

## Church & State: Catch It Pronto, Before It Goes!

Interesting. Breaking news about Trump's visit to the Vatican hit my inbox moments before I began writing this piece about a play that offers a political backdrop as a jumping off platform to explore the challenges of keeping the (or any) faith in a country where gun violence is business as usual and the muscle-flex of the NRA lobby assures future generations a savage crush of schoolyard snuff videos on (anti-) social media.

As for the Papal visit, it was, as the *Times* pointed out, "fraught."

In a Tuesday night prequel to the meeting (in the aftermath of Trump's \$110 billion weapons sale to Saudi Arabia), Vatican VIP Cardinal Peter Turkson spelled out the situation in a tweet: "Pope Francis & Pres Trump reach out to Islam-world to exorcise it of rel. Violence. One offers peace of dialogue, the other security of arms."

Post meeting summary: According to media reports, a beaming Trump called his brief one-on-one encounter (a half hour) with Francis "Terrific. The best!" while an unsmiling Pope said nothing. Score: exasperated Francis, 1; deluded Trump, 0.



*Church & State*, starring Rob Nagle, will run at New World Stages through June 4.

Trump so needs to see **Church & State**. But then he's not much of a theatre-goer—or supporter. If his proposed budget has his way the plug will be pulled on funding to the National Endowment for Arts. (Here's the place where I wonder where the \$110 billion Saudi bucks are going.)

But here's the clincher: moments after Trump vs. Francis grabbed my web-obsessed attention, I received word that Jason Odell Williams's *Church & State* posted a premature closing date of June 4th.

"I'm so proud of the entire *Church & State* team and what we accomplished here, especially our partnerships with Sandy Hook Promise and other charitable organizations," said producer Charlotte Cohn, who happens to be married to Williams. "The people we reached and the lives this play has touched are immeasurable and we look forward to a long and prosperous life in the regions, as well as at school and universities across the country."

And while this thought-provoking theatre piece will no doubt have a vibrant post-Manhattan afterlife on tour, it surely deserves a far longer run in New York City—a place where visitors from across the country and globe come to take in shows that both entertain and tap into the way we think about a wide cross-section of issues.

As for *Church & State*, it grew from Williams's visceral reaction to three gun-related tragedies: the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, in which 32 died and another 17 were wounded at the hands of a 23-year old student wielding a 22-caliber handgun; the 2011 shooting in which Representative Gabrielle Giffords and 18 others were shot; and the clincher—the December, 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting with its death toll of 28, including 20 children between six and seven years old. By January, 2013, Williams had his first draft of what would develop into *Church & State*.

Sharing Williams's reaction to these fusillade-stoked events, Cohn—a writer, actress, and founding producer of both the Music Theatre Festival (NYMF) and MainStreet Musical—signed on to produce this powerhouse of a work, infused with humor, while providing a subject matter that inevitably leads to salient post-performance conversations.

The storyline of the play tracks the behind-the-scenes activity taking place during the re-election campaign of Charles Whitmore, a fictional North Carolina senator who, at the top of the show we're told, believes "in good Christian values" and protecting "our Second Amendment Rights by helping to block a restrictive ban on firearms."

Played with down-home geniality by veteran actor Rob Nagle, Senator Whitmore is plagued by a turn of conscience that is both a platform game changer and a migraine-sized challenge for his New Yorker campaign manager, Alex Klein (Christa Scott-Reed). Additionally, his determination to tear down some of his key political building blocks is mystifying and problematic to his very Southern, very Christian wife, Sara (Megan Sikora, who joins the cast for tonight, replacing Nadia Bowers).



A recent phone conversation with Charlotte Cohn fleshed out even more of the passion behind both her and Jason's commitment to *Church & State*.

"I am half Danish and half Israeli—and I served in the Israeli army longer than required, becoming an officer and commander," she says. "I operated firearms. But unlike here, I had to be trained. And at the end of the day we removed the bullets from our guns and put them in a safe."

As a result, Cohn's former relationship with guns and their treatment was put to the test when she came to the U.S. and discovered how they were perceived here. "I was in awe at that they were not only admired, but were seen as cool and awesome and sexy," she says. "This kind of thinking...these concepts were alien to me."

Cohn also recalls seeing a video of a 15-year-old kid in one of the red states as he was turned down by merchants when he tried to buy cigarettes and alcohol, but was able to walk into a gun show and buy a gun. "It's beyond explanation," she says.

So basically she and Williams saw *Church & State* as a call to action. One that doesn't preach or come across as a tiresome lecture, but rather an opportunity to open the floor for discussion—primarily in the red and purple states—and to find pathways to fixing what has become an ubiquitous problem in American: gun violence, whether a group massacre or single victim.

"Once, during a Wednesday Night Talk-Back, a woman shared that she was both a Trump supporter and a member of the NRA. She told us she loved the play," reports Cohn, who calls the show a "dramedy" due to the high level of humor used to put some seriously poignant points across.

"Neither Jason nor I believe in 'Bitter Pill Theatre'—I know I don't enjoy shows that are just Sturm und Drang," says Cohn. "To me it's just not theatre without levity."

To date, the show has netted accolades from press and theatregoers from its initial readings and productions up to its run in New York. "*The Huffington Post* named it one of the top 10 productions in L.A.," Cohn says, going on to cite numerous other honors, including a Best Play nomination from New York's Off-Broadway Alliance.

But what is especially important and telling, according to Cohn, are the play's partnerships with charities—an approach unique to *Church & State*. The list includes [Sandy Hook Promise](#) and [New Yorkers Against Gun Violence](#).

In an author's note written in June of 2016, five months prior to the presidential election, Williams wrote:

"While most writers hope that their work will live forever, my dream for this play is that it will become obsolete. And many years from now people will read it and think, 'How quaint! Americans used to argue about gun control.' But as the news incessantly reminds us, these mass shootings are not going away any time soon. They have become our new normal. Orlando was a stark reminder of that. For now, I hope this play raises questions, sparks debate, makes people laugh, cry, and laugh while crying...But most of all, I hope this play speaks to your heart. Because, for me, that's the only reason to write anything: to speak to each other's hearts."

In closing, if you're reading this in NYC, I urge you catch *Church & State*, during its final week of performances (it closes Sunday, June 4th) at New World Stages (340 W. 50th St.)—and if you can't see it now, keep checking theatre listings in your own city for the touring company. Better yet, spread the word to theatres and auditoriums where you live urging them to reach out and book this vibrant, funny, and important show.

For tickets call 212-239-6200 or visit [churchandstatetheplay.com](http://churchandstatetheplay.com).