

ON THE ROOFTOP WITH BILL SEARS

A one man play based on the life and writings
of Mr. William Sears (1911-1992)

To Mr. Sears,
and
to my Grandfather,
James Bowen

Setting

WCAU-TV Studios in Philadelphia, USA. May 1953.

Cast

BILL SEARS

He's 42 and charismatic, with a strong mixture of both humor and melancholy. A natural performer and storyteller, he now finds himself alone, wrestling with a dilemma that reaches into his core, striving to retrieve the honest answer.

This script represents the original vision of the play as was first staged in April 2004, performed by Mark Perry with direction by J. Chachula. When the play began touring, adjustments were made to reflect the need for minimal props and set. Along with these changes, a less realistic approach to the premise of the play was adopted. Whereas this script clearly sets the play in Philadelphia in 1953, the touring production made it feel like Bill Sears, a spirit living outside of time, stumbles upon this place and this memory, and he decides to spend some time with us and to relive this crucial moment of his life. That being said, the spoken dialogue changed very little.

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The set is a 1950s TV studio, which is actually a converted radio studio. This is one of seven such studios at WCAU-TV in downtown Philadelphia. The studio is dimly lit at first with some light on stage right, where we see the set of a park scene. There is a tree and a bench covered by a cloth. On a chalkboard is written the title, "In the Park with Bill Sears." At stage left, apart from the set and still in darkness, there is a make-shift dressing area with a mirror. A kitchen area is offstage left. A sound room is upstage. Still portraits of WCAU personalities hang on the wall along with other items. BILL appears at the door. He is a middle-aged man, made up to look like an old man. He speaks to someone offstage.

BILL: Good show today, Paul. No, go ahead, I'll get the lights.

BILL comes in, full of snap. He wears striped pants, a flat gray coat, a light checkered vest, and a string tie. He stops.

BILL: I love that hush, the quiet of a dark theater... or a TV or radio studio, as the case may be. It's a silence that vibrates with anticipation, every atom poised to bring into being whatever one might fancy. You could say, let's go back to the Renaissance, to Spain, to Seville... or to Rome of the 1st Century, or east to the Orient and points yet unknown. You could call up stories of people long gone. You could bring a man back from the dead. Yes! You can bring a man back from the dead, let him live again, let something of his essence mingle in our midst for a

while, so you might enjoy his company, gain from his experience. All you have to do is ask, and this hush—this pure soil for the cultivation of the soul—it responds. And for a span of time, you can forget that it's 1953 and that you're in Philadelphia.

He turns on the lights.

BILL: You remember that joke. "I entered a contest once. First prize was a week in Philadelphia. Second prize: two weeks in Philadelphia." WCAU, a 7-studio house broadcasting radio and television. I do a daily show, plus my sports gig (*he waves an Eagles pennant*) and then there's "In the Park." Some Sundays, I like to take a little extra time after the show, to reflect. I don't have much quiet time at home between my two sons' escapades and the menagerie of pets and guests my wife Marguerite keeps. Let's see what we got on.

He turns on a speaker monitor and we hear music.

BILL: Ah, Guy Lombardo. Must be Stu in the booth—he loves the old sugar-stick.

He turns down the music, when he discovers a cup of coffee and a donut by his dressing table. There's an envelope next to them.

BILL: Oh, isn't that nice? Coffee with cream and (*sniffs*) two sugars. And a honey-glazed. Heaven. And a letter. (*He picks it up and sniffs it.*) It's a contract. (*He shakes it next to his ear.*) To renew the show for another year. Boss shows me into his office the other day: "Sears, Television is big, very big, and it's getting bigger.

The CBS people, they're happy, very happy with your show. Stick with us, Bill, and you'll be a star." And now they're offering me... (*Listens carefully to letter.*) Forty-five? No. (*He weighs it in his hands.*) Fifty! \$50,000. (*He sighs.*) Sounds... delicious. Just one problem.

The number '16' is written prominently on his dressing mirror. He wipes it away and writes '17' in its place.

BILL: I'm calling it "The Divine Dilemma." And today is Day 17. (*Talking to God.*) Only 2 days left. Beyond that, my conscience is clean. (*To audience.*) How do I put this...? I have a friend—works here at WCAU—who suspects that Jesus Christ has returned, and is wondering what to do about it. The answer is obvious, right? Christ hasn't returned, because when He comes, everyone is going to know it. That's how we know He's come: all the noise, the fire with the angels singing, horns blowing. Right. (*He shakes his head as if he's in complete agreement with that.*) Still... my friend suspects it anyway, and claims to have some proof. Good proof. Great proof... except for the angels, the horns and the universal cataclysm. What would you do? Really, given that point of view, what would you advise? Should my friend give up a good livelihood and fame to go and share this message? Because no one knows about it. Just like the first time He came—my friend says—when only twelve believed in Him, and He sent them out into the world saying, go out and share the Gospel with all nations.

