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INTERVIEWS NEWS OFF-BROADWAY THEATRE

INTERVIEW: Gun control examined in new off-Broadway play 'Church & State'

📅 March 1, 2017 👤 John Soltes 💬 0 Comment 📌 Church & State, Jason Odell Williams

Gun control doesn't seem like a typical topic for a theatrical comedy, but *Church & State*, the new play by Jason Odell Williams, isn't a typical show. The play is billed as a serious comedy, one that follows a senator's reelection campaign and the influences of faith, politics and "The Twitter."

The gun control aspect of the play, which begins previews Friday, March 3 at New World Stages in Midtown Manhattan, came to Williams after hearing news of the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech. The playwright said the images from that day struck him hard and personally. He's actually an alumnus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, a rival school to Virginia Tech. He remembers seeing students on news programs, and the images struck a chord.

"This in 2007 really resonated with me, and it kind of just became an issue for me," Williams said recently in a phone interview. "Then I started writing plays in 2008, and I started with a light romantic comedy because that's what you do, I guess. And then in 2011, when [Rep.] Gabby Giffords was shot and several people were killed in Tucson, I again had sort of another awakening and thinking, well, what's it going to take for something to change."



Jason Odell Williams is the playwright of *Church & State*, having its New York premiere at New World Stages. Photo courtesy of Russ Rowland.

Church & State was still a vague idea at this time in the writer's life, and he was uncertain if he could pull off a play that involved the issue of guns. "I just feel like that's really hard to dramatize without being overly dramatic and overly important, but then at the end of 2012, in December of 2012, after Sandy Hook, which I think everybody in this country [it] just really rocked us to the core, I was like all right, I need to do something," he said. "I just have to channel my anger and my frustration and my rage into something. I think a lot of playwrights have felt the same way."

The original title for Williams' play was *God & Politics*, but he shifted to *Church & State* as the project came together. He wrote the first draft in a month, but he felt the story was too one-sided. He shared the text with his wife, some friends and a couple of directors.

"Then I shared it with a director in Rochester, Ralph Meranto, who had directed my first play, *Handle With Care*," he said. "He's interested in doing new plays and such. He really liked what I had on the page so far for *Church & State*. He said, 'I want to do this play. I will commit to doing the world premiere if you work with me for the next several months and years, and develop it, and I said, 'Absolutely.' So I just sort of traded drafts back and forth. He would say, 'I love this section. This section I don't

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understand,' or, 'What are you trying to say here?' Just really asking really smart questions, and we developed it together throughout 2014 and '15."

The first two productions of *Church & State* took place at JCC CenterStage with Meranto in Rochester, New York, and The Skylight Theatre in Los Angeles, both in 2016.

"[The play] was my reaction to all the increasing gun violence here in America," he said. "What's it going to take for a Republican to change, to have a change of heart, a change of mind? What would that look like? What would that take? And then on top of that, how can I make that play interesting, vital and entertaining and funny? Because one of the things that I'm always interested as an audience member and as a dramatist is having fun at the theater and being entertained. So I struggled for a really long time. Can you write a play about guns and a tragedy and still make it funny? I hope we've achieved that balance because I don't enjoy theater as medicine. ... I want to entertain people, get them to like these characters and then sort of weave in some sort of drama."

As the play progressed from Los Angeles to Rochester to New York City, Williams would continue to tweak the characters and narrative. The out-of-town productions allowed the playwright to hear his words on stage and decipher what made sense and what needed to be reworked. He took mental notes on what parts resonated with the audience, when the audience seemed engaged and when they seemed bored.

These past few weeks he has been slightly altering the play for the New York cast, which includes Rob Nagle, Nadia Bowers, Christa Scott-Reed and Jonathan Louis Dent. The director for this new production is Markus Potter.

"We've got a tremendous cast," Williams said. "They're asking really smart questions, and it's pretty collaborative. They'll say, 'I'm not sure about this,' or, 'Can I ask you a question about this line?' And I'll say, 'Oh, that's because of this,' or, 'You know what, you're right. That doesn't make sense now. Let's say this instead.' Pretty minor stuff, but when you add it all up, I think it hopefully creates a better full picture. All of the little changes are adding up to make a stronger production."

Williams said he has learned over the years to be present at the start of rehearsals, but eventually it's better if he fades into the background and stops showing up every day. He needs to give his creation to the interpreters and let them interpret.

"I've got to step away and let them do their thing," he said. "So I was there for the first week of rehearsals. ... Then I came back at the end of the next week, and then I came back twice in the third week. And I guess that's been it. They're now in tech. They had a big day of tech yesterday, and I'll probably check in maybe once during tech. I've learned also that tech is not a good place for a playwright because that's when it gets messy. The actors in the rehearsal room, they discover these characters, and they build something. And by the last day of rehearsal, when they're doing run-throughs, the play is fantastic. It's like in this beautiful place."

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Williams sees the preview performances as a chance for him, the director and the designers to offer some further edits after having an audience experience the play. "Sometimes it's awkward if you're an actor to have the playwright in the room," he said. "I mean, I hope we create a very free and collaborative and fun environment, but you know sometimes ... there's a little pressure if the playwright is there."

It's also healthy for a playwright to find the process of premiering in New York somewhat nerve-wracking. Any playwright begins to second guess their work and have an "existential crisis," as Williams put it. To validate his work, he thinks back to the manner in which audiences responded in Los Angeles and Rochester.

"That's where I take solace," he said. "The play was critically acclaimed across the board in L.A. and in Rochester. I mean reviewers loved it, but what I appreciate most and what I sort of take the most solace in and most pride in is what audiences are saying."

The play, Williams said, offers a message that a lot of people have wanted to hear and have wanted to have articulated for a long time. Moreover he hopes *Church & State* starts a conversation — between people from both sides of the gun-control aisle.

As a liberal-leaning New Yorker, Williams often finds himself in the company of other liberal-leaning New Yorkers. They talk about gun control and politics, but there's a real "preaching to the choir" feeling that exists amongst them.

"What I think this play is doing is trying to look at things from a slightly different perspective," he said. "[The main character] is a Christian Republican from North Carolina. His wife is a very Christian, Bible-loving southerner who, although I probably don't agree with their worldview on politics and religion and guns, I can't help but love and respect them and who they are as people. When you like them as people, you have to listen to their ideas and listen to their point of view, and that's the only way you can find some sort of common ground. And so I'm hoping that this play will attract people from both sides of the aisle as it were and everyone will see someone up there on stage that they like and respect."

He added: "We shouldn't be screaming at each other and digging our heels in the sand. We should be trying to come together to the middle because nobody wants more death, more unnecessary lives lost."

By John Soltes / Publisher / John@HollywoodSoapbox.com

Church & State by Jason Odell Williams begins previews Friday, March 3 at New World Stages in Midtown Manhattan. Click [here](#) for more information and tickets.

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