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by **Deb Miller** on March 30, 2017

Religion, gun control, and the impact of social media are the hot-button issues addressed by playwright Jason Odell Williams in ***Church & State***, a political dramedy now making its New York premiere at New World Stages. Directed at a rapid-fire pace by Markus Potter, the play's mood instantly shifts from ridiculous to sobering, as its characters debate and rethink the timely topics that affect us all, divide our country, and define our politicians.



Rob Nagle. Photo by Russ Rowland.

When an elementary-school shooting in his town claims the lives of many local children – including two close friends of his own young sons – North Carolina Republican Senator Charles Whitmore makes some candid personal comments to a blogger at their funeral. The quotes spread like wildfire on “the Twitter” (as it’s referred to by the out-of-touch protagonist), calling into question his faith in God and the Second Amendment, and threatening his re-election campaign in the conservative South. Despite the relentless urging to do some carefully scripted damage control at that evening’s rally by his wife Sara (who is also certain that it’s called “the Twitter”) and campaign manager Alex Klein (exasperated in her attempts to correct them), the candidate decides instead to improvise, setting off a firestorm of fervent disagreements, surprising events, and re-examinations of their long-held beliefs.

Rob Nagle turns in a fine performance as the conflicted Senator, drawn with humor, psychological insight, and emotional depth, and delivered with three-dimensional range and nuance. He is both funny and sensitive as the development of his character demands, transitioning from flagrant evasions and silly trivialities (including a running joke about iced tea) to the sincere realization that the “unalienable rights . . . of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” should trump the right to bear arms. The also excellent Jonathan Louis Dent plays four minor roles that evoke the Senator’s changing position and moral conscience. He distinguishes them well, and provides the soft-spoken logic that ultimately convinces Whitmore to be forthcoming about his newly formulated and deeply felt ideas.



Christa Scott-Reed, Jonathan Louis Dent, Rob Nagle, and Nadia Bowers. Photo by Russ Rowland.

Unfortunately, throughout most of the show, the two female characters offer little more than the same old predictable stereotype of the domineering woman, at odds with each other and with the Senator, until they begin to listen to one another and are inescapably impacted by the unexpected turn of events. Alex, a “naturally dubious” Jewish New York Democrat who thinks her strange alliance with Whitmore will culminate in his successful bid for the White House, is played with “dry” wit, open ambition, and easy irritation by Christa Scott-Reed. Nadia Bowers as Sara Whitmore, the vacuous Bible-quoting gun-loving Southern political wife, too often crosses the line between characterization and caricature. She shouts, drinks, and blatantly flirts with her husband, while using inane malapropisms (“sticker-tape parade”) and willfully declaring that she’s in control (“He wears the pants, but I tell him which pants”), until forced to face a new reality.

The production’s design team is effective in creating a contemporary political tone. Scenic Designer David Goldstein provides a well-appointed green room where the behind-the-scenes action takes place, while surrounding the audience with red, white, and blue wall hangings, campaign posters, and flags. Costumes by Dianne K. Graebner are suited to the personalities (dresses and heels for Sara, a fitted pantsuit for Alex, a shirt and tie for Whitmore), while underscoring the political leanings of the Senator’s constituency on tee-shirts worn by Tom and Marshall (two of Dent’s characters), with mind-boggling slogans like “APATHY is a four-letter word.” Burke Brown’s lighting differentiates between present time and flashbacks, and Erik T. Lawson’s sound is ever clear, even when the high-decibel battling characters realistically talk over each other.

Though the words of *Church & State* capture the language of the on-going debates over the separation between the two, the need for gun control, and the increasing power of the internet, the script treads on very familiar ground, and its author would be hard-pressed to find a theater-goer in New York who doesn’t already agree with its obvious message. Will the play change your mind? Probably not. But it does strike a resonant note about listening to the perspective of others and putting yourself in their shoes, as the characters eventually do.



Running Time: Approximately 75 minutes, with no intermission.