My friend really loves his job. Don't get me wrong, the industry has its dark side, its temptations. (*He picks up a record.*) This record arrived the other day addressed to me... (*He flips it around – a \$20 bill is taped to the back of the sleeve*) with a 20 spot taped to the sleeve. Might be a good record, it'll certainly get a lot of airplay.

He pulls off the \$20 bill and tapes it in a prominent spot.

BILL: But I say treat people fairly and honestly, and for the most part, they'll do well by you. Take a guy like Ed Sullivan. He's got a reputation to be the "great stone face," but I've found he's one of the genuinely nice people in the business. He's invited us on his show twice now, and because of that, this new rag, TV Guide, did a feature on us. So all in all, things are looking up for the show, for me.

I hope you won't think this immodest. Praise doesn't mean that much to me. My priorities are clear: First, air. Second, water. Third... I dunno, food? Well, praise is after air and water, definitely. Thank you for laughing. So it's not just the money. (*He picks up the envelope.*) Besides, 50,000 isn't what it used to be, say, in 1912, when you could get a beer for a nickel. Still... Wanna see what I do for such a sum?

He throws a sheet off the park bench to reveal several stuffed animal puppets.

BILL: I talk to the animals! I play dress up and take pleasure in the fact that when I'm finished putting on the makeup and costume, I look like my grandfather! I mean it's all good and fine to play

make-believe every once in a while, to have fun, but to be paid a salary that a doctor—someone who saves human lives on a regular basis—doesn't make. Dear God, where will it all end—did you ever catch yourself mid-sentence and wonder who is this speaking with my mouth because it sounds frighteningly like my father?!

My father. Money meant so much to my father. And he wouldn't see this kind of money in 20 years of hard work. Factory work. I look in the mirror some days and I don't see myself. I see him. Looking back at me, with a look of disbelief in his eyes. And we have this ongoing dialogue, he and I—actually the mirror and I—about whether what I do is actually worth anything.

He hides part of his face with his hands.

BILL: Maybe it's just the mustache.

He starts taking off his makeup.

BILL: So each Sunday, I'm transformed from my father into my grandfather then back to my father again. And the three of us enjoy a donut and a cup of coffee. So let's see, how do you split coffee and a donut three ways? See, if Christ had returned, He could do this. Or was that Moses? To Grandfather, the coffee. I'll hold the donut. And for Father...

He goes to the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of beer. He blows the dust off it, but does not open it.

BILL: For father, Milwaukee tap water. He's Irish after all. (*Holding up the bottle as if toasting his father.*) That you may see no one but yourself in the mirror. On a Saturday night Father would stand for hours around the piano at Hennessy's House with the only other two Irishmen in town and they would sing one short song over and over. (*Sings.*)

“Ooooh... McGinty was dead and McCarthy didn't know it;
McCarthy was dead and McGinty didn't know it.
They both lay there dead in the very same bed
And neither didn't know that the other was dead.”

The phone rings. He picks it up.

BILL: Bill Sears. Hi Stu. Sorry to hear that. Sure. Of course. Okay. (*He hangs up.*) That was the DJ who's on now, Stu, and he's got a stomach flu—

He hears his rhyme and thinks. He reaches for a pen and paper.

BILL: Just saying he may need me to cover for him.

The phone rings again.

BILL: Pete's Porcelain Palace... 30 seconds? No, I got it. Go do your thing.

He scribbles a few lines, and then goes into the sound room. He comes back out and grabs a horn (sound effect) that is hanging on the wall. Music comes up on P.A. system. When the song fades, the “On the Air” sign comes on. We hear BILL's voice.

BILL: This is Bill Sears in Studio 7, and here's a limerick for you: I just got a call from Stu, seems he has a touch of the flu, said he

couldn't sit, and if I could pinch hit, then he could take... (*the bonk of a horn*) ...a trip to the loo. If you're listening, Marguerite, I'll be coming home soon.

We hear Benny Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing." BILL reenters.

BILL: Benny Goodman's 'Sing, Sing, Sing' is an ol' stand by for DJ's. At 8 ½ minutes, it gives us time to grab a snack and visit the little boy's room. Good thing I was here. Silence can be bad for a radioman's career. Now, where was I? I forget. So I'll do what any old codger would: I'll start at the beginning.

