

CHURCH AND STATE

Posted By Kathleen Campion on Mar 28, 2017



Review by Kathleen Campion

I went to see a “seriously funny new comedy” — that’s what the press release said. Seventy-eight minutes later, the actors were taking bows before an enthusiastic audience and my mascara is all over my face, what with the weeping and the wiping that preceded the curtain call.

The plot *might*, at first, seem predictable. A conservative Senator from North Carolina, a get-along, go-along kind of guy, is running for reelection. His sassy, velvet-glove of a wife bristles at the attention he pays to his assertive campaign manager from New York — political pro who hopes to ride this senator to a White House run.

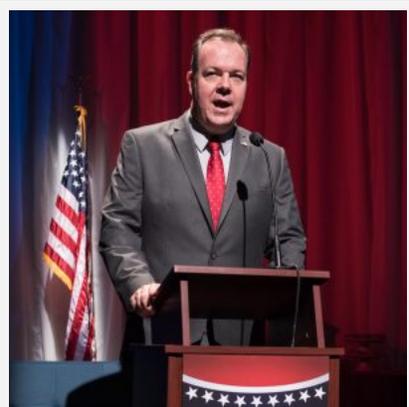
The characters *might* have been stereotypes: the bulky Southern senator for whom “Jesus is his running mate”; the too-loud senator’s wife still strutting her high- school-cheerleader charms; and the oh-so-thin, oh-so-controlling campaign manager full of disdain for the backwater material she’s working with in the two of them.

Playwright [Jason Odell Williams](#) beats every comic moment out of the cultural differences of these disparate people, and lulls the audience into a comfortable complacency. We *know* these folks. Well, we don’t *actually* know them, but we’ve seen them on sitcoms and at Trump rallies.

As we settle into the embrace of the funny, if superficial, banter, Williams serves up the senator’s come-to-Jesus moment. Just as a innocent show-and-tell lesson in a second grade class can turn to tragedy in a nanosecond, *Church and State* slams you with import. You do not see it coming. The playwright taps into all the lingering, barely repressed horror that twenty-first-century Americans have stockpiled in the face of gun violence.

Seventy-eight minutes isn’t a lot of time to build three characters and one big idea. Williams manages that with a disarming trick. He writes an unlikely hero, then someone casts a remarkable actor, Rob Nagle, who makes him breathe.

[Nagle](#) (the senator) is unerringly genuine. He has a gift for the seemingly interrupted aside, for the pregnant pause, and for the endearing peek at the boy-in-the-man he offers up. The play is built around the Paul-on-the-ol’-Demascus-road epiphany, but it would only have consequence with a consequential actor in the part. It’s Nagle’s play.



Church and State; Photo by Russ Rowland

That said, **Nadia Bowers** is ideal as the political wife we cannot ignore and come to enjoy. Similarly, Christa Scott Reed plays her edgy-New-Yorker smartass with real distinction. *Her*, we actually know. And, finally, Off-Broadway audiences know there is likely to be one actor who fills out the cast of many tangential characters. **Jonathan Louis Dent** is a chorus of credible guys who pop in and out of the action.

Arguably it is Art's job to plumb the unresolved, still unvanquished emotional weight of tragedy. A society that allows the murder of second-graders to go unaddressed — and, in so doing, encourages more obscenities of this sort — never really sleeps well again. Playwright Jason Odell Williams seeks to trouble your sleep with your conscience. *Church and State* packs surprising philosophical punch, though dressed as a comedy.

Church and State – By Jason Odell Williams; directed by Markus Potter

WITH: Rob Nagle (the senator), Nadia Bowers (the senator's wife), Christa Scott-Reed (the campaign manager) and Jonathan Louis Dent (everyone else)

Designed by David Goldstein, lighting by Burke Brown, costumes by Dianne K. Graebner, sound by Erik T. Lawson. Sofia Montgomery is the stage manager. Produced by Charlotte Cohn, SCS Innovations, Forty-Eight Theatrical. Casting is by Wojcik/Seay Casting. *Church and State* has an open ended engagement at New World Stages, 340 W.50th. Running time is 78 minutes with no intermission



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Kathleen Campion is a nationally recognized financial journalist with a gift for making the opaque in markets reporting transparent. At Bloomberg News she was one of three managers who created Bloomberg's broadcast and cable media. She recently returned to an early specialty – arts reporting and reviewing for Front Row Center.