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Theater Review, "Church & State"
By Ben Miles

The ancient art and craft of theater allows us – the audience – to observe ourselves, our dilemmas, our hopes and, yes, sometimes even our prayers. A well performed play can rivet our attention, connect to our empathy and pierce even armored hearts. Theater is analogous to prayer, in that better and worse images of ourselves can be evoked through our participation in prayer. And when prayer becomes a communal experience, such as in a church or synagogue it, like live theater, becomes a sort of redemptive performance. Likewise, when a play is performed that touches our emotions while broaching the struggles of our era, it becomes a sort of prayer.

So it is with the marvelous new play by Jason Odell Williams, "Church & State," now in its world premiere at Los Angeles's Skylight Theatre, through August 14. Directed with intensity and up close clarity by Elina De Santos, with a four member cast, "Church & State" is a contemporary conceit that is as timely as the nightly news, and just as troubling.

Charlie Whitmore (Rob Nagle giving a sterling in-the-moment performance) is campaigning for reelection as the U.S. Senator from North Carolina. His bid to return to office is complicated by a deadly schoolyard shooting that has recently taken place in Whitmore's own community. Out of frustration, Whitmore suggests to a reporter (Edward Hong in one of his several roles here) that he doesn't believe in God (after all, he ponders what sort of God would permit such carnage to occur). His youthful lady campaign manager Alex (the excellent Annika Marks), his wife Sara (a formidable Tracie Lockwood) and possibly the entire North Carolina election contingent are brought to the brink of coming undone.

In a swift, intermission-free 90 minutes, "Church & State" takes us on a behind the scenes trip through Whitmore's campaign travails, while fortifying its political premise through video feeds showing us senate deliberations with familiar faces, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator John McCain and Senator Elizabeth Warren (Nicholas Santiago is the video designer). We are given a solid sense of the lovingly playful relationship between Charlie and Sara, as well as the thick tension that exists in the relationship between Sara and Alex. And we are hit hard by a dramatic twist in the plot that underscores the conflict of this drama as well as the issue of our day: the danger of the rampant availability of firearms in a free society.

The set design by Jeff McLaughlin is simple and functional. The lighting by Sohail E. Najafi lends proper focus to the proceedings, while never being overtly theatrical. The sound motif by Chris Moscatiello is conveyed in a natural, unforced manner. And the costumes by Mylette Noraseem seem as if they could be clothes worn by actual candidates and their acolytes.

For those who are devoted to theater that is absorbing, relevant and controversial "Church & State" is a show for you. You'll laugh knowingly at familiar political and interpersonal tropes, cry helplessly for the seemingly irresolvable issues facing our nation and our world, and possibly think and dialogue deeply subsequent to this profound experience in the theater -- and perhaps even pray.

"Church & State" continues at the Skylight Theatre through August 14. The Skylight Theatre is located at 1816 ½ North Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles. Show times are twice weekly: Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. For reservations, call (213) 761-7061. For online ticketing, visit <http://skylighttix.com>.