I was born in Duluth, Minnesota on March 28, 1911. Sometimes I wonder if Father never forgave me for missing Saint Patrick's Day by less than two weeks. I was born in a caul. Wrapped in a veil, my father said. My Uncle Duffy was more picturesque. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and all the saints in purgatory! The laddie's come in a cocoon."

I began to walk when I was ten months old, but I began to speak when I was only six months. It made my father very nervous. Especially since the first word I said was not, "Daddy" but "God". Apparently, I heard it a lot around the house, generally followed by language less religious in character.

By the time I was a year-and-a-half old, my father was quite frightened of me. I knew several words that he didn't. It was at this time that I first had the dream. When I told Mother about my dream she told Father. He wanted to take me to a doctor, but Mother said, "He's just precocious."

"He's weird," Father told her.

All I could recall myself about the dream the first time I had it was that the room had been full of a wonderful bright light, that I was very happy, and that I wanted to remain there. September 20, 1912. Mother said she remembered the day of my dream very clearly. It was the morning that Father came downstairs after being desperately ill. He'd eaten some string beans from a bad jar and had been poisoned. For three days he thought he was going to die. At the height of his fever he confessed to Mother that ten years ago when they had first been married he'd taken Alma Jensen to a barn dance, and he didn't want to die with that on his conscience. Unfortunately for him, he recovered.

By the time I was five I was making my poor father's life a misery. I just had all these questions: Why was the sky blue? Where did a laugh go after you heard it? If the earth was round and people were walking on all sides of it, which side was up? Why was Sammy Agnew black and why was I white – most of the time? Did God have a wife? Where was His house? Could He speak Chippewa Indian like Uncle Walter? Did He really love everybody? Even old lady Yellow-jacket who chased us kids with her umbrella? Why did He make mosquitoes? And flies that could walk upside down on the ceiling? The big questions really unnerved my father. I seemed to have an inordinate interest in God, and he didn't care to discuss it with me.

One day at the circus, while the bare-back riders were galloping through the big rings of fire, I turned to Father and said suddenly, "Is that what hell is like?"

Father nearly swallowed his cigar. "Don't ask me, I've lived all my life in Minnesota."

"Where does *God* live, Father? How big is He? Does He have brown eyes?"

We left the tent immediately. Father stopped at a side-show and bought me a rubber ball. "Here," he said, "play ball. Be like the other little boys. Bounce the ball on the ground."

I did, obediently. Then I looked up at him proudly. "God made the ground."

About a month later, according to Mother, I had the dream a second time. I didn't say anything about it until my father came home from work.

"The man came again," I said.

"Who came?" Father laughed.

"The man."

"What man?"

"The man in light."

"Where?"

"In my dream again."

"Ethel! He's at it again."

Mother came hurrying in. "What's wrong?"

Father was already putting on his coat. "He's seen that man in a light in his dream again."

Mother picked me up tenderly and kissed me. "Of course, he has." She hugged me to her. "We all have nasty bad dreams."

"It was a good dream," I told her.

"What did the man look like?"

"I don't know."

"What did he say?"

"Don't follow in their footsteps."

The very next morning Father was shaving when I came into the bathroom.

"What's my name?" I asked him.

Father had often played this game with me. "Your name is William."

"Then why did he call me Peter?"

"Who?"

"The man in my dream last night."

Father cut his chin. "Ethel!"

Mother was very patient about it. "Are you sure he called you Peter, dear?"

I nodded. "He said: 'Fish like Peter.' "

Father went to work that morning with his face half shaved. "It's not normal. He talks like an old man. He'll be dead before he's six." Whenever my father became upset he talked with a brogue and waxed poetic. "If I'd known what was coming that

dark March night, I'd have stuffed him back into the 'caul' and returned him."

They say there's an age when the child looks to its father, looks into his eyes, searching for unconditional acceptance. There's a window of time and if the child doesn't find it, that window closes, and the boy has to go elsewhere for that acceptance.

If we were on Television Playhouse, this is where our troubled protagonist would reach for the bottle of beer, BUT! I'm more interested in this donut here...

He bites the donut. The phone rings.

BILL: (*Answers.*) Bill Sears. Stu, you're back! How'd it work out? Oh, good. Did you catch my bit? No? Ask your mother when you get home. Okay, call if you need me. (*Looks around.*) I know where I am, I know where I am. Donut. Beer. Dad. Dream. Ah!

One night I had exactly the same dream again. Only this time I was old enough to remember it clearly. So I wrote it down, all about the beautiful shiny white figure that came to me and brought a peace and rapture such as words can never describe.

I decided that I'd better go and tell my grandfather about my dream. Grandfather didn't always know the answers, but he always let me ask questions. I found Grandfather inside his barn singing at the top of his lungs:

*This is the end of this sample script.
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