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In Church & State, a Playwright Trains His Weapon

By [Leonard Jacobs](#) Mar 19 2017 [Interviews](#) + [Politics](#) + [Theater](#)



Photos: Russ Rowland.

Ask *Church & State* playwright Jason Odell Williams to describe himself and he turns into a maker of lists: “husband, father, writer, TV producer, [Orioles fan](#), comedy nerd, golf geek, Aaron Sorkin/Judd Apatow-wannabe and recovering [politics junkie](#) trying to wean himself off the news since the election.” That’s quite a mouthful. But then again, it’s a century for multitasking, [we all know that](#), and this writer [surely embodies his times](#).

And how! Williams’ play, *Church & State*, begins its Off-Broadway run on March 20, and it does seem like [bitterly ironic comic medicine](#) for these agonizing times: a “political comedy-drama about religion, guns, politics and ‘the Twitter.’” Ah, but such is the stuff of press releases and marketing slogans. Dig a little bit and you’ll find it’s *really* [about guns](#) and Charles Whitmore, an absurdly well-named politician three days out from his possible re-election to the US Senate who, for reasons revealed, decides it’s the perfect time to tell the public what’s *really* on his mind. What a relief, to run for elective office and [lack any filter!](#) Well, sure. Or you could just call it political suicide. It all depends on your [viewpoint](#). And your [capacity for laughter](#)

Directed by Markus Potter, *Church & State* features Rob Nagle, Nadia Bowers, Christa Scott-Reed and Jonathan Louis Dent in the cast. The play, running 75 minutes with no intermission, will have an [open-ended Off-Broadway run](#) at New World Stages (340 W. 50th St.). For tickets and schedule information, [click here](#).

And now, 5 questions Jason Odell Williams has never been asked:

What’s the most perceptive question anyone has asked you about your work?

“Why is the mixing of tones (comedy, drama) important for you?” and “What are the recurring themes, if any, in your plays?”

What’s the most idiotic question anyone has asked you about your work?

I come from a comedy approach to theater, where you need to ask tons of questions about every single moment to mine all you can out with each beat, so I don’t think there are any dumb questions when it comes to art. All questions are fair.



What's the weirdest question anyone has asked you about your work?

Same answer as #2. I like all questions about my work, especially if it's one I've never heard before because it forces me to think about my play in a new way.



Rob Nagle as a filter-less politician.

Are politicians human? Why do they do ridiculous things like not show who they really are? Unless they're all really duplicitous pervs. Or are they, er, just actors?

They are human, I think. Flawed, like the rest of us. But I think it takes a certain kind of person to want to take on that kind of job and unfortunately it does not attract the best kind of people. Power-hungry and greedy people tend to be attracted to that line of work so inevitably they are going to do dumb stuff.

What happens to our country if there is never any Republican, any conservative, who can ever be persuaded to reconsider their position on gun control. No argument, no act of evil. What happens if they are, every one of them, unyielding, uncompromising and implacable?

That's hard to think about. I like to believe that over the course of human history we are moving closer to enlightenment. There are steps backward we take as a society, of course (we're in one right now), but on the progress chart over the last 1,000 years, we've become more civilized and tolerant (Women can vote! We no longer poop outside!) so I think eventually they will yield on the gun issue. The next two election cycles will be interesting to watch. And within the next 20 years I think there will be significant strides on this issue.

"Bonus" question:

If granted unlimited power, would you repeal the Second Amendment?

No, I wouldn't repeal it; that could cause anarchy. I would instead use that power to block, limit and/or curb the sale of all automatic weapons, block all sales of weapons and ammunition online where there are no background checks, and hold the gun manufacturers accountable for every single crime committed with one of their weapons. Allow them to be sued in court for negligence when guns get into the wrong hands and they will end up self-policing themselves because they will have to pay millions in damages. The gun lobby needs to be treated like the tobacco lobby. It's a health hazard.