the Vatican but turn to terrorism. Riccardo meets the stunning Claudia, a Roman in her 30s. After an unconventional courtship, they fall in love.

As the play unfolds, we meet Riccardo's delusional abuser, Father David. In looking back, Riccardo must deal with the conflicts inherent in coming to terms with his abuse and how his relationship with Father David forever permeates his identity, psychologically, sexually and spiritually. Riccardo must



ultimately confront his past and then decide how far he is willing to go to exact revenge on an impassive institution. "This play is just like embroidery made with many different threads that come together in one final piece," Laura Caparrotti explains, "I have worked with the actors, scene by scene, trying to lead them into a text that continuously travels in time, between past and present."

Vatican Falls is based on factual accounts and events. Is this what happened to one person or the collection of different experiences that are fused together in one story?

"The latter. It's a collection of different experiences fused together. Each story is true. Charlie and Matt actually tell their stories and I actually had to dial it down because the real details --most audiences would not have been able to stomach. Father David is also a composite of a number of unknown and one or two infamous priests who seemed to have little remorse. We call them delusional but the Church leaders creates that mindset. And all the facts in the play are true.

The Rome show was canceled, and there were threats. How did that make you feel? Are you afraid something is going to happen here as well? Were any of those threats done to you?

"I was devastated. I should say WE were devastated as the amazing cast and crew devoted over two months of their lives to this project...to my play...to have the rug pulled out from under them literally at the last moment. It was and is--by far-- the worst thing that has ever happened to me in my career to date. I spent the next few months trying to get to the bottom of the reasons (what I like to call email wars) and found an elaborate and intense blame game among the producers (Francesca Scarano and Teatro Vascello's Manuela Kustermann). Unwilling to accept responsibility and make amends, Scarano and Kustermann, to date, have not answered for their roles in the fiasco--and they should.

There were alleged death threats and I was told some were aimed at me but I never directly received any and I am not so certain what I believe as far as all that goes. It certainly would not surprise me to find this to be true. I do know certain people close to the production have theories based on what they saw and heard that claim there may have been some deliberate sabotage going on. I won't elaborate since it's hearsay--but when pieces begin to fit--you have to wonder.

I am not concerned with threats here. I am writing the truth. And this play does not bash Catholicism. It does, however, paint a not so pretty but provable portrait of those in Papal power. I hope audiences will understand that."

The reading benefits [SNAP \(Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests\)](#) [2], the largest, oldest and most active support group for women and men wounded by religious authority figures. Recent headline news reports about the Catholic Church putting legal pressure on SNAP to hand over more than two decades of confidential information has put the group at the forefront of a major battle with Vatican attorneys wishing to silence them once and for all. SNAP is holding steadfast in their efforts to protect the privacy of victims, witnesses--even journalists who have come to them for help in the past. This very important group that has provided a safe haven for survivors since 1988. SNAP recently filed a lawsuit against the Vatican for crimes against humanity.

How did your support for SNAP start?

"SNAP was always one of my main sources for my research and after I recovered from the fiasco in Rome I had decided I wanted to do a fundraiser for this extraordinary group so I contacted the head of the NYC chapter, Mary Caplan. We had lunch and bonded immediately. She read the play and really believes in it. And the group has been under fire with Vatican attorneys wanting them to disclose private documents. They need our help now more than ever."

The reading is scheduled for May 15th. [The National Comedy Theatre](#) [3] is located at 347 West 36th St. (between 8th & 9th Aves), NYC. Tickets range from \$20 to \$50. Reservations via: VaticanFalls.com [4] or call 973-715-2356.



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