

## Great Left Coast Actor Arrives

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Tags: **Bob Dylan, Christa Scott-Reed, Elina de Santos, Gary Grossman, Jason Odell Williams' "Church and State", Jesse Dylan, Markus Potter, Nadia Bowers, Rob Nagle, Tom Waits**

**BY DAVID NOH** | Jason Odell Williams' anti-gun play "Church and State" is that rare work that combines a stark message, sadly all too pertinent today, with droll, dry, and highly diverting wit. It centers around incumbent North Carolina Senate candidate Charlie Whitmore (Rob Nagle) and how his stance on gun control is seriously affected by a shootout at a local grade school. Arguing pro and con around him, as well exerting varying but intense influences on him are two wonderfully strong women, his formidable wife (Nadia Bowers) and campaign manager (Christa Scott-Reed). The play is admirably compact and effectively if modestly staged, and, with its swift dramatic arc – encompassing everything from "Designing Women"-style Southern humor to stark tragedy that elicited real gasps from the audience – it packs an emotional and intellectual punch unmatched by anything I've seen this season.

Coming back to New York after 19 years on the West Coast for such a terrific part is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream for Nagle, who is easily recognized among his theatrical peers as a great actor, but a represents new commodity for New York audiences.

"I was here, working double shifts as a waiter," he told me, after a particularly exhilarating third preview Sunday matinee performance, "and running off to auditions and act in some tiny space. People said I'd hate LA, but I don't, and have come to find my community out there of theater, friends, and family. But this was a wish I had since college to go to NY to work, and I'm thrilled to be back and start this conversation."

The script of 'Church and State,' as Nagle tells it, fell into his lap.

"This director, Elina de Santos, and I had been wanting to work together for a long time. She said they were going to do the Los Angeles premiere of it and for me to look at the part of the senator.

“ IN THE NOH: Stark message, droll wit of “Church and State” features Rob Nagle

“That title sounded like an essay on government. What’s this going to be about? And then I could not stop reading it, and, you know, it’s very easy to put down most scripts and go make some tea or look at your Facebook. But I couldn’t put it down and said, ‘Oh shit.’ My wife Heather said, ‘Is it that bad?’ ‘No, it’s really good, and I’ve got to do anything to be in it. Both Elina and Gary Grossman, the artistic director, had told me they’d thought of me for the part. Next thing I know I’m in auditions to find the other actors and it kept growing in rehearsal.

“And then Orlando happened. You can feel pretty silly going into work to make a play happen, but if it’s a play like this... It was incredible and thrilling and chilling and moving, and we had to find a way to laugh a lot. Jason canceled a family vacation in Mexico to spend it with us in previews and the opening. We opened in June and played through September.

“When the decision was made to open the play in New York, I said, ‘I’ll get back there myself to be part of this.’ It took some hurdles along the way in investors’ meetings, trying to prove myself with a new director [Markus Potter] and entirely new production, and then it happened.”

Nagle observed that the tone of the play has changed since the first production, and after the election: “Now the world is really heavy. Every tweet is some fresh horror. As a result, along with what’s always been there, I feel certainly as emotional and affected as this character, but am now leaning more into being the smart politician who takes a horrible event and tries to make something good come from it. It’s gone deeper inside of me, and now Charlie Whitmore has gotten smarter about how he’s going to approach the future.”

Nagle’s quality as an actor was evident from the moment he enters the play. There was something – an alertness, a mischievous eye gleam, the totally reassuring ease of a natural stage animal – which made me pay attention, so I was amazed to discover this: “I was very shy when I was younger. My older brother did all the talking, so I literally couldn’t even pick up the phone to request an extra paper for my route without my mom writing me out a script. Then he went on to private school and I went to public school, and suddenly my voice came out. I discovered acting when I was 10 and knew what it was like to get that attention and be somebody besides me. My parents can’t figure it out: ‘You were so shy and now you stand before 2,000 people doing Shakespeare in a park!’”

The unpredictable randomness and sometimes miracle of chance encounters are among LA’s allures for Nagle.

“I was sick of waiting tables, so worked as a temp for a commercial production company in Santa Monica. My wife got sick and said, ‘Well, you can have my husband for the day.’ They said, ‘Heather’s hot! Why would we want her husband?’ I ended up working for director Jesse Dylan,



Rob Nagle is a Senate candidate thrown off stride by a tragic school shooting in Jason Odell Williams’ “Church and State,” now at New World Stages. | RUSS ROWLAND

Bob Dylan's son, for 10 years. Lots of commercials, music videos and three features.

"It was like getting an education you never could in film school. I'd see photographs of little Jesse, literally under the stage where his father was performing, looking out into the crowd and I'd see the makings of a director. I read scripts and did coverage and helped with interviews.

"I actually met Bob Dylan a couple of times. I never had a conversation with him because you don't, unless he wants to have a conversation with you. I remember going to the house when Jesse's daughter Anna was getting married. I didn't know he was there, but I was walking around the house when, through the window, I catch him clocking me, like the lone wolf. 'Who's that guy?' and you realize his whole life is 'Who's that guy?'

"It was extraordinary. I'm sitting across the table from Bob and Sara [his ex-wife], thinking 'What am I doing here?' Jesse was like, 'You want to meet him?' And I'm like, 'Oh, don't. Don't. Don't. Oh, I'm gonna piss my pants!' Sarah called me the next day, 'Oh, that was you outside! I thought it was a p.a. from the company. I didn't realize it was you – we talk on the phone all the time!'

"Tom Waits was shooting with Jesse at the Ambassador Hotel before it got renovated. I went to get some plates of food for Jesse and Tom, and then I walk out of the room. Tom calls me, 'Get back here!' I go back and he says, 'You're Rob? As in Rob of... Rob! Ohmigod, I didn't know you were here!' He once left a message about a shoot the night before they were to start:'[perfect funny/raspy Waits impression] 'I know Jesse's coming back from the airport and I have some ideas for the video you might pass on to him. I know we got me on stilts with a bunch of emus running around. What if we had a bunch of black balloons filled with helium? See what he says!' [heh, heh, heh!] Anyway, see you tomorrow!' If the phone hadn't died, I would have had that voicemail forever! Another time we were chatting away, and he said, 'Wait... hold on!... I had to make a left turn.' [laughs]."

The theater scene in LA – Do they even have one? Where is it? – has always fascinated me. Although not a joiner, as he says, Nagle is part of two theater companies.

"The Troubadour does mash-ups of classic works like 'For the Birds,' Aristophanes' 'The Birds,' but with music by Wings, Sheryl Crow, A Flock of Seagulls... you get it? Very LA, but crazy/good. We've done 'Two Gentlemen of Chicago,' 'Abba-memnon,' 'A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream'... incredibly hilarious modern *commedia del arte*.

"My other company, Antaeus, was founded in 1991 for classical theater, because the original people who started it got tired of hiring out of New York and London. I have now been running it with two other actors for six years. We're opening 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' tonight with Harry Groener as Big Daddy."

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**CHURCH AND STATE** | New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. | Through Jul. 2: Mon., Wed.-Sat. at 8 p.m., Sat. at 2 p.m.; Sun. at 3 & 7:30 p.m. | \$59-\$89; [telecharge.com](https://telecharge.com) | 75 mins., no intermission